Chapter 7

"Non-Political Professionals": Appropriate Civil Society Roles for VNGOs

Introduction: Ms. Ni

By early 2004, I had been engaged in participant observation for several months with a local Vietnamese NGO whose mission was to work for the health and wellbeing of women factory workers in and around Ho Chi Minh City. The director of this NGO was Ms. Nguyen Thi Ni,[96] a vibrant and engaging woman in her early thirties. Ms. Ni and I had become close friends, and hence our discussions, while courteous and professional, were quite open.

Over the many weeks watching Ms. Ni's operation, I was constantly struck by how different it was from organizations I knew of in the US that were involved in factory labor issues, particularly those "anti-sweatshop" movements involving garment manufacturing and the poor working conditions, poor pay, and poor job security offered to the (mostly) young women working there. Opposition to

[96] Pseudonym.

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sweatshops in the West is generally confrontational and frequently militant. Anti-sweatshop activists often perceive themselves to be engaged in a pitched battle to protect the rights of the poor and powerless against big multi-national corporations.

Ms. Ni's organization, in contrast, was neither militant nor confrontational in any way. Her projects involved frequent contact with all parties: the large multi-national brand names that contracted the work in Vietnam, the local or foreign invested subcontractors who owned and ran the factories, local officials in positions to enforce Vietnamese labor law, and the workers themselves. Although the factory owners were Ms. Ni's biggest headache, she never discussed them in terms of an "opposition" to be subdued. Rather, they were one of the factors that needed to be balanced in order to achieve beneficial results for all three interests. Ms. Ni was firmly behind the workers and worked on their behalf, but she pictured her role as a facilitator. Her world view was one of helping the big players see their benefit in helping the workers have a reasonable life.

In one of our many discussions, I challenged Ms. Ni on the difference between her approach and the American anti-sweatshop movement. (Revealingly, I first had to explain the meaning and connotations of the English word "sweatshop" to her.) She was extremely curious about this form of activism that she had never before encountered and asked more about the groups that fight against the big brands. She listened fascinated and a little appalled (like a by-stander at a traffic accident) as I described street protests, nation-wide boycotts, e-mail campaigns, law suits, editorials,

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and other confrontational tactics used to force the big brands into accepting responsibility for the conditions under which their goods are manufactured. After a very few minutes of this discussion, she sat up a bit straighter and said with a shake of her head and a gentle finality in her voice, “No, we don’t work like that.”

In our subsequent discussion, Ms. Ni clearly wanted me to understand two important points. The first was very explicit: there is no social space in Vietnam at this time for a Western-style anti-sweatshop movement coming from local organizations. Such activities would be illegal and extremely counterproductive. They would take on a “political” cast; that is, they would be seen by local authorities as being provocative. They certainly would not benefit the girls and young women in the factories. Her second point was less explicit, but to me it was no less clear. Ms. Ni did not see it as her role to engage in *confrontation* as a tactic for change. She is not a rebel or a protester. She will work for change through negotiation and education, acting always within legal bounds. She is not a rabble-rouser who will march the streets. She is a professional who will engage all parties on a professional level.

Is this “Civil Society”?

It is almost axiomatic to international development agencies that Ms. Ni’s organization and her activities are forms of civil society.[97] Institutionally, Ms. Ni’s VNGO is perhaps a form of civil society, but that assertion is debatable. Certainly it is

[97] Carothers (2005) talks about how international development agencies focus on NGOs when they engage, in his words, in “promoting civil society in practice.”

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organized and run by local people, and it is designed to assist other local people (the beneficiaries) retain and expand their rights and interests. On the other hand, its genesis lies in the international development world and it is a direct product of INGO planning and funding. This makes the institutional case somewhat ambiguous.

However, the case is made a bit clearer if we use a *process* approach to defining civil society. If we plot Ms. Ni's operational activities on a continuum of possible forms of civil society activities (see Chapter 3), we no longer make a blanket judgment about whether the VNGO is a "real" NGO or whether its ties to the state or international NGOs disqualify it from being a civil society entity. Rather our focus is on what this VNGO *does*.

In Ms. Ni's case, she is clear that they do not *do* "resistance." In her words, "we don't work like that." For the most part, Ms. Ni describes her work with factory workers in terms of state policy and state labor law. Her VNGO helps the factory workers understand their working conditions and make important choices, especially concerning health and sexuality. (Most of the factory workers are young unmarried women and girls, and most have come to the city for the first time for this factory job. Consequently, many are vulnerable and are uninformed about sexually transmitted disease, etc.) Activities include educational workshops and the production of health education materials for distribution to the workers. In this regard, their work is very much in line with state policy on health and welfare.

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Additionally, Ms. Ni works with local state officials, factory owners, and the international brands to ensure working conditions in the factories conform to local law and to the branding companies' policies (sometimes more stringent than local law). These activities could be plotted on the continuum somewhat to the left of her social services work, in the realm of "advocacy." I maintain that these activities, social

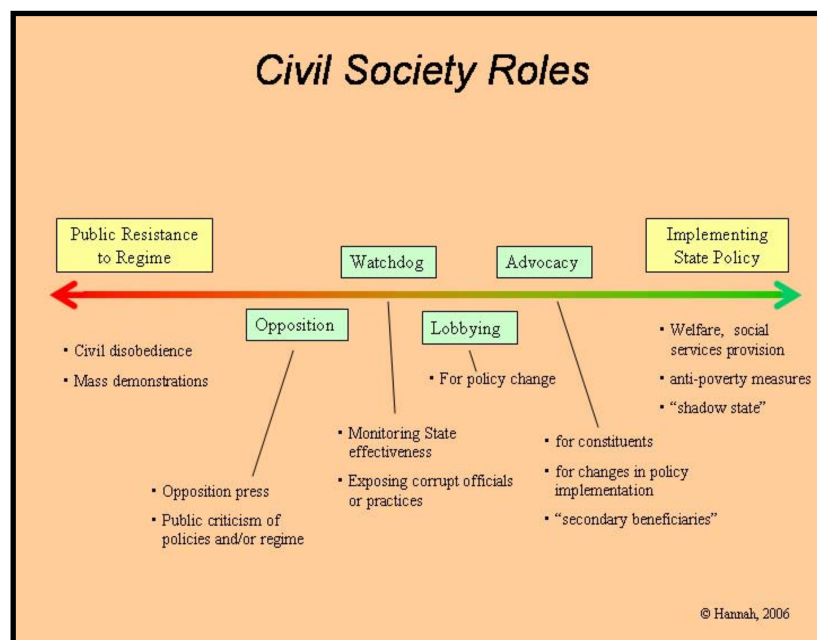

Figure 8: Continuum of Civil Society Roles

services and advocacy are certainly in the realm of civil society.

