Filling the Gap:
The Emerging Civil Society in Viet Nam

Irene Norlund

Ha Noi, January 2007

Table of contents

List of acronyms

CARE	CARE is an International NGO
CBO	Community-Based Organisation
CDF	Capacity Development Fund
CDP	Commune Development Plans
CIEM	Central Institute for Economic Management
CIVICUS	CIVICUS World Alliance for Citizen Participation
CSI	Civil Society Index Study
CSI-SAT	Civil Society Index Study-Shortened Assessment Tool
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
FF	Fatherland Front
GDD	Grassroots Democracy Decree
INGO	International NGO
MARD	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
MOHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PACCOM	People's Aid Coordination Committee
PAR	Public Administration Reform
PRA	Participatory Rural Assessment
SAG	Stakeholder Assessment Group
SEDP	Socio-Economic Development Plan
VDP	Village Development Plan
VGCL	Viet Nam General Confederation of Labour
VNGO	Vietnamese NGO
VUSTA	Viet Nam Union for Science and Technology Associations
VUAL	Viet Nam Union of Artists and Literature
WTO	World Trade Organisation
WVS	World Values Survey

Executive Summary and Recommendations

Civil Society Index studies were carried out worldwide from 2004 to 2006 in order to assess the present strengths and weaknesses of civil society in several dozen countries. The assessments follow similar methodologies in each country to assess civil society at a national level, based on the participation of a national Stakeholder Assessment Group (SAG) and a national team comprising a coordinator, researchers and an international civil society expert. The assessments are based on a common methodology developed by CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation through extensive research in a number of pilot countries.

The Viet Nam project was carried out from April 2005 to March 2006 and was made possible by support from the UNDP and SNV in Viet Nam. It was the first attempt in Viet Nam to broadly map civil society.

Objectives of the CSI include:
- Creating knowledge about the state of civil society
- Creating a shared understanding of civil society among key stakeholders
- Improving the self-understanding of civil society and developing a better appreciation of its role
- Producing an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of civil society and outlining some priority areas for policy and actions.

This discussion paper provides a context for the project in Viet Nam and summarises the methodology and outcome of the CSI study. The definition used for civil society is broad and inclusive and focuses on the functions, rather than the forms, of the organisations involved. The major findings are discussed and the paper concludes with a number of recommendations as to how the development of civil society in Viet Nam could be further supported.

The CSI studies assess four essential dimensions of civil society, which together give a broad and coherent perspective on civil society. The four dimensions are: the structure of civil society, the socio-economic environment for civil society, the values of civil society, and the impact of civil society activities. In all, the Stakeholder Assessment Group (SAG) assessed 74 indicators related to the four dimensions.

The SAG in Viet Nam started by identifying the strongest and most powerful forces in society and in the civil society. It was pointed out that the Communist Party is the most important force in society, followed by government institutions, the private sector and the media. Civil society organisations were considered less influential. Among the organisations in civil society, the media was identified as the most influential followed by some of the mass organisations and the intellectuals.

In terms of the outcome, the project found that the *structure* of civil society in Viet Nam is very broad-based, comprising a large number of organisations, associations and groups. Seventy-four percent of the population belong to at least one organisation. The five large mass organisations have the largest membership base (more than 30 million members), but the quality of their membership is questioned by the SAG because membership is not always voluntary and these organisations are closely related to the party-state. However, during the 1990s, they expanded at the grassroots level, where they make important contributions through social activities. Besides the mass organisations, there are a large number of other groups, professional organisations, Vietnamese NGOs and community-based organisations, which conduct activities related to health, education, people's livelihoods, religion, cultural and sports activities. Most organisations are concerned with providing services to poor and disadvantaged people. The weaknesses of this broad form of civil society include a lack of strategies and weak umbrella organisations and networks. Some organisations lack financial means and need to develop their capacity. Overall, the structure of civil society is judged to be of limited strength.

The assessment of the *socio-economic environment* for civil society shows a mixture of conducive and less conducive factors. Poverty reduction has progressed at a spectacularly rapid pace in the last decade, with the poor falling in number from two-thirds to about one-quarter of the population. Economic and political stability has been reasonably high, and overall the level of inequality has not changed dramatically. Nevertheless, in international terms, the income level is still low in Viet Nam. Limits on political competition and rights leave much room for improvement. Basic civil rights and press freedoms are not fully implemented, and the rule of law does not facilitate the establishment of organisations or the growth of charity. The SAG assesses the level

of corruption in society to be high. On the other hand, state effectiveness and decentralisation are seen as positive factors. Socio-cultural factors are more conducive for cooperation, there being a fairly high level of trust between people, but tolerance is more limited and spiritedness, a value that indicates how people judge violations of public norms, is judged to be at a medium level. Relations between the state and civil society are deemed to be below a medium level in terms of organisations' autonomy, their cooperation with the state, and the level of support they receive from the state. However, the mass organisations enjoy more privileges than other CSOs. Relations with the private sector and the role of corporate responsibility are both judged to be of fairly little importance. The overall conclusion was that civil society in Viet Nam is operating in a slightly disenabling environment.

The examination of the *values* in civil society organisations, and how they are promoted in society, also points to conducive and less conducive factors. Poverty alleviation and non-violence are the most important values in CSOs, and corruption is judged to be considerably lower than in society in general. Gender equity is being promoted in society, but in terms of its actual practice within the organisations it is not thought to be above a medium level. Tolerance is likewise at a medium level within the organisations, but more strongly promoted in society. More problematic is the low level of transparency and democracy within organisations and the correspondingly minimal efforts to promote such values in society. Finally, the efforts to promote environmental sustainability are assessed as quite low. The conclusion is that civil society practices and promotes positive values to a moderate extent, with strong efforts to alleviate poverty as the leading factor. This makes the values dimension of civil society the strongest of the four, but leaves room for many improvements by the organisations.

The *impact* of civil society's activities is assessed by the SAG to be of limited impact overall in terms of influencing public policies on issues like human rights, social policy and national budgeting. Nor is civil society having much impact in holding the state and private sectors accountable. Civil society's work to meet societal needs is judged to be at a medium level, as are its responses to social interests, although trust in organisations is fairly high in this regard. Citizen empowerment is the area where civil society has the most impact, particularly through informing and educating citizens, empowering women and supporting people's livelihoods. Thus, the conclusions point to a relatively limited overall impact on society at large. Notably, the score for the impact dimension is the weakest of the four.

The graphical representation of the aggregated scoring of the 74 indicators in the four dimensions forms a "civil society diamond" for Viet Nam.

The civil society diamond for Viet Nam
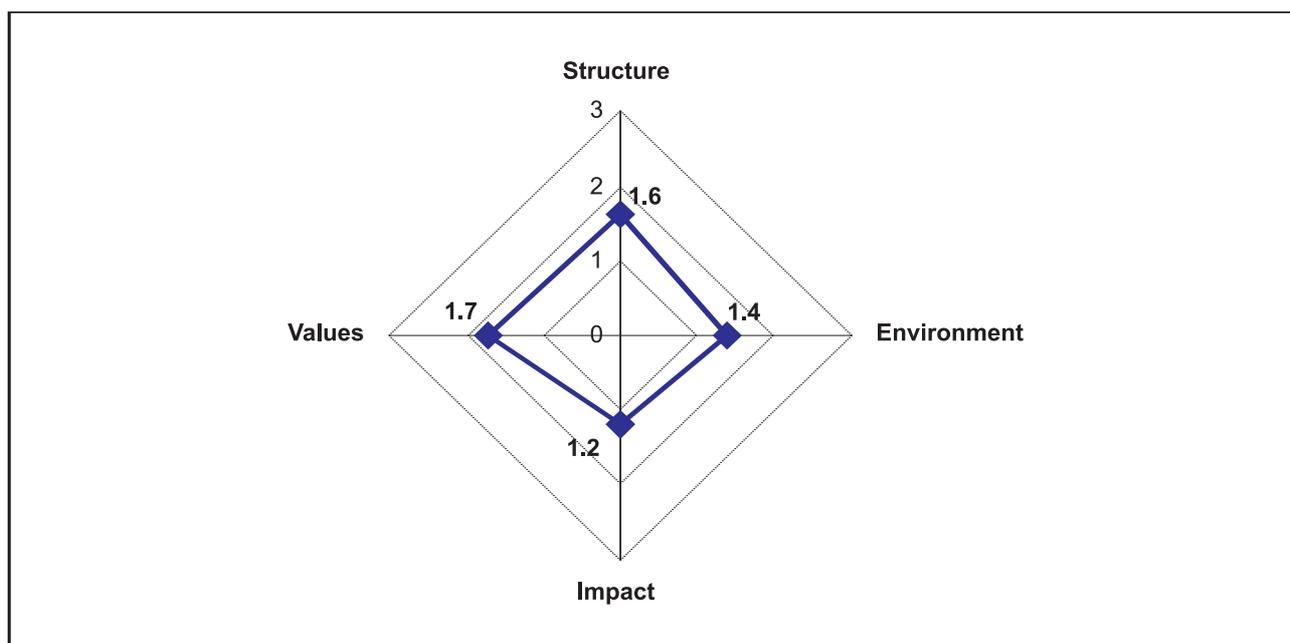
Recommendations from the study, developed further in this discussion paper, point to a number of areas that can be improved in Viet Nam to support stronger development of associational life. These include:

1. *Improving the social, legal and economic environment for Vietnamese social organisations, associations and movements.*
2. *Strengthening capacity in Vietnamese social organisations.*
3. *Focussing on and strengthening effective networks of social organisations.*
4. *Strengthening cooperation with the private sector.*
5. *Strengthening the capacity for and implementation of research and evaluation of CSO activities, including in-depth studies of civil society organisations.*

Recommendations provide the government, donors and civil society with a number of fairly detailed suggestions. One suggestion is to set up a "Capacity Development Fund" supported by donors, and possibly by the private sector, to facilitate the coordination and strengthening of civil society organisations and activities, to improve networks, and to improve funding transparency.

Introduction

There is a notable lack of understanding and analysis of civil society in Viet Nam. So far, little public discussion about "civil society" has taken place in Viet Nam, though in recent years the term is beginning to be used by scholars, donors, practitioners and a few government officials. Few people know what the term "civil society" means at all, as it is not spoken about in the media or in the official discourse. In spite of this fact, there are ongoing discussions about the phenomena and fact of associational life. At present, increased interest in organisations can be observed in the country based on the fact that the number of organisations is increasing in almost all spheres of society. Even the state shows an increased interest in organisations and how they can play a more beneficial role in the development of society and in limiting corruption. Although most people suppose the mass organisations are the main popular organisations in Viet Nam, the Socio-Economic Development Plan for 2006-10 (SEDP), approved as the development strategy for the coming period at the 10th Congress of the Communist Party in April 2006, mentions the existence and possible contribution of different organisations. This alone is proof of the increasing official and public attention.[1]

A recent mapping of civil society shows the existence of a much broader associational life in Viet Nam than is usually assumed. No doubt, a civil society - as a broader expression of the associational sector - has emerged over the last decade, and has been gaining strength in recent years. This is the outcome of a number of factors, including the increasing momentum of public administration reforms, greater political flexibility, the partial retreat of the state from the social sector and, in a complementary development, the expansion of civil society's activities in the fields of development, social issues and environmentalism in many parts of the country.

A Civil Society Index study (CSI) was carried out in Viet Nam during 2005-06 in order to assess civil society, to give more substance to the strengths and weaknesses of civil society and to initiate discussions in Viet Nam about the state of civil society. The study was based on the methodology outlined by CIVICUS, a research and action NGO based in South Africa, which has framed a global project to assess civil society in more than 50 countries. The project was led by a national coordinator from the Viet Nam Institute of Development Studies in Ha Noi, and also included a group of Vietnamese researchers supported by an international civil society expert. A report was prepared from the study: "The Emerging Civil Society in Viet Nam. An Initial Assessment of Civil Society in Viet Nam", edited by Irene Norlund, Dang Ngoc Dinh and a team of researchers.[2] The CSI is built on a strict methodology with a framework of 74 indicators to assess civil society. The indicators are arranged in four dimensions: 1) the structure of civil society; 2) the socio-economic environment for civil society; 3) the values of civil society; and 4) the impact of civil society activities. It is the intention of the CIVICUS CSI project in general to support understanding within the countries themselves about their own civil societies, and to provide a basis for international comparisons. The CSI study in Viet Nam is the first attempt to describe Viet Nam's civil society in a comprehensive way, however it is still only an initial mapping and needs to be discussed openly to improve our understanding of the reality.

This discussion paper is intended to present some of the findings of the CSI study in a shorter and more accessible way than in the comprehensive and detailed report, as well as to contribute to the policy dialogue on civil society development among donor agencies and between donors and the Government of Viet Nam. The problem in Viet Nam is to define the character of civil society, the conditions that facilitate or inhibit its development, and the ways that it can be supported to gain a more active societal role in the future.

The discussion paper is divided into five sections. The first section presents a brief analysis of recent socio-economic and political trends in Viet Nam as a context for the emerging civil society. The second section deals with the outline of the CSI study in Viet Nam and looks at its appearance in the 1990s and up to 2006. The third section draws major findings and conclusions from the CSI study's four dimensions. The fourth section draws conclusions from the CSI study. The final section outlines some recommendations on how the sector can be strengthened in Viet Nam, including a suggestion for a "Capacity Development Fund".

---

[1] Social organisations, mass organisations and NGOs, for instance, are mentioned and encouraged to engage in economic development and management. Enterprises, cooperatives, producers' associations, and consumers' groups are also recognised to have a role in diversifying economic management. SEDP 2006-10, Ha Noi 2006, p. 140.

[2] The research team included Bach Tan Sinh, Chu Dung, Dang Ngoc Quang, Do Bich Diem, Nguyen Manh Cuong, Tang The Cuong and Vu Chi Mai.

1. Socio-political environment

During the 1990s, the reform process of *doi moi* accelerated in almost all corners of society. The focus was on economic reform in accordance with government policy to develop a market economy with socialist characteristics, based on the rule of law. The core of the political system and "determining for the state-society relations" is the Communist Party, confirmed by the first post-*doi moi* Constitution of 1992.[3] This constitution endorsed the reform path of *doi moi* and included guarantees for basic civil and human rights and obligations.

Since the late 1990s there has been a clearer separation of Party and government responsibilities, with the Party taking a less direct role in administration but retaining overall "leadership". The Party's role is to steer both the state and the mass organisations by means of political programmes, strategies, policies and guidelines; this point was underlined, for instance, in a review of the Party's role in government and society.[4] The review pointed out that incentives must be developed to involve people in state management and mass organisations. The associations, and particularly the Vietnamese non-governmental organisations (VNGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs), nevertheless pose a major challenge to the Party, because it does not provide guidance directly to them. [5]

1.1 Strengthening participatory governance

The public administration is perceived as a key component of state management, with the Party as its nucleus.[6] Accordingly, the public administration reforms (PAR) constitute one of the core policies with direct implications for governance. From the early 1990s, the main task of PAR was to change the "central bureaucratic mechanism", which was based on the principle of lower levels of the bureaucracy asking for and receiving support from the higher level, the so-called "asking-giving mechanism".[7] Administrative reforms have been implemented for the last decade, but results are appearing very slowly as the process is complicated and involves changing the power relations within the administration and between Party and administration. The lead roles of the Party and the administration leave less space for civil society to influence planning and budgeting. Despite this fact, the decentralisation process has had some positive results, such as the increase of government spending through the provincial level from 26 percent in 1992 to 44 percent in 2004.[8] At lower levels, decentralisation has been implemented to a lesser degree.

The other most important step for increasing people's influence in the PAR is the introduction of the Grassroots Democracy Decree (GDD) of 1998 (updated in 2003), which emphasised the people's right "to be informed, to discuss, to carry out and to monitor". Nevertheless, by the mid-2000s, the GDD is still not implemented everywhere in the country, according to recent studies.[9] The provinces' interest in implementing village and commune development planning (VDPs and CDPs) in recent years, however, shows that the government is willing to increase participation, particularly at lower levels like village and commune. Moreover, participation is today accepted as a means to increase the effectiveness of many government projects that are financed by multilateral donors, such as road building and other infrastructure projects. However, there is still very little participation when it comes to other large-scale projects, like the construction of dams for hydro-electric production or environmental projects. Likewise, there is very little participation at the higher levels of governance, such as the district and province. It will still take time to institutionalise participation in governance, which to some degree has been imposed by donors so far.

---

[3]   Constitution 1992 §4.

[4]   Party Civil Affairs Committee, *Report on review of 20 years of "Renovating of the Party's exercise of leadership over government and society".* Ha Noi August 2004

[5]   Ibid.

[6]   Government of Viet Nam (2001) *Strategy for Public Administration Reform (2001-10).* Ha Noi, p. 6.

[7]   Ibid, p. 2.

[8]   Viet Nam Development Report (2004) *Governance.* Joint Donor Report to the Viet Nam Consultative Group Meeting, Ha Noi 1-2 December, p. 79.

[9]   Pamela McElwee et al. (2005) *Deepening Democracy and Increasing Popular Participation in Viet Nam.* Ha Noi, UNDP (draft). Helvetas project in Cao Bang presented at seminar "Filling the gap between local government at commune level and local population". Ethnic Minority Working Group, Ha Noi 25 April 2006.

1.2 Strengthening the Vietnamese civil society organisations

While the Party is attempting to separate the state and Party more clearly, the state is withdrawing from a number of areas to allow individual and private initiatives to gain a more important role.[10] The state has realised that it does not have adequate funds or capabilities to upgrade the whole social field. This policy is called "socialisation" (xã hội hoá), because the state wants to play a smaller role than at present, particularly with regard to basic social services. Thus, "social" is seen as the opposite of "state", and "socialisation" is employed for what is elsewhere called "privatisation".

The Socio-Economic Development Plan 2006-10 (SEDP) is the general development strategy that was passed at the 10th Congress of the Communist Party in April 2006. For the first time, a Vietnamese 5-year plan clearly focuses on the poor and vulnerable groups. The plan stresses that participation is desired and expected by organisations and the private sector when it comes to the "socialisation" of parts of the education, training, science and technology (research), and health domains, as well as some aspects of cultural and sports activities. Particularly in the field of social security, the government is appealing to voluntary security networks for the establishment of social funds and development of the mass organisations' funds for the disabled and other people with difficulties.[11] Although it gives the Fatherland Front the lead role for cooperating with authorities, associations and mass organisations at all levels, the SEDP also encourages humanitarian activities by "all non-governmental organisations, social associations and unions to develop social security networks and provide effective assistance to the vulnerable" and "to engage in managing and monitoring some pubic fields".[12] In this space, the CSOs have a potentially much larger role to play.

The discussions and incremental changes in the Party-state's thinking on governance issues show some concerns for including "citizens" more directly in the planning operations of the lower levels of the administration. The space for "participatory governance" seems also to be changing in the new environment. However, participatory governance is not leading to increased participation by a broader civil society; rather, it is leading to decentralisation and increased participation in the governance system and the electoral system. The mass organisations are gaining a new role as mediators between citizens and the government, whereas the role of civil society as a broad-based counterbalance to the state is a minor concern for the Vietnamese Party-state. Improving the quality of governance is the main focus of the government, which views the administration as the core manager of the Party-state. Civil society has pushed more actively for increased space in society, and its conditions seem to be improving in the present period, as the country is preparing its WTO membership[13] and increasingly accepting the impacts of external forces.

---

[10]   Phan Van Khai (2005) Prime Minister Phan Van Khai was speaking at a conference on promoting the socialisation of education, healthcare, cultural, physical training and sports activities, in Ha Noi on July 26, 2005, Thai Press < vnnews-l by Stephen Denney> 29 July 2005; SEDP 2005-10.

[11]   Ministry of Planning and Investment (2006) SEDP 2006-10, Ha Noi March 2006, pp. 82-95.

[12]   *SEDP 2006-10*, pp. 91, 140.

[13]   WTO approved officially Viet Nam's accession as member of the organisation 7 November 2006.

2. Civil Society Index study

The lack of broader information about civil society in Viet Nam led to the decision by UNDP and SNV to support a Civil Society Index Study (CSI) based on a methodology outlined by CIVICUS. The objectives of the CSI studies are to assess the state of civil society and generate relevant knowledge of civil society at the national level by means of engaging civil society stakeholders. In an action-oriented process between the stakeholders and the governments, the goals are to generate self-understanding of civil society in the various countries, to strengthen civil society and to generate discussions about the state of civil society and ways to improve its situation. In the period of 2004-06, CSI surveys were carried out in approximately 50 countries throughout the world. In each country, a national Stakeholder Assessment Group (SAG) was established as a core feedback mechanism for the national team organising the study. The SAG in Viet Nam consisted of 12 members, comprising eight representatives from civil society, two researchers and two members from the government administration.[14] In Viet Nam, as well as in other countries where basic research about civil society is still limited, a shortened version of the methodology was applied, the Civil Society Index Study-Shortened Assessment Tool (CSI-SAT). [15]

The national team of coordinators and researchers met with the SAG to discuss and adjust the project. The core methodology consists of identifying the conditions of civil society with respect to four dimensions: 1) the structure of civil society; 2) the socio-economic environment for civil society; 3) the values of civil society and 4) the impact of civil society activities. CIVICUS has developed seventy-four indicators to be assessed and discussed by the SAG in accordance with the methodology. The SAG scores each indicator in a pre-developed scoring matrix, and taken together, the scoring of the four dimensions constitutes a "civil society diamond", representing the strengths and weaknesses of the four dimensions. Each indicator can be scored from 0 to 3, and the indicators are aggregated to create a four-sided figure, the "diamond". The process takes place over several rounds, with a preliminary report developed before the first scoring, and the full country report written between and after the scoring-meetings. The final diamond reflects both the information and data collected in the report, and the scoring of the SAG.

The approach suggested by CIVICUS for analysing civil society may appear fairly simple and clear-cut. However, the simple approach has an epistemological background deriving from different approaches to civil society, developed on the basis of the academic discussions in the last decades. The objective of the Civil Society Index (CSI) is to be a tool and a conceptual framework for assessing the state of civil society at the present time and at the national level, through a framework that seeks to accommodate cultural variations in different conceptualisations of civil society, while still adhering to basic, universal values. It strives to avoid Eurocentric analysis by pointing to the fact that collective citizen action is a feature common to all societies, and as such is perceived as an adequate concept for describing the universal reality regardless of its philosophical roots.[16] At the same time, the methodology is also meant to generate self-understanding in a specific country context and to be a tool for cross-country analyses.

The definition of civil society used is: ***The arena outside of the family, the state and the market where people associate to advance common interests.***[17]

---

[14] Annex 1 for list of SAG members.

[15] Further details about the methodology can be found in Annex 2. Most of the surveys are full CSI studies, whereas the CSI-SAT provides a less elaborate initial study.

[16] CIVICUS (2005), *Civil Society Index - Shortened Assessment Tool (CSI-SAT). A Guide for CSI-SAT Implementing Agency,* CIVICUS. Heinrich, Volkhart Finn & Mahi Khallaf (2006) *Assessing Civil Society in Cyprus and Across the World - The Civil Society Index.* CIVICUS.

[17] Available from: <www.civicus.org/new/default.asp> [Accessed: 25.2.2006]. Anheier, Helmut K. (2004) *Measurement, Evaluation, Policy.* London and Sterling VA, CIVICUS and Earthscan.
      CIVICUS (2005) op. cit.

Figure 1. Civil society arena's fuzzy boundaries
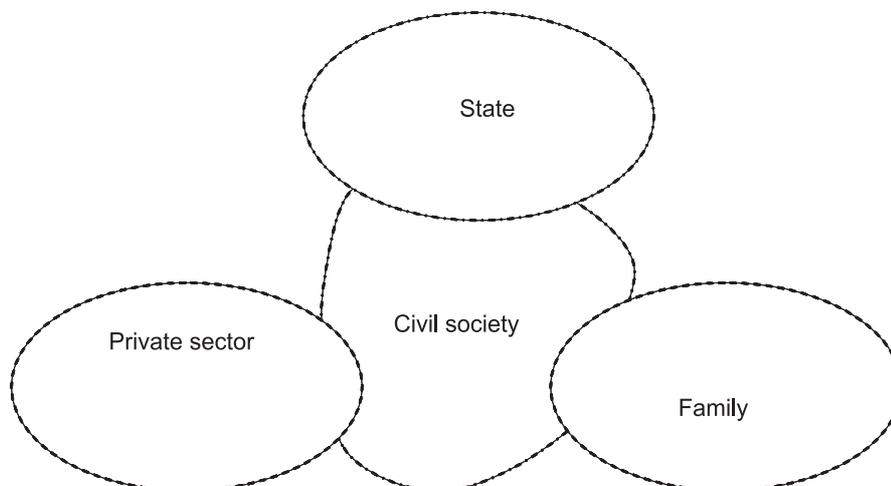
The important point about this definition, graphically presented in Figure. 1, is that it is broad and open, and it emphasises the fuzzy borders between civil society and the various sectors, which is of central importance in a country like Viet Nam where civil society interacts closely with the state; and it is not separated from the state, as some definitions suggest. It also aims to take account of the functions of organisations rather than their forms, which is to say that it includes any efforts to support activities and values promoting the well-being of the citizens through charity, philanthropy or other means. The definition is more expansive than others that include only organisations or associations as the core of civil society, because informal groups and coalitions are also counted. This expands the definition of civil society beyond just an associational sector to include a broader number of activities "to advance common interests". The definition is inclusive and flexible enough to adjust to individual countries, because the particular criteria for defining civil society are dependent on national perspectives. The SAG in Viet Nam accepted the definition as appropriate for the CSI study, even if some members wished that it could be stricter and clearer. There was a common agreement among the members of the SAG and the CSI National Implementation Team to use the CIVICUS approach and method in analysing Vietnamese civil society.[18]

The CSI assessment is basically a-historic, a snapshot at a given moment in time of a certain society. However, the idea is to follow up with repeated rounds of assessments to add dynamics to the methodology. In the Viet Nam study, the changes over the last decade are considered centrally important to any understanding of the emerging civil society.