They are also a far cry from the "anti-sweatshop" tactics I described to Ms. Ni, which would have to be plotted much farther to the left (on this continuum), in the realms of "watchdog" or even open resistance. But as Ms. Ni pointed out, her VNGO doesn't "work like that." To do so would be counterproductive, in part because it is

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illegal and would undermine her institutional basis for continued work, but also in large part because such confrontational activities would be considered verging on being "political" and would almost certainly earn one a reputation for being "unprofessional."

In my fieldwork with Vietnamese NGOs, I found that this identity as a "non-political professional" – one who works in *partnership* with the Vietnamese government, not through confrontation – was an important recurring theme in VNGO staffer descriptions of themselves. This description is in part dictated by funding issues and the political economy of donor-funded development, in part by the realities of working within an authoritarian political system, and in part from their understanding of what "development" means to them and their constituencies. They are part of a larger discursive construct of development, but they are a local and particular manifestation of that discourse. They are subjects of development, active in their own self-definition while at the same time constrained by the larger discourses to which they are subjected. As Watts (1993, after Escobar, 1988) says of NGOs, "... it is surprising how little work has focused on the invention of institutions which produce, transmit and stabilize development 'truths'." This is particularly true of development in Vietnam where very little (or no) critical work on the formation of VNGO worker subjectivities has been done.

The remainder of this chapter looks at how Vietnamese development workers – in both INGOs and VNGOs – promote their images of themselves and their own

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version of "development truths" through the construction of their own identities as development professionals. This assertion takes three forms, covered in the following three sections: In the first section, I will explore the self-construction and self-identification of VNGO staff members as "professionals." The *professional* development worker is essential in the discursive construction of the VNGO sector in Vietnam, produced and reproduced through their work.

In the second section I will look at the trend toward making the development sector in Vietnam a *Vietnamese-led* endeavor. This trend has two notable aspects. The weaker one is the halting and partial attempts at creating VNGO networks to promote – and in some cases to control – the idea of Vietnamese NGOs. The second is the fascinating phenomenon of INGOs transforming themselves into local VNGOs, a movement with strong support from within the INGO community but with major hurdles to overcome vis-à-vis the Vietnamese state.

In the third section, I will briefly discuss the construction of development in Vietnam as a purely "non-political" enterprise. By extension, VNGOs consider themselves "non-political" organizations – and must convince others that they are. "Professionalism" in Vietnamese development work is directly influenced by the notion of "non-political development."

Finally, after exploring these three aspects of VNGO professionalism, I will look at how certain activities undertaken by the "professional" VNGO workers are

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constructed as being appropriate for civil society organizations to undertake, and how others are implicitly or explicitly "out of bounds." In many ways, the idea of "appropriate" is tacitly agreed upon, but in others it is subtly or openly contested. Consequently, from both the donor and state perspectives, the construction of "professionalism" plays an important part in defining what are (and are not) acceptable forms of VNGO work, and even what is acceptable from civil society. This normative categorization of "proper" civil society activities illuminates the struggle over how civil society is being conceived and contested in Vietnam.

Professionalism

Escobar (1988) and Watts (1993) both note that the invention of development truths can be understood through the twin mechanisms of "professionalization" and "institutionalization." These intimately related processes have created specific forms of development subjects. The staff members of the VNGOs construct their own identity in particular ways, to accomplish specific aims with both the State authorities to whom they are answerable and to the beneficiaries whom they serve. Beneficiaries as subjects will no doubt take on/be given particular status and roles *vis-à-vis* the "professional" VNGO staff. In turn, VNGO workers as development professionals create a working environment that resemble international organizations.

In contrast to the office-based VNGOs I studied for this dissertation, I am also aware of small grassroots organizations in Vietnam that have been formed to assist

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less fortunate members of society. For many reasons, these groups are difficult for foreign aid workers to locate, and often are impossible for international agencies to interact with. I would argue that these groups are certainly a form of Vietnamese "civil society," but they are usually not taken into account in studies of civil society in Vietnam. Edwards (2004) states that this is a common situation around the world:

> Because the data for most of the world cover only registered organizations, trends in other areas of associational life are difficult to identify, especially those below the radar screen of academic research like community groups and grassroots movements (p. 23).

In Vietnam today, there is any number of hospital patient feeding groups, church- or temple-based charities, etc. In fact, the philanthropy sector in Vietnam is robust and growing (Sidel 1996 and 1997).

VNGOs are aware of these organizations, and often are supportive of their work, but certainly do not accept them as being fellow "VNGOs." Instead, they distinguish themselves to the authorities and to potential donors specifically through their formal type of office-based organization ("institutionalization") and in their recruitment and training of personnel ("professionalization"). Of course, if many VNGOs begin to resemble international NGOs, it is no accident. And the forms of projects, the ways of understanding their work – their "invention of development truths" – can be traced back to the discursive formation of development as an international project. Locally, this international project is manifested a powerful political economy driven by huge donor budgets, by the national, state-led

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development project, and by a knowledge elite (the development professionals) made up of both Vietnamese and foreign development "experts." Within that discursive formation, VNGOs survive in large part due to their ability to distinguish themselves as professional organizations.

VNGO "Professionals": The Construction of a Development Identity

Professionalism among Vietnamese NGOs is a complex and heavily coded ideal. It is an ethic and a goal, inscribed on specific behaviors, easily recognized, but not as easily described or defined. It is manifested through working styles, interpersonal relations, speech acts (such as use of vocabulary, forms of address, etc.), office organization, meetings and other events, and myriad other behaviors and affectations. During a presentation I gave to both VNGO staffers and Vietnamese employees of INGOs in Hanoi in the Spring of 2004, Vietnamese NGO workers described themselves as urban-dwelling, well-educated, office-based staff members[98] doing project-funded work in poverty reduction and social welfare for the benefit of poor or otherwise marginalized members of Vietnamese society. They perceive themselves and express their work as enlightened, socially conscious, intellectual, absolutely non-political, and, above all, *professional*, just like the foreign NGO workers which often serve as their role models.

[98] One participant came up after the meeting and aptly suggested I add "middle class" to this list of Vietnamese NGO workers' traits.

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VNGO workers like Ms. Ni and the attendees of my presentation in Hanoi nurture this particular vision of themselves and their role in the development community in Vietnam. They re-inscribe this ideal in their own behavior and in their evaluations of other agencies' staff as being either "very professional" or not. VNGO professionalism cannot easily be reduced to a recipe of actions and/or office furniture that should/must be adopted. It is a culturally and historically complex ideal, with some aspects that Americans and other Westerners would easily recognize (such as neatness of appearance, cordiality, and punctuality), and other aspects that we would not (such as forms of deference, management and organizational methods, and ideas on conflict avoidance and resolution). Teasing apart all these traits and influences of VNGO professionalism is well beyond the scope of this dissertation. But recognizing their existence and their importance in VNGO life is fundamental to understanding the complex relationships that VNGOs have with each other, with the donor community, and with the myriad offices of the Vietnamese state with which they interact.