2.1 The emerging civil society in Viet Nam

Since the mid-1990s, a few Vietnamese scholars have started studying "people's organisations", and in the early 2000s a study of "civic organisations" was initiated.[19] Foreign scholars also started to write on the subject in the mid-1990s, but the majority of the scholars did not consider the mass organisations to be part of civil society; rather, they were seen as part of the Party system. The status of the newly appearing Vietnamese NGOs (VNGO) was also debatable, as they did not have a membership base and their leaders came almost exclusively from the state bureaucracy or the Party. Most of them could not even be classified as independent.[20] According to the dominant (neo-liberal) criteria, there was basically no civil society in Viet Nam, even if a few organisations might have had the potential to develop into one.[21]

---

[18] The methodology is elaborated further in Annex 4.

[19] Bui The Cuong (2005) Civic organisations in Viet Nam. In: Irene Norlund, Dang Ngoc Dinh et al. *The Emerging Civil Society*, Ha Noi, VIDS, UNDP, SNV and CIVICUS, Annex 5.

[20] Michael L. Gray (1999) summarised and added new evidence in his article: Creating Civil Society? The Emergence of NGOs in Viet Nam. In: *Development and Change*, 30:4, Oct. 1999. The research was carried out in 1996.

[21] Mark Sidel was one of the earliest scholars pointing to the multitudes of organisations in Viet Nam in Sidel (1995) The emergence of a non-profit sector and philanthropy in the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. In: Tadashi Yomamoto ed. (1995) *Emerging Civil Society in the Asia Pacific Community*. Singapore, ISEAS.

One of the core challenges to understanding civil society in Viet Nam is to confront the fact that institutions are not independent from the state and the Party, but are on the contrary deeply entangled with each other and the state. The state has, since the revolution, considered the state sector to be the most important in Viet Nam, and, in accordance with Marxist-Leninist theories, has also become the agency that defines the framework for civic organisations or civil society. Nevertheless, since *doi moi*, the organisations and associations have taken on quite different forms, functions and objectives, and they undoubtedly gained in importance during the 1990s.

Each type of organisation emerged in specific historical circumstances. The faith-based and village-based groups have the longest history, having been present in the villages for centuries. The mass organisations were set up in connection with the Communist Party's establishment in 1931 and the August revolution of 1945. They were seen as intermediaries between the Party and the people following the revolution and the establishment of the Party's power as of 1954 in the North, and 1975 in the South. Since the *doi moi* reforms, particularly from the late 1980s, the mass organisations have nonetheless changed form. They receive less support from the state and have to operate semi-independently from the Party. The number of grassroots organisations and clubs under the mass organisations expanded considerably in the late 1990s, particularly Women's Union and Farmers' Association grew dramatically, primarily in the rural areas. Vietnamese NGOs started to emerge in the early and mid-1990s as a new type of organisations. By the mid-2000s, it was more broadly accepted among scholars, donors and organisations that there was in fact a civil society operating in Viet Nam despite the country's one-party political system.

The legal framework for organisations varies according to the different types of organisation. The first "Law of Right to set up Associations" was promulgated in 1957. For a long time, legal changes were small, and only after *doi moi* did a broader legal framework begin to take shape for mass organisations, VNGOs, INGOs and funds. A new legal framework was introduced for the mass organisations in 1989, providing them with more independent management. The first framework for INGOs was also introduced in 1989, and the PACCOM (People's Aid Coordinating Committee) was established as a government body to cooperate, facilitate and regulate INGOs. The first important step towards the establishment of VNGOs was the passing of a decree on non-profit science and technology organisations in 1992. The first Civil Code, passed in 1995, began the process of building a framework for the CBOs; social and charity funds were included in 1999, important for non-membership based VNGOs; and a decree from 2005 created a framework for small-sized financial institutions, i.e. mainly credit groups. The legislative environment improved for most of organisations in 1995, and since then a Law on Associations has been discussed. Only in 2005, however, was it decided that the National Assembly would pass such a law in 2006.[22] The draft law on association was reviewed by the National Assembly during the spring session but due to the inability of the government and National Assembly to reach an agreement on the content of important sections of the law it was removed from the agenda for approval in 2006.

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) is the government institution charged with outlining the legal framework for organisations and permitting associations to be established. There are multiple ways to register an organisation, but all involve long and complicated procedures. In recent years, VUSTA (Viet Nam Union of Science and Technology Associations) has developed into one of the most important umbrella organisations for many of the professional associations and VNGOs. Some are registered directly with VUSTA at the central level and others register with one of the provincial VUSTA organisations. Others register under a ministry, and some research NGOs register with a university. As for the CBOs, they can register in accordance with the Civil Code, but it is also possible to register with one of the mass organisations, such as the Red Cross or some of the other organisations under the Fatherland Front, or with an agricultural cooperative.[23]

---

[22]   Annex 3 outlines the main legal decisions and refers to the specific laws, decisions and decrees.

[23]   Theveeporn Vasavakul and Nguyen Thai Van (2006) *Collaborative Groups in Rural Viet Nam: A Background Paper.* Ha Noi.

3. The four dimensions of civil society - SAG analysis

The CSI study in Viet Nam began with a meeting in the Stakeholder Assessment Group (SAG), with a special session to identify the strongest and most powerful forces in society and in the civil society. It was concluded in the session that the Communist Party is the most important force in society at large, followed by government institutions, the private sector and the media. Several civil *society* organisations were characterised as less influential, and the least influential forces among the organisations identified were the trade unions, Vietnamese NGOs and the War Veterans Association. Civil society organisations were in general not considered very influential in this social mapping. In a following session the most important social forces among the organisations in *civil society* were discussed by SAG. The result showed that the media was identified as the most influential force, followed by some of the mass organisations and the intellectuals. Somewhat influential were International NGOs, mass organisations, professional associations, religious groups, ethnic minority groups, intellectuals, youth and farmers. The least influential were workers, and business associations. This "power mapping" resulted in a number of fairly surprising conclusions, where, for instance, the workers who used to be considered the backbone of the social forces are considered to have lost their former role as social agents, and new forces that have emerged in the arena like intellectuals, religious organisations and ethnic minorities are considered more powerful. The leading role of the Party was nevertheless not questioned by the SAG.

3.1 The structure of civil society

The structure dimension of the CSI includes issues about the breadth and depth of citizen participation, the diversity of types of organisations and other participants, the extent of umbrella organisations and available networks, and finally the human and financial resources available to organisations.

3.1.1 Data for the structure dimension is broad-based, but some is still lacking

The structure dimension of the CSI was a critical issue, because this dimension identifies the organisations that are eligible to be considered part of civil society. The research team contacted many different organisations in the preparation of the first report for the SAG.

Around the year 2000, some locally engaged organisations began to describe themselves as NGOs and interest began growing for an understanding of Vietnamese civil society. Despite constantly struggling with the definition of civil society, a Vietnamese group of researchers, in connection with an INGO (CARE) drew attention to the fact that civil society had long historical roots in Vietnamese village structures, and that a broad range of organisations were part of it. It was accordingly suggested that today's civil society includes not only the VNGOs, but also the mass organisations, professional organisations and community-based organisations, as well as funds, charities and supporting centres. [24]

According to the MoHA, the definition of non-state organisations *(tổ chức phi chính phủ)* is quite broad. It includes: 1) associations, unions and societies, 2) funds, 3) science and technology organisations, 4) social support/patronage organisations, 5) legal counselling organisations.[25] Each of the groups register, as mentioned, according to different legislation, but in spite of the multiplicity of organisations, they are not seen as forming a civil society, but as "civic organisations" or "popular organisations". Mass organisations are not included in the categorisation, because they are "socio-political organisations" and accordingly considered to play a special role in society. In Vietnamese, the term most similar to civil society is *xã hội dân sự*, a literal translation of "society" and "civil", but it is rarely used in official discourse.[26]

---

[24]   Le Bach Duong, Khuat Thu Hong, Bach Tan Sinh, and Nguyen Thanh Tung (2002) *Civil Society in Viet Nam*. Ha Noi, Center for Social Development Studies.

[25]   Nguyen Ngoc Lam (2005) *Một số nét khái quát tổ chức, hoạt động của tổ chức phi chính phủ* (An overview of NGOs and NGO activities), Paper commissioned by VIDS to the CSI Viet Nam study.

[26]   The term is derived from Chinese.

The snapshot of Viet Nam in the mid-2000s aims to identify civil society in a broad and *inclusive* way by means of the CSI study. It shows a very broad range of organisations and initiatives. Although the goal of the CSI is not only to include *organisations*, but also other types of collective actions, the identification of civil society in Viet Nam had to begin with organisations. Besides the formal organisations, there are a large number of semi-formal and informal groups and activities, which have not been dealt with more than superficially because of the lack of knowledge available.

According to the CSI's broad definition, a large number of organisations and groups constitute civil society.[27] The CSI Vietnam study grouped the organisations into four categories: 1) mass organisations, 2) professional associations, 3) VNGOs, and 4) community-based organisations (Table 1).[28] *International NGOs* (INGOs) have a special role. They are considered very important for facilitating and inspiring the other organisations, but they are not themselves civil society actors. They are seen rather as donors, supporting the CSOs and government institutions. The number of INGOs increased from about 50 to nearly 600 between 1990 and 2005. [29]

The *mass organisations* category comprises six major organisations: The Fatherland Front (FF) is usually counted among the mass organisations, but functions at the same time as an umbrella for 29 organisations. The five others include the Women's Union, Farmers' Association, General Federation of Labour, War Veterans Association, and Ho Chi Minh Youth Union. Historically, they have had a special relationship with the Party. Moreover, they are organised hierarchically, with organisations at each administrative level from the centre to the provinces, districts, communes and villages. The number of members of the five major mass organisations is about 32 million (not including the FF). An important point regarding the role of the mass

Table 1. Main categories of civil society organisations

Category	Types of organisations included in category	Relations to state	Vietnamese definition
Mass Organisations	1.Women's Union 2. Farmers' Association 3. Youth Organisation 4. War Veterans Association 5. Worker's Organisation (VGCL)	Fatherland Front	Socio-Political Organisations
Professional Associations and Umbrella Organisations	1. Umbrella organisations like Red Cross, VUSTA, VUAL, Cooperative Alliance, etc. 2. Professional Associations	1. Fatherland Front 2. Registered with an umbrella organisation. Central or provincial organisations	1.Socio-Professional Associations 2. Social and professional associations; some belong to the NGOs
VNGOs	Charity Research NGOs Consultancy NGOs Educational NGOs Health NGOs	VUSTA, Line Ministry, Provincial or District People's Committees	Social Organisations; NGOs
Community-Based Organisations	Service and development or livelihoods-oriented Faith-based organisations Neighbourhood groups Family clans Recreative groups	Indirect affiliation to other organisation or Civil Code Many are not registered	Rural collaborative groups Faith-based organisations Neighbourhood groups Family clans

---

27   See Annex 4 for full list of organisations.

28   For further discussion of the classification of organisations, see Bui The Cuong (2005), Civic organisations in Vietnam. In: Irene Norlund and Dang Ngoc Dinh et al. *The Emerging Civil Society,* Hanoi, VIDS, UNDP, SNV and CIVICUS, Annex 5.

29   The latest figures point to a disbursement of 160 million USD in 2005, up from 80 million USD in 2000. Vietnam News Brief Service, 13 April 2006.

organisations in civil society is that the grassroots organisations have a fair amount of autonomy and can act in their local settings, whereas the higher levels often serve as a career ladder both within the organisations and into government or party positions. They have widespread organisational structures all over the country, but need support from donors or other non-state sources to undertake innovative programmes besides the state-sponsored campaigns. Some organisations under the Fatherland Front are not considered civil society organisations, such as the Communist Party and Viet Nam's Armed Forces.

Professional associations include fairly different types of organisations, which can be divided into two major groups, umbrella associations and professional associations. To the first category belong some of the organisations under the FF, like VUSTA, Red Cross, Union on Art and Literature, Viet Nam Cooperative Alliance, the Lawyers' Association, three religious organisations, etc. Others are broad organisations, like the Gardening Association, which has a network in 61 provinces with a membership of about 700,000.[30] The various associations under FF have different functions and structures: VUSTA has 56 associations operating nation-wide, 38 provincial organisations, and 73 centres and institutes.[31] The Viet Nam Union of Arts and Literature Association (VUAL) is composed of 10 national professional associations and 63 provincial ones. Moreover, there are 19 sports associations and federations, 70 unions of economic organisations and 30 associations in the field of charity and humanitarian aid.[32] However, information on professional associations' organisation and activities is fairly limited.

VNGOs are usually small organisations. The estimated number of VNGOs differs depending on the source, but it is in the range of 1,300 to 2,000. The main types of VNGOs include, roughly: 1) organisations which deliver social services for the government in health or education, often charity based; 2) NGOs carrying out research (mainly in the north); 3) organisations that carry out social work programmes (particularly in the south of Viet Nam)[33] ; 4) organisations that try to reach marginalised groups and use new approaches; and 5) organisations that work in the manner of consulting companies for the government or donors to help, for instance, implement PRAs, prepare programmes, etc.[34] VNGOs are often more innovative than other organisations in terms of their programmes and methodologies, but are limited in impact and have very limited funding. The development-oriented VNGOs are particularly dependent on foreign donor funding; in a study of "issue-oriented" organisations in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City (Box 1), foreign funding represented about 25 percent of the total funding, but for VNGOs, the percentage is probably higher.

Box 1: Vietnamese NGOs in the North and South

A larger study of 322 "issue-oriented" organisations in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City was carried out in 2000. It concluded that the situation in the north and the south differed considerably in terms of organisation focus, financing and relations to the government.[35] In general, the VNGOs are small with an average of 9 members in the south and 15 members in the north.[36] In the south, the focus of work was more in the tradition of social work to solve social problems in an action-oriented way, whereas the Ha Noi-based organisations were more engaged in research, information dissemination and services. They were also more interested in influencing policy than the southern ones. Furthermore, the organisations in the south were financed by domestic sources, whereas the Ha Noi-based organisations received most resources from service fees.[37] Both in the north and the south, foreign funding was in the range of 25 percent, which is fairly low, considering that it is often suggested that the VNGOs are driven by donors.[38] However, it may be more true that there is a larger financial dependence when it comes to the mainly development-oriented VNGOs.[39] They are increasingly able to initiate new approaches to problems and to work directly with communities, rather than only in partnership with the mass organisations as was often the case in the past.

---

[30]   Mark Sidel and Thaveeporn Vasavakul (2006) Report to VUSTA on Law on Associations, Ha Noi.

[31]   VUSTA (2004) Ha Noi; Nguyen Ngoc Lam (2005) op. cit.

[32]   Nguyen Ngoc Lam (2005) op. cit.

[33]   In the south of Viet Nam there are longer traditions for organisations engaged in social work and the structure of organisations is quite different between the north and the south (Wischermann (2003) Viet Nam in the Era of Doi Moi. Issue-Oriented Organisations and Their Relationship to the Government. In: Asian Survey, 43:6).

[34]   A number of articles about VNGOs are collected in, Ben J.T. Kerkvliet, Russel H.K. Heng and David W.H. Koh eds. (2003) *Getting Organized in Viet Nam. Moving in and around the Socialist State.* Singapore, ISEAS.

[35]   Bui The Cuong, Nguyen Quang Vinh, Wischermann (2001); Wischermann (2003), op. cit.

[36]   A few large organisations can be found like VINAVAC with up to 300.000 (ADB, Helvetas).

Community-based organisations (CBOs) comprised in 2005 an estimated 100,000-200,000 groups.[40] They are formed for purposes related to people's livelihoods and include groups like water-user groups, pig- or cow-farming groups, youth groups, mutual assistance groups, education and training initiatives, old age groups, family clan groups, and groups taking care of festivals and pagodas. In the cities, there are neighbourhood groups, cultural groups, recreational groups and so forth. These groups are small; some are self-generated, but others are also created around the activities of donors, INGOs or VNGOs. As they operate at the grassroots level, they have no independent legal framework for their activities, but have been able to register under the Civil Code since 1996, and under mass-organisation or cooperatives. Presumably, a large number of groups are not registered at all.

If members of the large organisations and faith-based organisations are counted, civil society amounts numerically to at least 65 million people, from among a population of 83 million.[41] This does not count members of sports, health, educational and cultural organisations. In addition, there are informal groups, like credit and savings groups, with more than 10 million participants, and informal groups, like CBOs and others, with millions of members.

The mapping of organisations in Viet Nam demonstrates that social life is rich and diversified. One of the few representative surveys carried out in Viet Nam, the World Values Survey (WVS), came to a similar - even higher - result in its first survey, conducted in 2001. On average, each person is a member of 2.3 groups in Viet Nam, according to the survey.

Table 1. Membership in various organisations and social groups in Viet Nam, China and Singapore, 2001

Group/association/org.	Viet Nam	China	Singapore
Development/human rights	1.5	0.4	0.5
Conservation/environment	7.6	1.2	0.9
Peace group	9.2	0.9	0.9
Religious organisation	10.4	3.6	19.8
Trade Union	11.3	6.9	4.3
Professional association	13.3	1.2	4.4
Health group	14.8	2.7	3.6
Youth work	15.4	1.1	8.3
Education/arts/music	17.3	2.2	14.0
Sports/recreation	19.2	3.2	15.1
Local community group	26.2	1.5	2.4
Social welfare	26.5	2.9	7.1
Women's group	28.4	0.9	1.2
Political group/organisation	28.5	8.3	0.4
Other	3.7	--	3.6
Mean membership number	2.33	0.39	0.86

Source: R. Dalton (2006) and World Values Surveys 1999-2002.[42] The WVS is based on 1000 interviews; a limited number, which means that very low figures are less reliable/representative.

---

[37] Wischermann (2003), op. cit. p. 878.

[38] Gray, op. cit. 1999; Gita Sabharwal and Tran Thi Thien Huong (2005) *Civil society in Viet Nam: Moving from the margins to the mainstream.* Ha Noi, DfID.

[39] Katrine R. Pedersen (2005) *Changing State-Society Relations. A Study of Civil Society Law in Viet Nam's doi moi Era.* Ha Noi.

[40] PPWG seminar on "Rural collaborative groups" (2005): Nguyen Van Nghiem, *Farmers Groups in Agriculture and Rural Areas - Remaining Issues.* Chu Tien Quang, *Policy and legal framework to develop cooperative economic organisations in the agricultural sector of Viet Nam.*

[41] See Annex 4 for a detailed list. Some people are members of several organisations. 74 percent are calculated to be member of a least 1 organisation according to WVSV.

[42] VWS can be found on <http://www.democ.uci.edu/democ/archive/vietnam.htm>, the survey is based on 1000 interviewees.

The number of people belonging to organisations is very high in Viet Nam compared with countries like Singapore and China, which have comparable types of governance. In the China survey, interviewees belonged, on average, to 0.39 organisations; the number for Singapore is 0.86.[43] These figures point to one significant difference between the three countries: the government in Viet Nam is more accepting and encouraging of some kinds of organisations than its neighbouring countries.[44]

3.1.2 SAG assessment: civil society is broad, but not so deep

Overall, the breadth of civil society was assessed to be considerable, because of widespread organisations at all levels and in all provinces; only the remote areas inhabited by ethnic minorities have few organisations. However, its depth was judged to be rather low, because membership in organisations is not considered voluntary in many cases and members are often not very active. One of the indicators in the World Values Survey (WVS) included the level of political activism in Viet Nam. Unsurprisingly, it was very low: less than 2 percent of the WVS sample had taken part in political actions, although a little higher share, 6 percent, said they had signed petitions.[45] Charitable giving is considerable for a poor country and many initiatives take place both within and outside the state, as it is a tradition to support people in need. The SAG gave this indicator a high score in terms of quantity, but a fairly low score in terms of quality. Volunteering is also widespread in the organisations. The assessment of voluntarism was high in terms of the number participating, but surprisingly low again in quality. A general weakness was identified, namely the relative lack of umbrella organisations that can give effective support to smaller organisations, as well as the lack of informal networks. There are weak relations between various organisations belonging to the same types, and there are even weaker relations between organisations of different types, even though they often work together or in parallel on projects on the ground. The availability of financial resources was judged to be at a medium level, whereas human resources, technical resources and infrastructure available for organisations were deemed to be low.

The conclusion is that the organisations are very diversified, resulting in the appearance of a segmented civil society, in spite of the existence of a number of general umbrella organisations, like the Fatherland Front, which have a rather formal function. VUSTA is among the few umbrella organisations that have started some activities to support the organisations with capacity building. Financial resources are needed for many, though not all, organisations; however, the need for more qualified staff and infrastructure is even more important, according to the SAG.

> *The structure (score: 1.6) of civil society shows a very broad-based civil society, but a complicated mixture of organisations of different origin, structure, legitimacy, purpose and financing. The depth of membership is, on the contrary, substantially lower, because members are not very active. This has an overall impact and weakens the structure. Networks between organisations are very weak, which diminishes the impact of their activities, learning and advocacy, and the umbrella organisations do not provide sufficient support infrastructure. Capacity building and infrastructure are some of the organisations' most pressing needs.*

3.2 The environment for civil society

The assessment of the environment for civil society is based on seven issues: political context, basic freedoms, socio-economic context, socio-cultural context, legal environment, state-civil society relations and, finally, state-private sector relations.

---

[43]   Russ Dalton (2006) Civil Society, Social Capital and Democracy. In: R. Dalton and Doh Chull Shin eds. *Citizens, Democracy and Markets Around the Pacific Rim.* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

[44]   Dalton (2006) op. cit.

[45]   According to the WVS survey.

3.2.1 Data for the environment dimension: some international ratings are controversial

In the CSI report, data on the socio-political environment are based partly on international comparative indexes for issues related to the levels of governance, corruption and political rights. This created considerable debate in the SAG. The socio-economic context was based on a number of economic criteria that are available from numerous reports from governments and donors. The socio-cultural indicators were based mainly on the World Values Survey Viet Nam, as there is little other national data available on this type of information. Information about the legal environment came from local studies in Viet Nam; likewise, information about the relations between civil society and the state, and between civil society and the private sector, was based on various studies carried out in Viet Nam.

3.2.2 SAG assessment: a number of weaknesses, but also some strengths

The CSI Stakeholder Assessment Group (SAG) found that "political rights" in Viet Nam still have some limitations, though not as much as foreign sources indicate, i.e. that Viet Nam is a "not free country".[46] A core point made within the group was that citizens have the right to vote freely. There was, however, broad agreement that political competition is limited, since only one party is permitted. The rule of law is still, according to the SAG, only partially established in the country, despite years of administrative and judicial reforms; and corruption is substantial in the public sector (as well as other sectors not included in the discussion). State effectiveness is assessed to be quite good, in spite of fairly low scores on the international comparative data; decentralisation scores quite highly, with a considerable portion of state funds distributed to the provincial level (44%). However, the distribution to lower levels looks less positive.

Even if the *basic civil rights* (freedom of assembly, expression and association) are in principle guaranteed by the constitution, the SAG found that there are some violations of basic rights and gave this indicator a medium score. Press freedom was an issue of debate, but most found that liberty in this field is considerable, even if there are sensitive topics that are not discussed. This stands in sharp contrast to international sources like Freedom House, which ranks Viet Nam very low in this regard.

The *socio-economic context* is assessed based on a number of indicators, eight in total. Viet Nam is still a poor country, with a GDP per capita of about 640 USD[47], in spite of rapid growth and significant poverty reduction over the last decade. The situation is generally stable and free from major economic or social crises, and inequalities are moderate (below the benchmark of a gini-coefficient of 0.4).[48] The literacy rate is very high from an international perspective. On the negative side, the IT infrastructure is still below the benchmark established by the CSI. Other negatives include the poverty level and the presence of some religious and ethnic conflicts. Overall, however, this indicator scored fairly well because of the relatively high economic and political stability, and the high rate of literacy.

The *socio-cultural context* in Viet Nam is defined in terms of norms and attitudes that may be conducive to civil society, including "trust", "tolerance" and "spiritedness". These indicators are not very familiar to the Vietnamese public, but are often used by researchers to assess the context for democratic values (Putnam, WVS).

Trust is seen as the glue that holds society together through networks and associational activities. The WVS trust indicators were accepted as a benchmark for the CSI. The general question raised in the survey is about the extent to which the interviewee thinks that most people are trustworthy.

---

[46]   Freedomhouse. Available at: <http://www.freedomhouse.org>

[47]   MPI (2006) SEDP 2006-10, Ha Noi March 2006, p. 19.

[48]   According to the Vietnamese Living Standard Surveys, inequality has not changed considerably: 1992 gini-coefficient was 0.34 to 0.35 in 2002. However, there is still a major problem of inequality between the Kinh people and the ethnic minorities, and the situation seems to becoming more aggravated.

Table 2. Level of trust in various countries

Country	Level of trust, percentage
China	52%
Japan	42%
Viet Nam	41%
Canada	39%
USA	35%
Korea	27%
Singapore	17%
Philippines	6%

The relatively high level of trust in Viet Nam of 41 percent might be due to several reasons, even if the pattern among the countries does not provide a clear conclusion. The society's basic values are still largely oriented towards the family and a close circle of friends and relatives, a situation which might raise the level of trust higher than, for instance, in post-Cold War East European countries, where the level is generally very low.[49] The trust level seems to be higher in general in countries influenced by Confucianism, though less so in South Korea and Singapore. Beyond the family-oriented and Confucian culture, the organisational culture, involving Party and mass organisations and educational institutes, has created a new layer of "comradeship" that may also add to a relatively high level of trust. China, for instance, has a high level of trust also. One finding from the WVS in Viet Nam indicates that trust was not higher for people who belong to organisations than for those who do not, which means that trust, often translated into social capital, does not promote democratic values, but rather those of the existing political culture.[50]

Tolerance [51] was deemed to be at a moderate level in society, particularly with regard to various types of "social evils", like prostitution, drug addiction and homosexuality the tolerance was low. The *spiritedness* [52] indicator investigates people's attitudes to issues like taking bribes and falsification of taxes. 94 and 88 percent respectively rejected these activities as "not justifiable". However, the level of spiritedness recorded by the WVS looks to be higher than reality, given how widespread corruption is; it perhaps demonstrates a discrepancy between people's perception of their own values and the real situation. Different definitions of bribes/corruption are another possible explanation for the gap. Gift giving is common and accepted in Vietnamese society, but is considered a kind of corruption by international standards.