As a part of their self identification as development professionals, most VNGO staffers have adopted a vision of development that is all-too-common in the international development community, and which echoes Vietnamese state rhetoric on the national development agenda. Crush (1995) describes this dominant view of development that has permeated development practice since World War II:

> Deeply embedded in the development discourse, therefore, was a set of recurrent images of 'the traditional' which were fundamentally ahistorical and space-insensitive. Collectivities

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> (groups, societies, territories, tribes, classes, communities) were assigned a set of characteristics which suggested not only a low place in the hierarchy of achievement but a terminal condition of stasis, forever becalmed until the healing winds of modernity and development begin to blow (p. 9).

With few exceptions, VNGO workers adopt these images of “backwardness” that must be rescued by “modernity.” However, their vision is often made more complicated by two factors. The first is that VNGOS cast many of their beneficiary groups either as victims of modernity’s march or as those left behind in its wake: street children, factory workers, etc. These are not necessarily inherently “backwards” people (though some, especially ethnic minorities, are certainly painted that way), but may simply need to be “educated” into the new modern ways of life. They are salvageable, and the VNGO will take on the task of shepherding these stragglers along.

The second factor, tightly imbricated with this acceptance of the development discourse’s categorizations, is the fact that VNGO staffers are themselves Vietnamese. As such, they resist – and deeply resent – any implication that the “developmental category” (Shresthsa, 1995) in need of modernizing is “Vietnamese people” in general. They will concede that Vietnam is, as a nation, poor and “underdeveloped,” but they will point to Vietnam’s high literacy rate (often quoted as being over 90%) as proof that the “Vietnamese people” themselves are not “backward.” Rather, the country’s poverty is circumstantial (to do with a history of foreign intervention, war, mismanagement, etc.) and they count themselves as among the civilizing forces that

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can and will “save” the country. Their use of development categories is finer grained, focusing on those specific groups within Vietnam who are, in their own terms, “uneducated,” “backwards,” or simply “unfortunate.” In this sense they reject being categorized as “requiring” development while accepting the development paradigm for their country and the balance of their countrymen.

The willingness of VNGO workers to take on these tasks comes from a number of motivations, perhaps as numerous as the number of VNGO staffers. Common themes are evident in discussion with these people, however. One clear motivation is a calling to help their fellow human beings, and particularly their fellow Vietnamese. The strain of humanitarian altruism is deep and unmistakable among a large number of VNGO workers. There are long-standing historical precedents to mutual aid in Vietnamese culture, and an ethic of sacrifice is a common trope in literature and historiography. Idealism around being of service to the community is especially attractive to young VNGO workers and serves as an important motivation in recruiting new staff.

Multiple “Professionalisms”: Complex and Contested

Although the ideal of professionalism is ubiquitous among VNGOs, the specifics of what constitutes professionalism are not universally agreed upon. Conflict over differing ideals of “professionalism” in VNGO work is evident and probably inevitable. There are certainly different forms of VNGO, with different historical

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antecedents and therefore different ideas of what constitutes professionalism. For example, Ms. Ni, embodies a form of professionalism influenced by her upbringing and education in Saigon, but also very heavily by her former position working in an INGO. She often commented to me about how robust and carefully crafted her office procedures and regulations are, how carefully her personnel manual was written, and how important to her was her open and "participatory" management style. When she commented about how "good" her management procedures were (an uncharacteristically immodest assertion on her part), I asked her how she developed them. She was very clear that they were based on the "international standard" she learned in her former position at the INGO.[99]

In contrast to this track of "professionalism," another VNGO established in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) by a VCP-affiliated woman from Hanoi was run much more like a Vietnamese government office. Unlike in Ms. Ni's organization, where workers generally had separate, semi-private desks to work at, the workspaces in this VNGO were clustered in groups of three or four (for mutual comraderie and for mutual surveillance). In contrast to Ms. Ni's "participatory management style," all the decision-making power in this VNGO resided at the director's level. This form of "professionalism" rests on both a cultural and historical basis of a "moral and

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[99] At one point during my fieldwork in her VNGO, Ms. Ni involved me in a personnel problem that required her to invoke several of these procedures, including drafting a letter of reprimand for an employee and other disciplinary tasks. One of the amazing aspects to Ms. Ni's procedures was that most of these tasks – *including* the letter of reprimand for the employee, were undertaken in English. Her rational was that the staff person had excellent English skills, and the files would one day be audited by an INGO, a fellow member of an international consortium Ms. Ni's VNGO belonged to, so English made most sense for the organization.

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intellectual elite" having clear authority[100], and on the moral obligation of those elite to exercise that authority on behalf of the less powerful in society. Its resemblance to Vietnamese officialdom is not coincidental; that is where the director herself was trained. It is interesting to note that Ms. Ni has little regard for this organization, neither for how it is run nor for the results of its work. (However, as a "professional," Ms. Ni scrupulously avoids saying anything directly disparaging.) She sees it as a throw-back to "old ways" of operating that fail to promote the "better" ideals of participation and openness. I do not know what this organization's leaders think of Ms. Ni and her VNGO.

The resurgence of the field of "social work" in HCMC provides my final example of contested professionalisms among VNGOs. This resurgence is due almost entirely to a 50-year campaign by one woman, Ms. Trang,[101] to promote social work as a profession, and especially her dogged persistence in convincing the communist authorities in HCMC to officially recognize and sanction it as a profession after 1975. Ms. Trang and a very small handful of other Vietnamese students were trained in Social Work in a French school in HCMC prior to the French giving up their Indochinese colonies in 1954. Ms. Trang continued her involvement with that school and a second one that began teaching Social Work in Saigon under the American-backed regimes in southern Vietnam.

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[100] See Metzger (1998) for a fascinating discussion of how this concept of "moral and intellectual elite," based in part on Confucian ideologies, is essential to the idea of "democracy" in China.
[101] pseudonym

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At the end of the war in 1975 when the communist regime took control of the south, they had little concept and no experience with social work as a profession. But Ms. Trang's efforts to promote Social Work since 1975, and especially since the advent of the *đổi mới* policies in the mid-1980s, have paid off in amazing ways. For almost 15 years, before it was officially recognized by the Ministry of Higher Education as a subject of study at the university level in the Spring of 2004, Ms. Trang and a small number of her students were teaching the principles and techniques of social work in the Open University (a semi-private university in HCMC) in the departments of Sociology and Women's Studies. When I asked her during an interview (2004) how many students have passed through those degree programs focused on Social Work, she joked that she must have over 500 intellectual "grandchildren" by now.[102] A large number of INGO and VNGO workers in HCMC, working in all different kinds of organizations, count themselves among Ms. Trang's grandchildren.

Ms. Trang's approach to "professionalism" is clearly institutionally based. Her life-long vision is for a credentialed, academically trained cadre of workers to deal with the problems in society. In this she has been highly successful, and through her students is strongly influencing the VNGO sector in southern Vietnam. Ms. Trang is *highly* respected among VNGO workers in Vietnam (particularly in the south),

[102] Her intellectual "children" were her own students (who designed the curricula in the Open University), and her "grandchildren" are their students. This kinship metaphor was both apt and very humorous in Vietnamese, and Ms. Trang and I got a good laugh out of it.

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perhaps even venerated. At one meeting I attended in HCMC between VNGOs and the World Bank, all the attendees deferred to Ms. Trang' comments and explanations.

However, when I pressed my informants in VNGOs about the idea of "social work," those who came from the INGO worlds were somewhat dismissive. "Social work is not development," I was told by one VNGO staffer (2004), in a thought echoed by a number of VNGO people I talked to. "It only deals with the symptoms, the results of the bigger issues and problems." Ms. Ni, one of my main contacts among the VNGOs said,

> Social work is only intervention… In development work, you know the purpose, you have a better picture of the whole society, so you work to make the community and society better in different ways. It's about thinking and empowering, not charity (interview, March 2004).

In other words, many VNGO workers like Ms. Ni see development as a long-term search for cures, not a short-term fix for individuals in need. This is their "professionalism," a distinction that separates them in their minds and in their own development discourse, from charity workers. Ms. Trang strongly disagreed with this assessment, when I asked her about it. "Social work must concern itself with *both* the immediate issues of assisting people *and* with the underlying causes of poverty and other social ills. Social work *is* development work," she told me (2004). This is her own professional take, her own self-identification as a professional development worker.

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Vietnamese-led Development

Stemming from Vietnamese NGO workers' increasing confidence in their own sense of professionalism is a growing desire for development in Vietnam to become more completely a Vietnamese-led project. VNGOs are happy to receive international funding – they could not survive without it – but both VNGO staff and Vietnamese staff of INGOs are largely convinced that they can do without international staff. They believe, simply, that they can do the job better and cheaper. Vietnamese often express the opinion that foreign workers do not and cannot understand the local conditions and social/political dynamics, and therefore are less effective within the Vietnamese context. Added to their relative ineffectiveness is the enormous expense of maintaining a foreign NGO employee in Vietnam. They have extremely large salaries by local standards, live (relatively) affluent lifestyles, incur expensive transportation and communication expenses, etc. This line of reasoning can, in some cases, lead to an almost nationalistic response from VNGO workers. They do not reject "international development," but rather would like to see fewer foreign aid staff and more local staff, especially local staff with decision-making authority within the organization. Vietnamese staffers perceive themselves as playing important professional roles and wish to be recognized as doing so.

If, as they assert, Vietnamese development workers are professionals and can do the job, what need have they for foreign bosses? This argument has been growing in the NGO sector in Vietnam for some time, now, and can be seen manifested in two

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separate phenomena which I will discuss in this section: the creation of VNGO "networks," and the attempt by several INGOs to convert their organizations into VNGOs.

VNGO Networks: Communication, Solidarity, and Defining Authenticity

Another attempt to define "professionalism" in the VNGO community is the establishment of VNGO "networks." These networks are an attempt at formalizing and institutionalizing relationships between VNGOs. Visible manifestations of such networks are often published directories of VNGOs (e.g., Vietnamese NGO Network, 2002 and Trần Tuấn, 2002a and 2002b), workshops or meetings, an organization structure and officers for the network, and recognition by INGOs and other donors. Such networks are attempted in part as a replication of similar structures among INGOs, in part to raise the visibility of VNGOs *vis-à-vis* the public and donors, and in part to strengthen VNGO position in society *vis-à-vis* the state. These small organizations also develop a sense of "community" with other VNGOs, transferring information, techniques, and norms of behavior. In part, such networks are enabling and empowering for the VNGOs, in part they act as mutual surveillance, adjudicating who is "really" a VNGO and who is not.

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During my research in Hanoi, I found two attempts at developing such networks started by VNGOs there.[103] These two networks took very different approaches: the first, calling itself the "VNGO Network" (their own English name, a direct translation of the Vietnamese) was essentially open to any VNGOs who wished to join. Its principle function seemed to be the development and dissemination of a VNGO directory, funded by a foreign donor, that listed approximately 20 or so VNGOs (of the 200-300 known in Hanoi and HCMC) as a method of increasing communication between VNGOs. They also claimed to call meetings of all VNGOs, but such a meeting did not take place during my fieldwork there.

The second "network" called itself the "Community Development Group" (CDG). CDG was started by five VNGOs that claimed to be the first (and for a time, the only) "true" VNGOs, a claim based on autonomy from government control and repeated by foreign aid workers. CDG's approach to membership was distinctly different than the VNGO Network: instead of allowing open membership, CDG actively vetted applicant organizations before allowing them to join, using criteria such as the applicant's autonomy from government and VCP control, the nature of their development work, their non-profit status, and the *professionalism* of their operations. At the time of my interviews with CDG, only 15 VNGOs had been granted membership. CDG was intentionally establishing criteria by which an organization

[103] I also identified a network of VNGOs established as part of an INGO natural resources project, along with expression of plans by INGOs to build other such networks. I will not discuss these networks in this dissertation.

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could term itself a "real" Vietnamese NGO, promoting a vision of VNGOs that reinforced their professional ideal.[104]

In HCMC I found a great desire among VNGOs to communicate with each other. However, due to the political climate there, they were only able to do so through personal networks and informal ties. VNGO officers repeatedly told me that local (HCMC) authorities actively prevented the formation of a formal VNGO network and have forbidden VNGOs from holding meetings with more than two or three VNGOs present.[105] Events where multiple organizations could meet together are *ad hoc* and/or opportunistic. In March of 2004, during my fieldwork for this dissertation, I was invited to a rare meeting of VNGOs, called by the World Bank for the purpose of presenting their poverty alleviation programs. Although this meeting was organized and hosted by a HCMC-based VNGO, certainly the fact that the World Bank was involved and was a driving force in organizing this meeting was a deciding factor in the authorities' decision to allow this meeting to take place. Interestingly, all of the 30

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[104] CDG was also very active in publishing a directory of Vietnamese NGOs through one of their member organizations, the Research and Training Center for Community Development. (See Trần Tuấn and Lê Quốc Hùng, 2002a and 2002b). This directory lists 40 VNGOs, nearly all in Hanoi. Interestingly, inclusion in the directory was not limited to CDG members, opening the definition of "real VNGO". Almost certainly this is due to the request or requirements of the World Bank office, which funded the publication. Note also that whereas the English version of this directory is *Directory of Vietnamese Non-Governmental Organizations*, the translation of the Vietnamese version is *Directory of Vietnamese Organizations that have Characteristics of Non-governmental Organizations* (my translation).