Organisation's *legal environment* is of critical importance. It could be argued that the legal framework in Viet Nam is supportive in the respect that organisations can be established, as evidence has shown. Compared to other countries in the region with similar governance, the number of organisations is high in Viet Nam. However, the SAG pointed out that it was still very difficult to set up organisations; the procedures are time consuming and personal contacts and money are necessary. Advocacy was also found to be limited and fairly difficult to practice. Tax laws are not especially favourable for organisations. Although non-profit organisations do not have to pay tax, philanthropy does not enjoy any kind of tax-exemption, which the SAG found to be an area that could be easily improved and have a great impact.

Several questions were addressed with respect to *state-civil society relations:* How autonomous is civil society from the state? Can the organisations operate without excessive government interference? Does the state protect the public interest?

---

[49]   Dalton (2006) op. cit.

[50]   This finding is special to Viet Nam.

[51]   Tolerance is defined as the levels of acceptance of people of different ethnicity, religion, nationality, and various forms of social or physical disabilities.

[52]   Spiritedness is defined as the extent to which citizens disapprove of violations of public norms, like tax avoidance or free-riding.

The mass organisations are clearly not autonomous vis-à-vis the state, but their grassroots-level groups are more so than the higher levels. As for the VNGOs, professional associations, CBOs and even religious organisations, it was a point of discussion whether the state interferes a lot in reality, despite its intention to do so or not. Some SAG members found that their organisations could operate without much interference. Most organisations have some relationship with the state, as pointed out earlier, because of the entangled nature of the societal structures. It was also argued that state interference protected organisations in case of difficulties. By and large the point is that "independence" from the state is not a major concern for most organisations. With respect to an indicator of cooperation with the state and financing of CSOs by the state, the mass organisations cooperate most with the state among the CSOs and obviously receive the most support from the state, but still have to search for other funding options (for instance, the trade union has a large tourist branch, Women's Union have considerable foreign funding). Even VUSTA under the Fatherland Front is only partially financed from the state budget. The professional associations and the VNGOs usually only receive support from the state if they carry out certain agreed-upon tasks. As mentioned earlier, the connections between the state and the CSOs are complicated and cannot just be seen as an outcome of cooperation or non-cooperation in the context of the Vietnamese political culture. The indicators concerning "dialogue between the state and the CSOs" and "state cooperation and support for CSOs" were both judged to be at a below-medium level.

Relations between the private sector and civil society were not a major concern for the SAG, which generally gave low ratings for the private sector's attitudes, the level of corporate social responsibility in the country, and the level of corporate philanthropy. The research group had found numerous examples of corporate responsibility, but no overall figures. It seems to be an area that requires further attention and investigation, particularly as it has become increasingly important in other Asian countries.

One of the main causes for the weakness of civil society is its environment (score: 1.4). Political freedoms and civil liberties are still limited in a number of areas, the legal environment is not enabling for most organisations, with the exception of the mass organisations, which enjoy special privileges from the state and the Party. The relations between the state and the CSOs in general are below medium, and relations between the CSOs and the private sector are also judged to be below medium.

3.3 The values of civil society

The analysis of the values of CSOs and how they promote the values in society comprises seven issues: democracy, transparency, tolerance, non-violence, gender equity, poverty reduction and environmental sustainability.

3.3.1 Lack of data for values dimension in general studies

The data for this dimension caused more difficulties than the two former dimensions' data, because values and culture generally receive less attention than the socio-economic and legal arenas, particularly when it comes to the internal conditions within organisations. Some general statistical data are available about organisations, such as on leadership and gender, but case studies and project reports were used more frequently. By and large, this left more space for the SAG members to influence the scoring based on their own opinions and experiences.

3.3.2 SAG assessment stresses poverty reduction and gender equity, not transparency

With regard to democracy within organisations, the mass organisations practice "democratic centralism", which means they hold democratic elections but elected leaders also have to be approved (or even pre-approved) by the higher levels. The professional associations usually practice democratic elections but Party members might have an influence on the outcomes. VNGOs have different types of leadership but they are usually centred around single individuals, and they do not, with rare exceptions, have a large membership base. In general, CBOs practice democratic elections but leaders will often be persons from the mass organisations, the administration or the village leadership. This mixed picture led the SAG members to give

widely differing scores, depending on their definitions of democracy. Some thought "democratic centralism" was democratic, whereas others did not. It is broadly agreed that the state decides the framework for the democracy. Still, democracy is by and large viewed in a positive light by most (though not all) organisations. On the other hand, the SAG did not find that the CSOs promote democracy very much in society.

Corruption within civil society is judged to be lower than in society at large; nevertheless, civil society is not without corruption and a "petty culture of corruption" is widespread throughout Vietnamese society in general. Financial *transparency* was assessed in terms of how large a proportion of organisations make their accounts publicly available. The opinion was divided in the SAG on this issue, but most found that only a small share of organisations practice this form of transparency. There was broad agreement in the assessment group that CSOs in general are not promoting the value of transparency in a substantial way in society, a logical result of the lack of transparency among the organisations themselves.

Tolerance is considered natural for civil society, in terms of accepting other people and promoting non-violence in a country founded on Buddhist and Confucian values. Experiences of long wars in Viet Nam also contribute to support for peace and non-violence. It is also common for organisations to help various marginalised people, such as those with disabilities or other problems, as well as people who are ill or poor women. Nonetheless, tolerance is lower according to the "otherness" of other groups, particularly drug addicts, alcoholics and criminals. Immigrants, ethnic minorities and people living with HIV/AIDS are more accepted than those belonging to the first group, but tolerance are yet limited.[53] The SAG was not convinced that tolerance is high in civil society, and there are also the "less tolerant forces", such as the mafia, drug rings, trafficking of women, prostitution and so on.

Gender equity was discussed in terms of how large a share of leaders in civil society is female. Statistics show that women constitute about 30 percent of the leaders in CSOs, which is not particularly low in comparative perspective, but neither is it equitable. Practice of gender equality within the organisations was a topic of heated discussion with little evidence to rely on. Female members of the SAG were more negative about the practice of gender equity than male members, and the debate demonstrated that it is an unresolved issue within the organisations. On the other hand, there was broad agreement that gender equity as a value is promoted strongly by civil society organisations to society at large.

The SAG gave its highest score to the civil society's support for *poverty reduction*, even to the extent that civil society is considered among the driving forces behind this issue, though some members found that the state was still the *main* force behind efforts to alleviate poverty. In the field of the environment, the assessment of civil society was quite low, though, in recent years, this topic has been receiving increasing attention.

The overall picture based on the SAG's assessment shows that there are both strong sides and weak sides of civil society's values. Poverty eradication and peace are strong values; gender equity and tolerance are promoted quite strongly; but transparency and environment sustainability are less well promoted in society. Democratic values are difficult to assess because of the lack of agreement on a definition, but in general they are not promoted strongly in society. "Participation" is a more acceptable term than "democracy" for describing people's increased involvement in civil society activities.

The *values* (score: 1.7) of civil society are characterised by engagement in charity, voluntarism, peace, and a fairly high level of trust and spiritedness within CSOs, in spite of the erosion of traditional values in society at large as a result of modernisation. On the other hand, some values are neither practiced nor promoted by CSOs, such as transparency and democracy, both of which will be important if the organisations are to become stronger and more trusted in society. Tolerance is at a medium level, but civil society organisations promote it more strongly in society than they practice it. Participation is practiced more commonly and seen as a kind of democracy.

---

[53]   According to the findings of VWS Viet Nam

3.4 The impact of civil society

Civil society's impact received the lowest score among the four dimensions examined by the SAG in the CSI assessment. The issues discussed included: influence on policy, holding of the state and private sector accountable, response to social interests, empowerment of citizens, and meeting of social needs.

3.4.1 Data for impact dimension are based on general data and case studies

Data on the impact dimension was, as in the case of the values dimension, fairly weak. It is easy to trace general developments in the country through poverty assessments and surveys on living standards, but it is more difficult to assess how much influence civil society has on the country's policies, or how much it actually supports social goals or empowers citizens. For this dimension, the sources of information used included case studies and reports from the government, donors, INGOs, VNGOs and researchers.

3.4.2 SAG assessment stresses impact on poverty alleviation

The impact of civil society on human rights was discussed in terms of the different definition of human rights in Viet Nam vis-à-vis the West. It is a "sensitive" issue in Viet Nam, and civil society is by and large not involved in human rights advocacy. However, if the definition also includes social and economic rights, civil society is very active in the field. Nevertheless, the score was quite low for this indicator. Civil society's impact on social policies was also assessed as quite low.

Does civil society hold the state and private corporations accountable? By and large the impact of civil society was judged to be low when it comes to holding the state accountable. With respect to its impact on the private sector, the assessment was almost nil. In the latter case, on the other hand, the CSI report pointed to an increasing number of strikes at foreign-owned enterprises where workers have been successful at improving working conditions.

"Responding to social interest" comprised two indicators. The first concerned how effectively civil society responds to high-priority social concerns. The SAG scored this indicator fairly negatively. In contrast, the trust in CSOs was scored quite high, based on evidence from the WVS. In this case, the mass organisations are the most trusted.

Empowerment of citizens is an indicator that was assessed positively by the SAG. This indicator involved assessing civil society's activities and successes in the field of informing and educating citizens on public issues. There is no doubt that all types of CSOs are active in this regard. A fairly positive assessment was also made of civil society's role in building people's capacity to organise themselves and take more control over decisions that affects their lives, as well as to mobilise resources to solve common problems. Often, this kind of initiatives takes place with the support of INGOs, but are implemented by mass organisations or VNGOs. As to whether civil society empowers marginalised people, like ethnic minorities, the SAG was more doubtful, assigning a medium score; women, on the other hand, constitute a core group that is being empowered by the CSOs, according to the SAG.

It is debatable to what extent civil society is able to meet societal needs. The SAG discussed whether civil society organisations are lobbying the state to provide services. It concluded that this goes on to some extent, but not very much, because the idea of lobbying is not very well known in Viet Nam. As the "socialisation" process proceeds, civil society might gain more influence in the fields of health and education, as it will have to take on more responsibilities. The SAG also discussed whether civil society meets societal needs directly, but found that its impact was not significant in comparison with government programmes. Civil society was judged to reach marginalised groups a little better than the government. The aggregate score for this indicator was at a medium level.

The *impact* of civil society overall is judged to be quite low (score: 1.2) by the SAG. Considerable impact was identified with regard to poverty alleviation and empowerment of citizens. However, civil society does not have a strong impact on social policies at present. This might be because first, the state is still considered to be the driving force of policy-making and implementation, and second, because of the lack of an enabling environment. On the other hand, as there were no general studies to rely on, the low score could also be due to the lack of in-depth knowledge among the members of SAG and the National Team about the activities and impacts of civil society.

3.5 The civil society diamond

The stakeholder assessment group (SAG)'s aggregated scoring for the results of the four dimensions of the CSI in Viet Nam can be presented as a four-sided figure, the "civil society diamond". The diamond for Viet Nam is of a small-to-medium size (Fig.2).

1) The *structure* of civil society scored 1.6 on a scale of 0 to 3, indicating that organisational life and organisations are considerable, but they also face a significant number of difficulties. 2) The *socio-political environment* was given a below-medium score of 1.4, however this shows thus that there is some space for organisations. 3) The *values* of civil society and the promotion of values in society were judged to be at a higher-than-medium level, with a score of 1.7. The highest score among the four dimensions, this reflects some strong positive values (non-violence, poverty eradication, promotion of gender equity) and activities by civil society, as well as some weak areas (lack of transparency in terms of both its practice and its promotion in society). Finally, 4) the *impact* of civil society scored quite low at just 1.2, reflecting the SAG's assessment that civil society's activities have a mediocre degree of impact.

Figure 2. The civil society diamond for Viet Nam
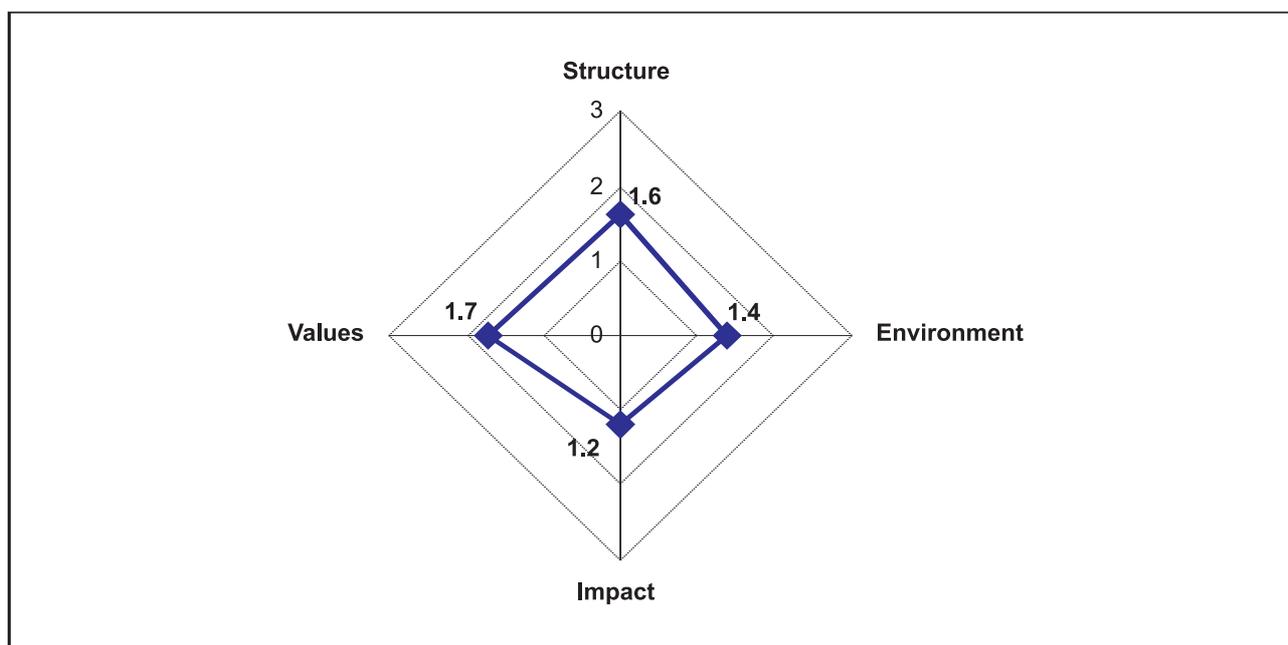
The SAG's assessment is a reflection of the information available about civil society and the normative opinions of how local stakeholders perceive the situation in Viet Nam, combined with evidence from data in Viet Nam and international assessments. The diamond presents a broad picture of the state of civil society in

Viet Nam today, reflecting it strengths as well as its weaknesses. The SAG meetings and scorings do provide a fairly positive assessment of the state of civil society in Viet Nam and the possibility for dialogue with the state.