[105] The authorities in HCMC have a history of opposing meetings and workshops involving multiple NGOs, both foreign and domestic. While working as a consultant to international NGOs in HCMC in 1993, I witnessed the police shut down a meeting of INGOs at a local restaurant. At that time, such meetings were commonplace n Hanoi.

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or so VNGO participants knew each other and each others' work, and all seemed quite pleased at being able to come together in one room for that meeting.

Similarly, Ms. Ni was asked by a Western embassy to host a meeting, inviting both INGO and VNGO people to attend a lecture given by a traveling international expert in a specialized development issue. Ms. Ni jumped at the chance, spending a large amount of staff time (and my volunteer time) arranging the lecture. Her rationale was in part to provide an opportunity for Vietnamese and foreign staff to interact *in a group* on a substantive issue, and in part to have her organization be seen to play a role in bringing VNGOs together in an environment where that is extremely difficult to do. "Just like when [the other VNGO] hosted the World Bank meeting last month," she told me, indicating that she wanted to contribute to the nascent and fitful process of local NGOs trying to build a sort of community or network (though far less institutionalized than those in Hanoi). The meeting was a great success, and from my discussions with participants it was clear that Ms. Ni gained points among her peers as a "professional" for hosting it so well.[106] (Interview, 2004)

[106] In an interesting side note, while helping with meeting preparations, moving tables, sweeping floors, etc., I was introduced to a quiet young man who was also helping out. I had not seen him at Ms. Ni's office before, and he did not dress or act like the other VNGO staffers I knew. I assumed he was someone's relative come by to lend a hand until Ms. Ni pulled me aside to inform me that he was a local policeman, detailed to the office to monitor the meeting, which was to take place the next day. The meeting itself was not, apparently, a very high priority for him, for after about an hour and a half of mopping floors, etc., he excused himself, and he did not return for the meeting. I imagine the comings and goings of the guests was monitored, but the police kept a very low profile that day.

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The "Localization" of International NGOs: Converting INGOs to VNGOs

The idea of networking among VNGOs is born, in part, of the feeling that Vietnamese are capable of managing their own development process, given the continued supply of international donor funding. A second – and perhaps one of the most interesting phenomena in the NGO scene in Vietnam – is the relatively new trend of international NGOs converting (or trying to convert) themselves into local NGOs (VNGOs). This phenomenon is meeting a fair amount of official resistance, but a small number of INGOs have been able to make this transition, or were in the process of doing so during the time period of my research. In this section I want to very briefly explore this phenomenon as both a recognition and an assertion of professionalism in Vietnamese NGOs.

Through my work with INGOs in the early 1990s, I became aware that a fairly large proportion of the INGOs that came to Vietnam shortly after *đổi mới* did so with the expressed hopes of establishing local offices, registering as local NGOs. From the late 1980s when the first INGOs began to establish themselves in Vietnam until today, these hopes have not been realized. INGOs are registered with and managed by the People's Aid Coordinating Committee (PACCOM) which is a member to the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations (VUFO). Self described as a Vietnamese NGOs, both PACCOM and VUFO are in fact organs of the state, tasked with overseeing INGO activities and investments in Vietnam. Newly arrived INGOs must register with

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PACCOM, thus centralizing the management of INGO activity in the country.[107] International agencies that want to establish locally registered office for their work are routinely denied that possibility. For example, the Pearl S. Buck Foundation (PSB) has eight offices worldwide, and all except the Vietnam office are registered as local NGOs in their countries of operation (interview, 2003). In Vietnam PSB has been channeled into the state's INGO management bureaucracy.

During my fieldwork – and notably only in Hanoi – I found that a number of organizations were either contemplating or were actively working on a "localization" strategy, attempting to make the change from being a branch office of an INGO into a true VNGO. As a starting measure, many INGOs are now run by 100% Vietnamese staff, no longer relying on directors or other staff from overseas. Some organizations that had here-to-fore been registered through PACCOM as INGOS were (at the time of my fieldwork) making the attempt to totally reconstitute themselves as local Vietnamese NGOs. Another group of organizations wanted to do so, but had not yet been able to find the appropriate mechanism or had run into obstacles that prevented them from doing so. In some cases the INGO "spun off" local VNGOs to undertake specific parts of the INGO development portfolio, or to represent the INGO in specific geographic locations outside Hanoi.

[107] Information about INGO registrations, PACCOM, VUFO, and related issues is from personal experience as a consultant to INGOs in Vietnam from 1993-1997. See also Suzuki (2002).

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In one example, CIDSE, a European-based INGO, completely relinquish its named presence in Vietnam by splitting itself into two VNGOs along programmatic lines. The staffs of the two resultant VNGOs, including their directors, were made up of the staff members hired and trained by CIDSE during their over 15 years of operation in Vietnam. Interestingly, however, the Vietnamese staff that manned the small CIDSE field office in Ho Chi Minh City, who were offered the opportunity to either join one of the two newly formed VNGOs or to create their own, opted to resign instead. The conditions for operating a VNGO in HCMC were too restrictive, and these staff members had not cultivated the appropriate contacts to be successful. At the time I left my field site, they were on the job market, looking for work at other INGOs.

Motivations for INGOs to form local NGOs, while diverse, are frequently expressed in two major ways. The first is that the INGO's mission and/or philosophy requires that it rely on local people to do development work. The manner in which the INGO perceives itself and its work is through, in part, the establishment and support of a local institutionalized NGO sector, capable of taking on the challenges of development "for their own people." Secondly, INGOs in Vietnam frequently make the case, as do Vietnamese employees of both INGOs and VNGOs, that there is now a large, highly trained cadre of Vietnamese development workers who are capable of running these organizations themselves – in fact probably better than foreigners can run them. The last 15 or more years of INGO investment in Vietnam has seen the

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creation of a Vietnamese NGO workforce that is highly professionalized and competent. INGOs, having succeeded in professionalizing development work in Vietnam, are eager to support the creation of a local development sector.

But those INGOs wishing to convert to VNGOs frequently meet with problems. One such obstacle, curiously enough, is the organization's name. Vietnamese law stipulates that the name must be in Vietnamese and not reference foreign individuals or organizations. Thus the Pearl S. Buck Foundation found itself in a dilemma whether to remain registered as an INGO and keep its name, or to rename its Vietnam operation (dropping the name of its founder) in order to enable it to register as a local NGO. Similar legal and bureaucratic problems abound.

Perhaps the most fundamental problem for INGOs transforming themselves to VNGOs has to do with the registration process itself. I have discussed in an earlier chapter the difficulties that VNGOs have in registering themselves, due mostly to the lack of clarity in the legal system. There are at least a half dozen methods for VNGOs to register, each with its benefits, costs, and risks. This lack of clarity and lack of certainty creates a "barrier to entry" for INGOs wishing to convert and is made worse by the very fact that such a conversion requires the INGO to dissolve ties with PACCOM. A shift from one bureaucratic line of control to another is never easily managed in Vietnam. PACCOM retains its own legitimacy from the vast amounts of money that INGOs spend in Vietnam, and is therefore reluctant to let any INGO out of its stable. I have no evidence that PACCOM actively thwarts INGO-VNGO

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transformations, but conversations with INGOs that want to convert reveal that PACCOM officials' attitudes and incomplete information have exacerbated an already unclear situation, making the risks seem higher than they probably are. This form of information control may have a stronger "disciplining" effect on INGOs than any overt attempt by PACCOM to prevent an INGO from "jumping ship."

None-the-less, representatives of many INGOs, including CIDSE, ENDA, Pearl S. Buck Foundation, ActionAid, and Population and Development International (PDI),[108] to name a few, told me of their desires and intentions to transform themselves or a part of their operations into VNGOs, or the fact that they have already done so. Ms. Ni's organization (one of my field sites in HCMC) was, in fact, a spin-off from a large INGO's development project which was designed with one of its goals being the creation of a VNGO.

Most Vietnamese staff of INGOs confided in me that they felt Vietnamese could do a better job designing and running development projects in their own country. Often the added burden of dealing with a foreign boss – adapting to a foreign office culture, thinking, speaking and writing in English, etc. – was an onerous and wasteful imposition. They were, they told me, skilled and dedicated – *professionals* in their field.

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[108] After returning to the US from my fieldwork in 2004, I learned that CIDSE had successfully converted its organization into two different VNGOs. Earlier, ActionAid helped establish a VNGO in a provincial area to take on the local work of one of its larger projects. The Vietnamese staff of PDI had voted and some opted, with PDI's support and blessing, to start their own VNGO. Both ENDA and Pearl S. Buck had not, at the time of my fieldwork, been able to make the transition, even though they both ran with 100% Vietnamese staff.

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When "Professional" Means "Non-Political"

One absolutely crucial aspect of "professionalism" as defined by virtually all VNGO staff members (and Vietnamese working for INGOs) is their vehement claim to being "non-political," *never* engaging *any form* of political work. Regardless of the kind of organization they work for, they describe their approach, their philosophies, and their work in this way. They participate in the discursively created and maintained separation between themselves and any form of "political society." It is as fundamental to – and as inseparable from – their identity as "professional development workers" and "non-governmental organizations" as the idea of being a "non-profit" is to American charitable agencies.

For well over a decade, Critical Development Studies scholars have noted the absurdity of describing "development" as a "non-political" endeavor, yet this is still the way the international development community characterizes its work. Development is intimately involved with policy, resource allocation, and state ideology. The notion that you can take politics out of development is truly remarkable, but this is what development agencies around the world profess to do, and surprising, at least on the face of it, is the fact that "developing countries," i.e., those that benefit from the investments and projects from international development agencies, are complicit in this absurdity. One particular aspect of development, known as "governance," is particularly wrapped up in the way a state governs, and yet is the target of millions of "non-political" development dollars in dozens of Third World

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countries. Other inherently political ideas, such as “social capital,” “democratization,” and (indeed) “civil society” are also the focus of nonsensically described “non-political” development programs.

In Vietnam, the large multilateral development agencies promote ostensively de-politicized programs for the promotion of governance and civil society. The implication is that the ‘administrative reforms,” “judicial reforms,” and promotion of local NGOs (as a form of civil society) are non-political acts. In their work to promote “rule of law,” “more complete citizen participation,” and “democratization,” they gloss over the inherent notion – and implied criticisms – that the Vietnamese government is non-democratic and requires reform. The “anti-politics machine” (Ferguson, 1994) strikes again to transform the donor community’s attempt to re-form a government from a *political* act into a *technical* fix.

The Vietnamese government is aware of this “discursive move,” however. It has been cautious in adopting prescribed changes designed to enhance “governance” (such as a liberal NGO law), a reflection of its acknowledgement of the politics deeply rooted in such decisions. On the other hand, the Vietnamese state deploys its own version of the anti-politics machine in its dealings with both the international donor community and the VNGO community. The VNGOs, themselves, work within the state definitions of what is “non-political,” while occasionally questioning these boundaries.

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In this section I will discuss some aspects of each of these three visions of the "non-political" in development in Vietnam, the views from the international development community, from state ideological perspective, and from VNGOs' sense of practicality and survival. These views are mutually constructed, but also mutually contested, reinforcing and limiting. It is, in fact, in their interplay that we see the basic forms that future VNGO-as-civil-society relationships are beginning to appear.

International Development Agencies and the "Non-political"

Much has been written on the many aspects of the discursive construction of "development" as a non-political exercise (e.g., Ferguson, 1994; Abrahamsen, 2000; Harris, 2001). It is, in fact an imperative in modern development practice that development projects retain the characterization of being non-political. The legitimacy of the endeavor – development – is at stake. If development projects were perceived and described as being political, they would risk being the (overt) target of rival powers and factions within and between governments. Multilateral agencies, in particular, as virtual "clubs of nation states," work very hard to cast their work as being in partnership with acknowledged governments, i.e., with the members of their "clubs."

In fact, this charade of being non-political cannot stand up to even the most cursory scrutiny. By the mere fact that these multilateral agencies work closely with the recognized governments of the countries where they run projects means they are

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supporting and re-inscribing a *status quo*, promoting one faction (the ruling one) amongst the many possible alternatives that may or may not exist. This, in fact, is a political act.

I am not suggesting that development agencies could or should do anything differently. I am merely asserting that the characterization of their work as non-political would be more accurately rendered as "non-contrarily political," as the support of a regime is an inherently political act.

And yet, the power associated with the construction of development acts as being non-political is immense. Ferguson's groundbreaking work, *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1994) is perhaps the most complete description of the mechanisms by which development programs, even when (or perhaps especially when) they fail to meet their stated objectives, work to further strengthen power in the ruling regime and its many bureaucratic organs. The discourse of development, according to Ferguson, is extremely productive, even when the power relations it creates and enhances were not explicitly delineated in the original project documents. The documents themselves never refer to enhanced bureaucratic state control, since that, in itself, would be considered "political."

In fact, Carothers (2005) tells us, contrary to the basic tenants of civil society theory, "[d]onors have chosen to consider civil and political society as separate realms because, as we shall see later, doing so helps defend the claim that it is possible to

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support democracy without becoming involved in partisan politics or otherwise interfering unduly in the domestic politics of another country" (no page number). Some bilateral donors like the US are interested in only supporting Third World civil society groups that explicitly advocate for democracy. Conversations with American diplomats in Vietnam revealed a dismissal of Vietnamese NGOs as not being part of a "real" civil society, and that no such "real" civil society – one that openly opposes one-party rule and promotes pluralistic democracy – is possible under the current regime. Carothers corroborates this as a more general position: "The view that has most influenced donors, especially in the U.S. government, is one according to which civil society consists only of voluntary associations that directly foster democracy and promote democratic consolidation" (no page number).