One of the conclusions about the CSI-SAT methodology is that it has been instrumental in mapping civil society in Viet Nam and providing a basis to start discussions about the possibilities to strengthen civil society. The methodology has some weaknesses, as does any qualitative method, notably a lack of precision. The SAG is a small group, but this is accepted in sociological methodology as providing a microcosm for studying the bigger picture. What it does not represent is the marginalised groups themselves as they have difficulties representing themselves in forums such as the SAG. Moreover, there is obviously a need for more in-depth studies about the organisation, activities and impact of the CSOs. Bearing this in mind, the CSI study has helped open the door to a cross-cultural understanding of different interpretations of core issues for civil society in Viet Nam.

4. Conclusion

Civil society is defined in this paper as "the arena outside the family, the state and the market where people associate to advance common interests". This definition can only be applied in Viet Nam with the caveat that the boundaries are *very* fuzzy between the state and civil society. It is argued that in an inclusive perspective of civil society, all the organisations should be seen as part of civil society, including the mass organisations, which are the most extensive organisations, present at all levels in almost all the provinces (particularly the Women's Union and the Farmers' Association). They carry out campaigns initiated by the state, but they are also implementing thousands of projects and credit programmes for poor people, and the mass organisations' grassroots branches have a particularly notable degree of independence to fulfil the needs of their communities. Second, there are professional associations that organise people with the same professional interests in a wide range of fields and in almost all provinces. Third, the VNGOs, usually based in the cities but carrying out more narrowly focussed projects throughout the country, often concentrate on development-oriented projects, gender, health and community development. Finally, the CBOs are spreading quickly, focussed on livelihood services at the grassroots level in many provinces. The strength of civil society is manifested through the increasing number and diversity of civil society organisations at all levels, the active participation in Participatory Assessments taking place in relation to thousands of projects all over the country, and public discussions in the press.[54]

With regard to the more formal groups, the role of the state is inevitably of central importance, as it establishes the official framework for organisations. Even if the mass organisations are by far the largest, the total number of civic organisations is even larger and broader in its activities than the mass organisations, and goes far beyond the control of the state. Still, it might not be appropriate to call such organisations "autonomous", because there are often links and overlaps in personalities with the state-sponsored institutions. The state does not prohibit organisations, as evidenced by the very high level of membership. On the other hand, it is more engaged in the Party's governance and leadership of participation, than in civil society as such. The draft Law on Associations reflects that the state is still thinking in terms of "managing" civil society, contrary to the essence of organisations and associations, which are based on people's own initiatives.

Given the overlap between state, Party and civil society in Viet Nam, the dynamics of civil society cannot be seen primarily as the state *versus* civil society. Much of the change involves activities taking place *within* the state sphere. However, there are also activities taking place outside or, at least, on the outskirts of the state sphere, in groups organised at the grassroots level - even within the mass organisations. These include religious groups, ethnic communities, and groups for art and culture and various forums for livelihood activities. This view is obviously different from the idea of the CSI project, according to which autonomy is important for associations.

The *weaknesses* of civil society and associational life are, first of all, related to the framework for organisations, which still limits the potential of civil society with respect to service delivery and, even more, with respect to advocacy as a means of holding the state and the private sector accountable, promoting transparency and fighting against corruption. The legal frame is not enabling for establishment of new organisations and networks at present.

Second, the organisations have different characters and have arisen during different historical periods, resulting in very different roles and traditions in terms of their structures and activities. The mass organisations' role as social-political organs for the Party has changed to include service delivery. They have, however, not changed much in their internal structure in order to accommodate their new roles; the mass organisations still need to build the capacity to handle many of their programmes. The management and organisation of the professional organisations is less formed than the other kinds of organisations, but they have a great potential for voluntarism that could be employed more actively. The VNGOs appeared later on the scene for many reasons, some for charity, others for employment, but they mostly aim to support the poor and people with difficulties. They also need to build their capacities in order to become reliable partners to work with the government and donors.

---

[54] The draft Law on Associations is one of the recent examples. It has generated public discussions in the media, meetings, and comments to MOHA and the National Assembly.

Third, many organisations are members of umbrella organisations, but they are generally weak and do not provide enough support for the various organisations' activities. Networks are weak in general, and vulnerable groups like ethnic minorities have at present no networks. One exception is VUSTA, which has started proactively to organise seminars and training for VNGOs, and has started to take up the role of advocacy, as has been seen with the discussions around the draft Law on Associations.

Fourth, there are still issues that should be dealt with more proactively. There is a widespread popular expectation that the state should take action to support people in need. The bureaucracy is often reluctant to engage non-state organisations in local activities. The private sector is not participating actively in charity or corporate responsibility. Other values have negative effects on civil society. Tolerance is judged to be not very high and spiritedness is at a moderate level, which leaves space for corruption, one of the most difficult problems in Viet Nam today. These issues need to be taken up and debated more publicly.

Since the introduction of *doi moi* and particularly since the rapid economic development and societal changes over the last decade, the government has faced growing social problems concurrent with development and an increase of population. New problems have emerged that pose new challenges to the government; it is not equipped to manage the tasks alone. The government aims to supply the basic infrastructure of clinics and schools, with countrywide campaigns to control epidemics and provide services for poor children. The health system in Vietnam is not well developed, and with the introduction of the "socialisation" policies, the government is not able or willing to bear the burdens of improving social services alone. Civil society can help to identify and formulate the problems, and it can help deliver needed services. Civil society can also help more effectively when there are deep and severe needs to support poor people, people who are ill, who live with disabilities, or who have little access to social goods, such as those in the rural areas. In the cities, there are many new problems with street children, prostitution, trafficking of children and women, HIV/AIDS, and drug addiction. There are gaps and needs that civil society can fill but that are difficult for the state to reach. Needs have thus to be identified, and civil society has to take part much more actively than at present to identify the needs and to provide support where the needs are greatest. By giving civil society a clearer voice in all aspects of life, not only in the field of service delivery but also in capacity building and advocacy activities at all levels in the country, it can contribute considerably to achieving economic and social development in an equitable way. Civil society has, moreover, a very important potential role in promoting transparency and anti-corruption.

The strength of civil society is its diversified nature based on human activity and creativity. Viet Nam is still a poor country and it faces many hurdles to overcome poverty and increasing inequalities. It has to develop its economic and social potential, and liberate its population's potential for helping the country's disadvantaged people. At the same time, civil society can be inspired and supported by the state through various forms of cooperation. The state is in the last resort responsible to the population for ensuring that the new challenges are met in a way that helps improve the people's wellbeing, but it can cooperate with the civil society, and civil society can as well contribute by holding the state more accountable.

5. Strengthening the Vietnamese civil society organisations: policy recommendations to the Government, donors and civil society

Civil society cannot be organised and led by others; however, an enabling environment and support for capacity building are important preconditions. Therefore, while the government needs to open up the space for an independent civil society through changes to the legal framework, civil society needs to take a proactive role in identifying its best strategies for making positive contributions. It must assess the opportunities created by the government's legal frameworks and supportive international development actors. The donors and INGOs need to provide generous support to strengthen the capacity of the civil society by funding research and development. Donors need to consider civil society as a source for genuine partners; and they need to make funding available for newly established organisations to permit them to strengthen their organisations, rather than only contracting established organisations to deliver services. Five major areas to be strengthened can be identified.

1. *Improving the social, legal and economic environment for Vietnamese social organisations, associations and movements.* The limitations on civil society consist of both the narrow legal framework for the creation and operation of organisations and networks, and the need for an improved public space for citizens and organisations in general, and advocacy in particular. Social movements should also benefit from a larger space for operating and conducting advocacy.

2. *Strengthening capacity in Vietnamese social organisations and networks.* Organisations have to consider making internal changes with respect to their structure, accountability and transparency as a means to become stronger and more trustworthy in the eyes of the public and other organisations. They need to build the capacity of their staffs and create reasonable working conditions. Some civil society organisations have very limited budgets, as most funding is channelled towards a few large organisations. Participating in networks is an important way for organisations to build capacity and gain experience.

3. *Focussing on and strengthening effective networks of CSOs.* Networks have to be promoted and upgraded both between organisations of the same type, and between different types of organisations. Networks are glue that strengthens organisations, by spreading learning and information and giving organisations a voice when it comes to promoting civil society activities and holding the state and private sectors accountable. The large organisations have huge administrative apparatuses; they should facilitate information and knowledge flows to the lower levels, and they should institutionalise cooperation with other organisations.

4. *Strengthening cooperation with the private sector.* More could be done to encourage the participation of the private sector in charity and development work. Cooperation does take place already, but the CSI study shows that there is very little knowledge within civil society about the activities of the private sector and, apparently, very little engagement with it. The small-scale business sector might overlap with the cooperatives and CBOs, but the larger firms could contribute more to charity and development through corporate responsibility measures.

5. *Strengthening the capacity for and implementation of research and evaluation of CSO activities* Accumulated knowledge about civil society's activities is still limited. The CSI mapping of civil society was able to identify a large number of organisations and activities, but it is still a broad survey and there is both need and room for in-depth studies of the thousands of organisations, their objectives and activities and their organisation, membership and impact.

5.1 Capacity development fund

Different forms of funds and facilities to support the development of civil society have in recent years been developed in Asia, as well as other continents, with support from international donors, governments, INGOs, the private sector and private funds. Many possible models have been established, or are being tried, in countries like China, India, Algeria and Egypt, and in Eastern Europe. One problem in Viet Nam at present is the lack of coherence among the numerous small initiatives launched by multilateral donors, bilateral donors

and INGOs to support CSOs. For the purpose of establishing better coordination among the donors, it is recommended here that a common fund be created.

In accordance with the Ha Noi Core Statement on Aid Effectiveness and for the purposes of harmonisation and increasing transparency, the efforts of the multilateral donors, bilateral donors and International NGOs, as well as possibly the private sector, could be coordinated if they could agree to pool their funds and efforts to support the development of the non-for-profit sector.

The purpose of such a capacity development fund (CDF) should be to support the civil society sector and citizens' participation in the field of poverty alleviation and the promotion of equity. The purpose of the fund would be to support civil society organisations in building their capacity in a number of fields. Its objectives should be in accordance and agreement with the government, and to foster the development of transparent and accountable CSOs. A capacity development fund would make it possible for donors and CSOs to address some of the challenges currently facing the development of civil society in Viet Nam. The idea of a CDF was further discussed during the multi-stakeholder workshop "Capacity Building and Strengthening the Participation of NGOs for the Socio-Economic Development in Viet Nam" held in Ha Noi on November 9, 2006. See Annex 1.

Recommendations to the Government, the donors/INGOs and the CSOs to support the development of civil society in Viet Nam:

To the Government

It is recommended to the government to improve the socio-political environment in order to strengthen civil society. The government has to ensure a legal environment that facilitates the growth and operation of organisations by establishing simple legal procedures, whereas the draft Law on Association is suggesting quite complicated procedures. Meetings among citizens should, for instance, be possible without restrictions, and networks should be facilitated.

It is recommended that the government ensure more equal treatment of civil society organisations. The mass organisations enjoy preferential treatment in financial support from the state, which can be justified by their important responsibilities. However, the Vietnamese NGOs still have limited access to state resources and a limited ability to communicate with the state, because the government has not fully accepted them as partners in development. Ways to support the CSOs include support for information sharing and for the growth of networks between the different types of organisations, as well as including VNGOs in the national dialogue on development issues. It would be a significant step forward to open up the VUFO-NGO Centre to VNGOs and other organisations, or to establish a similar organisation/information centre for VNGOs.

It is recommended to the government that it make the funding from donors and INGOs transparent. The funds are usually channelled through PACCOM, or at least registered with PACCOM, but information is not available publicly about the distribution of funds to different organisations and projects. Transparency would encourage better distribution of funds and help prevent the funds of donors and INGOs from overlapping.