But putting "democratization" aside, the turn toward the promotion of "good governance" in development discourse is a clear case in point. The idea that changes in how a country governs can be considered "non-political" is somewhat farcical. But by couching the "fixes" in terms of "administrative reform" and other *technical* problems, to be dealt with by professional development workers with *technical* expertise, allows the myth of non-political interventions to proceed. Abrahamsen (2000) describes this process in terms of "democratization" in development discourse in Africa, and Harris (2001) describes how the World Bank deploys the ideas of "social capital" and "civil society" to, in his words, "depoliticize development." Jenkins (2002) explains how this works at the World Bank:

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> "…by speaking in terms of correcting perverse organisational incentives, unblocking institutional bottlenecks, diversifying civil society and reorienting its interface with state agencies, and other such 'technical' solutions, external agencies were able *to disavow any interference in the 'domestic politics'* of the states in which they operated. While the World Bank's Articles of Agreement prohibit such intrusive practices, they *do* permit it to address 'managerial' issues, to the extent they are relevant to the effective discharge of the Bank's responsibilities as a creditor agency..." (p. 487, emphasis added).

There is evidence that this general phenomenon of "depoliticizing development" also occurs in Vietnam. Certainly *all* multilateral aid agencies and international NGOs present themselves and their work as "non-political."[109] This, in fact, is a stipulation by the Vietnamese government to their continued presence in Vietnam. In practice, international NGOs tend to be extremely mindful that their work does not cross the bounds of what is considered by the Vietnamese state agencies as being "political." INGOs *tend* to limit their work toward service provision or poverty relief that does not challenge the state's *status quo*. Recent years have seen incremental steps by INGOs to be more involved in advocacy work, especially in fields (such as micro-credit and in the support of VNGOs) that can be explained in terms consistent with their non-political mission.

UNDP and the World Bank in Vietnam have both been involved more directly with state processes, however. UNDP has major programs in "administrative reform" and "judicial reform," both of which take a long-term approach to fundamental change

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[109] The exceptions to the idea of international development being non-political may be, of course, the many bilateral, state-to-state aid agencies such as USAID. However, even these agencies make distinction between "political" development projects and "humanitarian" or "technical" projects. This distinction is often related to their own internal budgeting categories and may be very hard to see.

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in the way the Vietnamese state operates. The World Bank has made repeated attempts to change Vietnamese government budgetary processes and spending (through project implementation, etc.) (Norlund, et. al., 2003). The fact that the Vietnamese government has accepted these projects and has "partnered" with the respective multinational agencies to implement them does not render them any less "political," however.

It may be useful to recap the incident described in detail in Chapter 5, where the UNDP's Civil Society Working Group (CSWG) strayed beyond the acceptable boundaries of the "non-political" in late 2002. In that incident, the primary state agency involved, the Ministry of Home Affairs, withdrew its support for the CSWG. UNDP, sensing it was on tricky ground, put a moratorium on CSWG activities for about 6 months, then reconstituted the group as the "People's Participatory Working Group," re-establishing it as focusing on a less "sensitive" topic, "participation" instead of "civil society."

In my work as a consultant to INGOS in Vietnam in the mid-1990s I learned what being reclassified from "non-political" status can mean. During a consultancy for an INGO, I stepped afoul of a Vietnamese INGO staffer with strong personal connections in the provincial capital where I had been working. Upon returning to Ho Chi Minh City, one of my wife's relatives (a HCMC resident) received a phone call from the security police from the province I had just returned from, accusing me of "doing political work" there. I was put on notice by these provincial authorities that if

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I were to return to that province, I would be arrested and charged with some vaguely defined form of "subversion." Only my wife's well-positioned relatives (the caller said) protected me from being arrested in Ho Chi Minh City.

Whether or not I would have been arrested (I never tested the validity of the threat), clearly the threat itself was meant to undermine my work in the strongest possible way. Being accused of "political work," i.e., casting my development work as political, was the worst thing that could happen to my credibility as an INGO consultant. This anecdote indicates the necessity for the international community to maintain the façade of being non-political.

The Vietnamese State and "Non-political" Development

At top levels, in the realm of Party ideology and policy, the VN state accepts and agrees with (and demands and enforces) the development community's self-limitation of their activities to "non-political" realms. On the surface, these broad categories of actors (international development organizations and "the state") are in accord on this, and they work together to ensure that development projects are conducted (and are described) in ways that do not transgress the boundary of the "non-political." Development agencies, including VNGOs, may engage in "humanitarian" activities and social service provision, they may support the health, education and poverty relief policies of the state, etc. Above all, these activities must be *non-political*.

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International agencies, particularly the UN and the World Bank also work in areas such as "administrative reform," curiously characterized as non-political, and they have mutually agreed that the institutions that are thereby put in place are vital to the continued globalizing project of "integrating Vietnam into the world economy." Through such elaborate constructions and negotiations the Vietnamese state and the donors are able to continue the many governance projects under the rubric of "development" and outside the rubric of "political."

At the same time, the Vietnamese state ideology holds as paramount its own legitimacy and its monopoly on political thought. The Leninist ideal that the Communist Party is the final arbiter of political truth is a core feature of Vietnamese political culture. This core value is the foundational meaning encoded in the Vietnamese usage of the terms "political" and "non-political." In fact, the Vietnamese term for "politics," *chính trị*, is used almost exclusively to refer to "high politics," i.e., to matters of state ideology, national sovereignty, or to inter-state relations (David Marr, 2001, personal communication). The ideas that English speakers associate with what may be considered "low politics" – everyday politics, office politics, politics of the body, etc. – are expressed using a variety of different Vietnamese terms. Therefore, the idea of activities or speech acts being "political" or "non-political" in Vietnamese (even in translation from English) is directly related to the acceptance of or the challenge to state ideology or policy.

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Therefore the Vietnamese state's definition of "political" is conservative, preserving (as it does) the *status quo* of state monopoly over political ideology. It is also a final bulwark against potentially intrusive donor definitions of "non-political." When the donor and the state disagree on the importance or the appropriateness of development policies, the state can invoke this foundational, non-negotiable definition of the off-limits "political" realm as an ultimate "check" on donor demands. On the other hand, activities in support of state policy and plans (inherently political by nature) are acceptable and welcome. In essence, as I have stated, the definition of "non-political" means, in reality, "not *contrarily* political"; the state defines what is non-political to its own ends.