It is recommended to the government that it encourage the private sector to support charity and become more socially responsible. Charity can be encouraged through tax benefits for the private sector. Further dialogue and study are needed to assess the private sector's engagement and the opportunities for improving corporate charity and responsibility, an area that could be supported by a capacity development fund.

It is recommended to the government that it encourage CSOs to participate in the implementation of the SEDP 2006-2010 and that it create the necessary conditions for them to do so. The current extent of CSOs' participation must be assessed and the factors that prevent or facilitate that participation must be identified through a dialogue with local governments.

To the donors and INGOs

It is recommended to donors and INGOs that, in order to strengthen civil society, they encourage a dialogue with the government about creating an enabling environment for CSOs, such as through the draft Law on Associations and other relevant laws and regulations. One specific point is to facilitate the access of CSOs to remote areas, and to facilitate CSOs in remote areas among and for ethnic minorities. Donors and INGOs can, moreover, support CSO participation in national and sector-wide partnerships, particularly the VNGOs, which are often mentioned as partners, but rarely participate.

It is recommended to donors and INGOs that they support capacity-building and organisational development among all four types of organisations through training and organisational needs assessments in dialogue with the organisations. This may include supporting the participation of CSOs in international forums and supporting research on civil society organisations and on the impact of CSO-state cooperation. The suggested capacity development fund could be a useful facility to support these types of efforts.

It is recommended to donors and INGOs that they support CSO networking by providing staff, training and the financial means necessary to develop information flows between various organisations, so as to improve cooperation and coordination between organisations. It might also help to support meetings organised by civil society organisations on relevant development issues. A capacity development fund could again facilitate such networks.

It is also recommended to donors and INGOs that they make more use of VNGOs to implement development programs.

To Vietnamese civil society

It is recommended to the CSOs that they be more proactive with regard to improving accountability, transparency and legitimacy as representatives of the people. It is also recommended that the organisations assess their values, structures, environments and impacts. This could involve identifying strategic interests and preparing strategies for building organisational capacity. The CSOs would benefit from documenting their knowledge, practices and contributions to society and communicating this information to other stakeholders. Such initiatives should be eligible for support from the CDF.

It is recommended that civil society seek opportunities for collaboration with the INGOs, donors and state so as to contribute effectively to Vietnam's socio-economic development. Resources should be mobilised both from internal sources and by tapping external opportunities, such as the donors, INGOs and state.

It is recommended that civil society organisations build clear linkages with the grassroots communities.

It is recommended that civil society use the opportunities available for better networking and cooperation between organisations. This will create added value and learning through the more effective distribution of knowledge and experience between

Annex 1: Workshop on capacity building and strengthening the participation of NGOs for the socio-economic development in Viet Nam

Ha Noi, November 9, 2006

The findings of the CIVICUS Civil Society Index study was planned to be presented at a national seminar after the initial launch of the study in May 2006. Meanwhile, in consultations with the Vietnam Union for Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA) and Viet Nam Institute of Development Studies (VIDS) it was decided to organise a larger multi-stakeholder workshop in order, not only to present the CSI study findings, but also to broaden the discussion on civil society- and NGO- development in Viet Nam. The workshop was held on November 9, 2006 with the support of UNDP, SNV and the Royal Netherlands Embassy.

The objectives of the workshop were to:
1. Identify the main challenges facing non-governmental organisations to contribute to the development process in Viet Nam;
2. Discuss and identify how different stakeholders could support an enabling environment for, and strengthen institutional and organizational capacities of, non-governmental organisations in Viet Nam and their networks.

The workshop brought together 160 people from different segments of society: government officials, research institutions, VUSTA members, Vietnamese and international NGOs and representatives from the donor community.

The workshop was opened by the Vice Minister of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA) Dr. Thang Van Phuc; the President of VUSTA, Prof Vu Tuyen Hoang; UNDP Deputy Resident Representative Mr. Subinay Nandy and; SNV Viet Nam Country Director Mr. Pieter de Baan. The workshop included a presentation from the Vietnamese NGO perspective (Centre for Sustainable Rural Development and VUSTA), the Government (NGO Department of MoHA), the CIVICUS CSI study, the New Zealand International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law, and the Director of the China Association for NGO Cooperation. From different angles, each presentation covered the challenges facing NGOs in participating in the development process and recommendations on how to support NGOs further.

Throughout the day there was broad agreement that VNGOs play an important role as additional players to the Government and the market - particularly in the area of service delivery. Some important assets of the VNGOs are their staff, their enthusiasm and multi-sector experience, the use of participatory working approaches and their inter-organisational networks. However, the potential for further contribution is considerable, though limited by several factors.

One of the main challenges is the lack of a comprehensive legal framework for associations and a general lack of knowledge of the different government decrees, laws and regulations, where they exist. Mass organisations are still heavily dependent on the state, whereas VNGOs have difficulties accessing funding. For the Government to involve VNGOs in social services, improved understanding and dialogue between the two parties is needed. Platforms for dialogue between the Government and VNGOs have to be developed further. The discussion to outline the Law on Associations is pertinent to ensure easy procedures for people to form associations and receive funding from various sources. There is at present only limited legal space for the participation of VNGOs in monitoring and evaluation of Government policies. Increased information sharing, dialogue and transparency among Government institutions and VNGOs are among the recommendations from the workshops.

Another set of challenges is of a more internal character to VNGOs. The organisational capacity in many organisations needs to be improved to make VNGOs trustworthy partners in the development arena. Challenges for VNGOs include the lack of a clear identity and constituency, often leading to vague visions and strategies for their engagement and future direction. This again leads to dependency on external demands - often from donors. These weaknesses result in problems for working relationships, not only to the government, but also to INGOs and the donors. In spite of this, the INGOs and donors are at present the main funding agencies for VNGOs working in the field of development.

Recommendations on how to solve these internal organisational challenges faced by VNGOs include general capacity building of VNGOs, development of long-term strategies and clearer visions, increased attention and effort on human resource development and simultaneously learning through working with the aim of creating organisations based on their own identity, capacity and building equal partnerships. Networking among VNGOs is another important measure for the organisations to forge improved cooperation amongst themselves and to make a stronger collective voice/advocate vis-à-vis the Government. Creating a platform for dialogue with the Government was equally recommended, establishing consultative forums and a centre for research.

Access to information and networking among VNGOs and also improving the dialogue with the Government, were highlighted as pivotal elements to the development of VNGOs. Creation of more networks or open platforms for dialogue could increase effective cooperation among VNGOs at the same time as it could enhance a better understanding and appreciation of VNGOs among Government officials. This would be an important stepping stone in the efforts to promote civil society as a third pillar in Viet Nam, and as a driving force to national development. In order to maintain this dialogue, more research and workshops are required, not only for the government to gain greater understanding about the VNGOs, but especially to explore future opportunities for co-operation between the two parties.

The idea of establishing a capacity development fund (CDF) for NGOs based on improved coordinated and expanded funding from donors and other sources was positively received and supported. A multi-stakeholder fund would be a way for INGOs and donors to provide capacity development support to VNGOs - opening up the opportunities for more organisations to get funding to address their capacity building needs and strengthening their internal governance structure. The fund should facilitate the creation and strengthening of networks among VNGOs and dialogue between the government and VNGOs. The exact set-up of such a fund was not identified during the workshop but certainly an initative that needs to be explored further as a way to strengthen and promote the participation of VNGOs in the development process of Viet Nam.

Annex 2: Stakeholder Assessment Group members

1. Mr. Nguyen Huu Tang, Vice-President Viet Nam Union for Science and Technology (VUSTA)

2. Ms. Pham Chi Lan, Senior Expert, the Prime Minister's Research Commission

3. Ms. Cao Thi Hong Van, Department Director, Viet Nam's Women Union

4. Mr. Nguyen Manh Huan, Viet Nam Fatherland Front

5. Mr. Nguyen Quang Vinh, Institute of Sociology, Southern Institute of Social Sciences (SISS), Ho Chi Minh City

6. Mr. Pham Dang Quyet, Senior Expert, Ministry for Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA)

7. Mr. Bui Duc Hai, Department Director and Institute of Economics, SISS, Ho Chi Minh City.

8. Mr. Hoang Ngoc Giao, Vice-director, Centre for Legal Research and Services (LERES), Ha Noi National University

9. Ms. Tran Thi Thu Ha, Senior Expert, Centre for Rural Development in Central Viet Nam (CRD), Hue University

10. Ms. Tran Thi Chung, Programme Manager, CIDSE, (now transforming to a local NGO, Friends)

11. Mr. Nguyen The Chien, Centre for Gender, Family and Environment in Development (CGFED)

12. Ms. Nguyen Thi Le Hoa, Programme Coordinator, Oxfam Great Britain, Ha Noi and Ms. Truong Thi Huyen, Programme Officer, Oxfam GB, Ha Noi

Annex 3: Major regulations for organisations 1990-2005

In 1989, Regulations for the mass organisations were framed in a circular and directive (Circular 07, 6 January 1989 from Government Committee for Organisations (later MOHA); Directive 01, 5 February 1989). The same year, the People's Aid Coordinating Committee (PACCOM), a special organisation of Viet Nam Union for Friendship Organisations (VUFO, one of the Fatherland Front organisations) was established to cooperate with INGOs (Directive 01, 5 February 1989 from the Chairman of the Council of Ministers).

In 1992 decree 35/HDBT was passed by Council of Ministers "On the establishment of non-profit scientific and technological organisations", which became the most important way to register new VNGOs, mainly research institutes and non-profit organisations (Decree 35/HDTB, 28 January 1992 from the Council of Ministers).

The Civil Code was promulgated in 1995. It was used as the frame for small groups at grassroots level where no other frame was available. Revised in 2005 (National Assembly, 28 October 1995).

Law on Cooperatives was passed in 1996, a frame for the new type of agricultural cooperatives after many of the cooperatives from the centrally planned time have been dissolved. It was revised in 2003 (Law 18/QH11, National Assembly, 26 November 2006).

In 1996 came the decision by the Prime Minister "Regulations on the operation of foreign non-governmental organisations in Vietnam" (Decision No. 340/TTg, 24 May 1996), followed up by guidelines for the INGOs the same year (UB-PCPNN, 7 August 1996). In 2001 the decision and regulation of management and utilization of aid from INGOs were promulgated by the Prime Minister (Decision No. 64/2001/QD-TTg of the Prime Minister, 26 April 2001).

In 1998 regulations for the operation and organisation of professional associations were decided by a comment from the political bureau of the party (Circular 143/TB-TW, 5 June 1998).

Grassroots Democracy Decree, 1998, was promulgated. Amended in 2003 in decree 79, where the role of the mass organisations at village level is included (Decree No. 29/ND-CP, 15 May 1998; Decree 79/2003/ND-CP by the government, 7 July 2003).

In 1999 the decree 177 regulates social and charitable funds, outlined by the Prime Minister (Decree 177/ND-CP from the Prime Minister, 22 December 1999).

In 2003 the decree 88 concerning operation and organisation of associations by the Prime Minister and the guidelines of decree 88 from Ministry of Home Affairs were outlined. In principle, this decree should pay the way for the upcoming Law on Associations which has been discussed since the early 1990s. The decree is a step forward in creating a legal framework, but not very liberal in setting up of organisations, and most VNGOs preferred to adhere to earlier decisions. It demands for instance a considerable number of people to recommend an organisation at each level to be eligible (Decree 88/ND-CP from the Prime Minister, 30 June 2003).

2005 the Prime Minister promulgated decree 28 on the organisation and operation of small-sized financial institutions. This facilitated the credit programmes (Decree 28/ND-CP from the Prime Minister, 9 March 2005).

2006 Law on Association - draft for discussion at the National Assembly meeting in May.

Annex 4: CIVICUS methodology

The background for starting the CIVICUS project in 1999 was the lack of overall understanding of civil society's empirical manifestation at a global level, and gaps in research on a) a contextual and valid tool to assess the state of civil society at country level and b) a framework and forum for civil society actors to engage and coordinate at the national level.[55] A number of pilot studies were carried out to refine the methodology.

Most of the 50 countries involved in the second round of studies in 2004-06 carried out a full assessment that, on top of the available data, included a number of regional stakeholder meetings, a survey of existing associations, and a media assessment. The shortened assessment tool (SAT) builds mainly on secondary data, which is plentiful, but does not cover all themes thoroughly, and is often not well organised or easily accessible. Nine countries carried out a CSI-SAT, including Viet Nam.

The practical working methodology of the CSI-SAT focuses on assessing the civil society in a dialogue between a national and an international approach. Accordingly, a national Stakeholder Assessment Group (SAG) was established with 12 members to represent, first of all, different parts of civil society, but also to include representatives from government and researchers specialised in the field. A team of seven Vietnamese researchers carried out research in the designated fields during an early stage of the project in May-June 2005, and the National Implementation Team (consisting of a national coordinator and an international civil society expert) outlined the report, according to the methodology, for the national Stakeholder Assessment Group (SAG). The SAG met for the first time in May 2005 to discuss the Civil Society Index methodology and approach, and the appropriateness of applying it in Vietnam. The second time it met, in September, the first draft report was prepared. The SAG scored the country's civil society according to a pre-developed set of questions and scoring options. Many comments were made on the report both from within Viet Nam and by CIVICUS. This report was developed into a full country report, which required a second scoring. That scoring took place at the third SAG meeting in December 2005. The final report is based on this scoring, the secondary data from Viet Nam, and the international comparative data suggested by CIVICUS. Last but not least, there has been a dialogue with the CIVICUS CSI team in Johannesburg, who have given thorough and constructive criticism throughout the project.

---

[55] Volkhart Finn Heinrich & Mahi Khallaf (2006) Assessing Civil Society in Cyprus and Across the World - The Civil Society Index. CIVICUS. Available from: <http://www.civicus.org/new/default.asp> [Accessed: 25.2.2006]

Annex 5: Civil society organisations in Viet Nam

CSOs: relations to the State, level of organisation and membership

Organisation/grouping	Type or relation to the State	Level: Central-Local	Membership
1. Mass Organisations			
Fatherland Front[x]	Socio-political	All	Umbrella for 29 organisations
Women's Union	Socio-political Fatherland Front	All	12 million[a]
Farmers' Association	Socio-political Fatherland Front	All	8 million[b]
Trade Union - VGCL	Socio-political	All	4.25 million[c]
HCMC Communist Youth Union	Socio-political Fatherland Front	All	5.1 million[d]
Veteran's Association	Socio-political Fatherland Front	All	1.92 million[e]
2. Umbrella organisations			
Red Cross	Fatherland Front	All	4.85 million members 3.5 million Red Cross youths and pioneers 14,800 Red Cross ward and commune organisations 12,700 schools have Red Cross organisations 1,900 offices and enterprises have Red Cross organisations[g]
VUSTA-Union for science and technology	Fatherland Front	Mainly cities, but some organisations working also in rural Areas	Central associations: 56 in various disciplines Cities and provinces: 37 local VUSTA associations with 540 membership organisations and 350,000 members. Total 1.15 million members in the whole country[h]
Business associations	Chamber of Commerce which is under the Fatherland Front	Mainly city based	200 associations 6700 members[i]
VUALL-Union of arts and Literature	Fatherland Front	Cities mainly	10 central associations and 60 at provincial level[j]
Old Age Association	Fatherland Front	Locality - all country	6.4 million[k]
VUFU - Union of Friendship Associations	Fatherland Front	Cities	47 member associations[l]
Vietnam Cooperative Alliance	Fatherland Front	All levels, mainly based in rural areas	300,000 cooperative groups; 17,000 cooperatives. Total 10.5 million members[m]

3. Professional Associations, VNGOs (Science & Technology)			
Professional associations; professional and business organisations (this category overlaps some of the others)	Ministries, VUSTA and People's Committees	Different levels	320 nationwide and 2,150 local associations[n]
Student Unions Ex "Summer culture light" in Ho Chi Minh City		Cities	ca. 400.000 annual volunteers work voluntarily in the countryside during summer[f]
4. VNGOS			
VNGOs or issues based organisations; Funds for support of the poor, handicapped, ill persons (this category overlaps some of the others)	VUSTA, ministries, provincial people's committees	City based, but many work in rural areas	322 organisations identified in 2000 survey in Hanoi and HCMC[o] 200 social funds[p] 800 Science and Technology organisations[n]
5. Informal groups			
Micro-credits, credit cooperatives, Credit and saving's groups	Various organisations; Women's and Farmers' Unions contribution from abroad; banks	Rural areas	About 100.000 credit cooperatives[r] 11,6 million borrowers from all credit schemes[s]
Informal groupings (agricultural activities, neighbourhood, dancing, sports, festivals and celebrations)	Not-registered but known to administration	Locality based in all country	Millions - n.d.
6. Faith-based organisations			
Faith-based organisations	Fatherland Front Some not registered	All, but mainly in provinces and localities	Buddhist: 7- 9 million Catholiques: 6-8 million Hoa Hao: 1.5 million Cao Dai: 1.1 million Protestant 600,000[q] Muslims 90,000[t]
6. International NGOs INGOs through PACCOM	Funded from abroad and supporting government and CSO		530 INGOs operating in Vietnam, 150 have offices[u]

a   Women' Union
b   Farmers' Association
c   VCGL 2003
d   HCM Youth Union
e   People's Army, 17 March 2005
f   Viet Nam News 10 July 2005
g   Chu Dung 2005

h   VUSTA
i   Stromseth 2003
j   Philantrophy 2001
k   BTCuong 2005 (2)
l. Philantrophy in Vietnam 2001
m. TTCuong 2005
n. Nguyen Ngoc Lam, MOHA 2005

o   Wischermann, NQVinh, BTCuong
p   Philantrophy 2001
q   Data on Population 2005
r   Viet Nam News 8 July 2005-09-19
s   Danida 2005
t   Nguyen Minh Quang 2005
u   INGO Directory 2003-05, Payne 2004

The table includes the identified organisations. In addition, there are many small informal organisations that are not registered (see main text).

Annex 6: List of literature

ADB (1999) *A Study of NGOs. Viet Nam.* Ha Noi.

Anheier, Helmut K. (2004) *Measurement, Evaluation, Policy.* London and Sterling VA, CIVICUS and Earthscan.

Banpasirichote Chantana (2005) Civil Society Discourses and the Future of Radical Movement in Thailand. In: Lee Hock Guan (2005) *Civil Society in Southeast Asia.* Singapore, ISEAS.

Bui The Cuong (2005) Civic organisations in Viet Nam. *The Emerging Civil Society.* In: Irene Norlund, Dang Ngoc Dinh, et al. eds. *An Initial Assessment of Civil Society in Viet Nam.* Ha Noi, CIVICUS VIDS, UNDP, SNV

Bui The Cuong and Nguyen Quang Vinh (2001) *Cac to chup o xa hoi Viet Nam: Mot nghien cuu o Ha Noi va Thanh pho Ho Chi Minh* (Vietnamese Civic organisations: A survey in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City). Ha Noi, Institute of Sociology.

CARE (2005) A Seminar Report on "The development of rural Collaborative Groups in Agriculture and Rural Areas - Posed Problems". Thanh Hoa 8-10 June.

Chu Tien Quang (CIEM) (2005) *Policy and legal framework to develop cooperative economic organisations in the agricultural sector of Viet Nam,* paper presented at People's Participatory Working Group (PPWG) workshop on "Rural Collaborative Groups". Ha Noi, 16 September 2005. Available from: <http://www.un.org.vn/donor/civil.htm>

CIVICUS (2005) *Civil Society Index - Shortened Assessment Tool (CSI-SAT). A Guide for CSI-SAT Implementing Agency,* CIVICUS.

Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam 1992.

Danida (2005) Micro-finance in Viet Nam and analysis of selected micro-finance institutions. In: *Support to streamlining of the Danida financed credit scheme in Viet Nam.* Ha Noi.

Dalton Russell J. (2006) Civil Society, Social Capital and Democracy. In: R. Dalton and Doh Chull Shin eds. *Citizens, Democracy and Markets Around the Pacific Rim.* Oxford, Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

Edwards Michael (2004) *Civil Society.* Oxford, Polity.

Escobar Arturo (1995) *Encountering Development. The Making and Unmaking of the Third World.* Princeton, Princeton University Press.

Fforde Adam and Doug Porter (1995) *Public Goods, the State and Civil Society and the Development Assistance in Viet Nam,* Paper to Viet Nam Update Conference, Canberra.

Freedomhouse, available at: www.freedomhouse.org.

Government of Viet Nam (2001) *Strategy for Public Administration Reform (2001-10).* Ha Noi.

Hannah, Joe (2005) Civil Society Actors and Action in Viet Nam: Preliminary empirical results and Sketches from an Evolving Debate. In: Heinrich Böll foundation, *Towards Good Society. Civil Society Actors, the State and the Business Class in Southeast Asia - Facilitators of or Impediments to a Strong, Democratic, and Fair Society?* Berlin, Heinrich Böll Foundation.

Helvetas (1996) *Viet Nam Study on the Present Scenery of Vietnamese Organisations (VNOs).* Ha Noi and Zurich.

INGO Directory 2003-05 (2004). Ha Noi. VUFO-NGO Resource Centre.

Kaldor Mary (2003) *Global Civil Society. An Answer to War.* Oxford, Polity Press.

Kerkvliet, Ben J.T., (2001) An Approach for Analysing State-Society Relations in Viet Nam. *Sojourn* 16, Oct. 2001.

Kerkvliet, Ben J.T., Russel H.K. Heng and David W.H. Koh eds. (2003) *Getting Organized in Viet Nam. Moving in and around the Socialist State.* Singapore, ISEAS.

Le Bach Duong, Khuat Thu Hong, Bach Tan Sinh, and Nguyen Thanh Tung eds. (2002) *Civil Society in Viet Nam.* Ha Noi, Center for Social Development Studies.

Mark Sidel (1995) The emergence of a non-profit sector and philanthropy in the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. In: Tadashi Yomamoto ed. (1995) *Emerging Civil Society in the Asia Pacific Community.* Singapore, ISEAS.

McElwee, Pamela et al. (2005) *Deepening Democracy and Increasing Popular Participation in Viet Nam.* Ha Noi.

Michael L. Gray (1999) Creating Civil Society? The Emergence of NGOs in Viet Nam. In: *Development and Change,* 30:4, Oct. 1999, pp. 693-713.

Ministry of Planning and Investment (2006) Socio-economic Development Plan 2006-10, Ha Noi.

Nguyen Minh Quang (2005) *Religious Issues and Government Policies in Viet Nam.* Ha Noi, The Gioi Publishing House.

Nguyen Ngoc Lam (2005) *Một số nét khái quát tổ chức, hoạt động của tổ chức phi chính phủ* (An overview of NGOs and NGO activities). Paper commissioned by VIDS to the CSI Viet Nam study. Ha Noi.

Nguyen Van Nghiem (MARD) (2005) *Farmers Groups in Agriculture and Rural Areas - Remaining Issues.* Powerpoint presentation, presented at People's Participatory Working Group (PPWG) workshop on "Rural Collaborative Groups". Ha Noi, 16 September 2005.
Available from: <www.un.org.vn/donor/civil.htm>

Norlund, Irene, Dang Ngoc Dinh et al. (2006) *The Emerging Civil Society. An Initial Assessment of Civil Society in Viet Nam.* Ha Noi, CIVICUS, VIDS, SNV, UNDP. Available from: <http://www.civicus.org/new/media/CSI_Vietnam_report%20.pdf>

Party Civil Affairs Committee (2004) *Report on review of 20 years of "Renovating of the Party's exercise of leadership over government and society".* Ha Noi

Payne, David (2004) *10 Years of Partnership between Viet Nam and the International NGOs.* Ha Noi, VUFO-NGO Resource Centre.

Pedersen, Katrine R. (2005) *Changing State-Society Relations - A Study of Civil Society Law in Viet Nam's Doi Moi Era.* Ha Noi, paper.

Phan Van Khai 2005. Prime Minister Phan Van Khai was speaking at a conference on promoting the socialisation of education, healthcare, cultural, physical training and sports activities, in Ha Noi on July 26 2005, Thai Press < vnnews-I by Stephen Denney> 29 July 2005.

Philanthropy in Viet Nam [internet], Available from: http://www.ansianphilantrophy.org./countries/vietnam/overview.htlm

Putnam, Robert (1993) *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy.* Princeton, Princeton University Press.

Putnam, Robert (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.* New York, Simon and Schuster.

Sabharwal, Gita and Tran Thi Thien Huong (2005) *Civil society in Viet Nam: Moving from the margins to the mainstream.* Ha Noi, DfID.

Salemink, Oscar (2006) Translating, Interpreting and Practicing Civil Society in Viet Nam: A tale of calculated misunderstandings. In: David Lewis and David Mosse eds. *Development Brokers and Translators.* Blomsfields CI, Kumarian Press.

Sidel, Mark and Thaveeporn Vasavakul (2006) *Report to VUSTA on Law on Associations,* Ha Noi VUSTA and UNDP.

Stromseth, Jonathan (2003) Business Associations in Policy making in Viet Nam. In: Kerkvliet, Ben J.T., Russel H.K. Heng and David W.H. Koh eds. (2003) *Getting Organized in Viet Nam. Moving in and around the Socialist State.* Singapore, ISEAS.

Tadashi Yomamoto ed. (1995) *Emerging Civil Society in the Asia Pacific Community,* Singapore, ISEAS.

Vasavakul, Thaveeporn and Nguyen Thai Van (2006) *Collaborative Groups in Rural Viet Nam: a Background Paper.* Ha Noi.

Viet Nam Development Report (2004) *Governance*. Joint Donor Report to the Viet Nam Consultative Group Meeting, Ha Noi 1-2 December.

Volkhart Finn Heinrich & Mahi Khallaf (2006) Assessing Civil Society in Cyprus and Across the World - The Civil Society Index. CIVICUS. Available from: <http://www.civicus.org/new/default.asp> [Accessed: 25.2.2006]

Wischermann, Jörg (2003) Viet Nam in the Era of Doi Moi. Issue-Oriented Organisations and Their Relationship to the Government. In: *Asian Survey*, 43:6.

World Values Survey can be found on <http://www.worldvaluesurvey.org >

World Values Survey Viet Nam (2001) Available from: <http://www.democ.uci.edu/democ/archive/vietnam.htm>