This idea that the Vietnamese state can invoke the charge that a development scheme might be too "political" raises a theoretical issue *vis-à-vis* Ferguson's "anti-politics machine." Whereas Ferguson asserted that (in the case of one particular development scheme in Lesotho in the 1970s) the interests of development discourse coincided with the interests of a centralized bureaucracy, my observations in Vietnam suggest that this is true only to a point. The overlap is significant, but in Vietnam, the state has been very protective of its own sovereign power to choose particular policy measures in support of development schemes and reject others. One international consultant to large donor organizations told me that in implementing World Bank anti-poverty programs, the Vietnamese ministries often used a "two-track" tactic. For the purposes of the project it implemented Bank-recommended policies while preventing

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those policies from affecting any key ministerial activities, which remained "unreformed." The state successfully isolated itself from outside efforts to transform its operations. When speaking on a different issue I mentioned the coercive power of the Bank to make policy happen as stipulations for granting loans, this informant dismissed my comment with a a shake of his head and a wave of his hand: "This isn't Rwanda or Ethiopia. This is Vietnam, and the Vietnamese would not put up with that kind of interference. We have to work much more carefully here" (name withheld, personal communication, Hanoi 2003).

One of the ways that the line between "political" and "non-political" activity is demarcated in Vietnam is through careful attention to vocabulary. For instance, as I discussed in Chapter 4, particular words are considered by Vietnamese authorities to be "sensitive" and are not in regular use. Among these words are the Vietnamese translation of "non-government organization" (*tổ chức phí chính phủ*) and the term "civil society" (in English or Vietnamese). I frequently heard statements about the government/Party requiring further "study" of the words "NGO" and "civil society" before deciding on proper Vietnamese translations as reasons for the absence of these words from almost all official documents.

This level of care with un-vetted vocabulary is very common among VNGOs and state officials, and is common knowledge among international donors. One example came in my discussions with the Office of Foreign Affairs of the Ministry of Home Affairs, in March, 2004, where they advised me not to use the either *xã hội*

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công dân or *xã hội dân sự* – the two translations of the English "civil society" – as neither had been approved by "the state" yet. They did not offer any alternative term for my use. In fact, the Vietnamese State is concerned very little about linguistics; it is the politics embedded in the terms that requires their (and therefore my) attention.

Walking the Line: VNGOs and "Non-political" Development

VNGOs themselves subscribe to the idea that they are, indeed non-political actors in the field of Vietnamese national development. In part, VNGOs are careful to comply with the notion on being non-political as a matter of survival; the state authorities, already ambivalent about the nature of and need for VNGOs makes their existence precarious. But VNGOs' compliance goes deeper than appeasing the authorities. VNGOs see reflected in their non-political stance a strong and deep form of "professionalism." They are not "rabble-rousers" or dissidents; they are rational, law-abiding, constructive citizens, working for the betterment of their nation. By identifying with (and helping to construct) this form of non-political professionalism, VNGOs create and maintain legitimacy for themselves and their activities *vis-à-vis* the state, international donors, and their peers in other VNGOs.

As with state officials, VNGOs are quite conscious of their vocabulary choice and other speech acts as reflections of professionalism and of their non-political engagement with development. They are aware of and vocalize what kinds of activities are and are not "allowed" or "appropriate" – i.e., would or would not bring

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sanctions from the authorities – often appending the temporal marker "at this time," implying that such activities may, in fact be desirable or possible in the future. They describe the state agencies they are required to work with as "partners" engaged in "cooperation." Interestingly these speech acts can be different, depending on the language of use. For instance in one VNGOs informational brochure, the English version described the organization as a "local NGO." The Vietnamese version, however, described them as a "Vietnamese Organization" (tổ chức Việt Nam) emphasizing their belongingness and nationalism.

The following anecdote from my fieldwork illustrates the care which Vietnamese development workers take to circumscribe their speech to ensure they continue to be perceived as "non-political"." During a meeting on domestic violence attended by foreign staff of INGOs and various Vietnamese development staffers (from INGOs and VNGOs), a Vietnamese participant was trying to explain, in English, differences in the treatment of women between the northern and southern regions of Vietnam. This participant felt compelled to preface his remarks on how the division of the country in 1954 affected the legal and cultural history of gender relations with the comment, "Sorry, I'm not talking politics, but before liberation…" The self-conscious apology and the use of the politically acceptable term "liberation" to refer to the end of the American War in Vietnam and the reunification of the

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country[110] both worked to position the subsequent statements as cultural and historical "fact," not politically motivated "interpretation." The speaker was successful in ensuring his remarks were taken as technical inputs toward addressing domestic violence.

Of course this claim to being "non-political" rests on a definition of what is "political." As I discussed above, the word that is used to translate the English word "politics" into Vietnamese, *chính trị*, is specific to what noted Vietnam historian David Marr (personal communication, 2001) describes as "high politics." It is "high politics" that are the most "sensitive" and jealously guarded by the Vietnamese state. For example, though lobbying for the rights of disabled people might, in the US, be considered a form of "politics," it is not *chính trị* in Vietnam. Consequently, working to convince the HCMC People's Committee to install sidewalk ramps for handicapped (as one VNGO is doing) is not considered "political." Similarly, working with city officials to grant residency permits for garbage workers who have migrated to the city (as TWAC is engaged in – see previous chapter) is not considered "political," either, though these permits confer specific legal rights including schooling for their children (interviews, HCMC, 2004).

On the other hand, understanding where that line is drawn between "political" and "non-political" can be problematic, as SNV, a Dutch INGO, learned in 2003.

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[110] Those opposed to the regime in Hanoi would refer to this historical event as "the fall of Saigon," or some similarly negative phrase.

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Vietnam has been working for several years to join the WTO. Recognizing that the economic shifts necessary to make accession possible will create or increase social welfare issues in Vietnam, SNV organized a workshop on WTO accession in August of 2003. They thought all was well until they couldn't get visas for workshop delegates from the Philippines and Cambodia to enter the country. Finally, 5 days prior to the start of the workshop, the delegates were granted permission to enter Vietnam, but only on the condition that the topic entitled "The Role of Vietnamese Organizations in Mitigating Impacts of WTO Accession" be dropped from the agenda. According to the analysis of a knowledgeable Vietnamese INGO staffer, "It is not the appropriate moment to discuss the involvement of local organizations in working with the government on these issues," for two reasons: First, the whole idea of VNGOs is still a sensitive one, and their role in the development process – particularly in their interactions with the state on setting the national development agenda, has not been settled. And secondly, the issue of WTO accession is "sensitive" for a different reason: the government has made a firm decision to proceed with WTO accession, so there is no room for further discussion. In particular, discussion of potential negative impacts is unwelcome (interview, name withheld, 2004).

The idea that development can be a non-political exercise, at least when using the broader sense of the English term "political," is difficult to defend. In fact, the "non-political" activities of VNGOs are supportive of the State policies, so they *are* (in that sense) political. Importantly, however, they are not *contrarily political*; they

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do not challenge the State ideology. Even in cases where the activities of VNGOs involve lobbying efforts to change State policy, they do so by invoking other supporting state policies. This form of lobbying works to re-inscribe State ideology. And yet, this notion of being non-political is crucial, even foundational, to VNGO staffers' perception of themselves, their organizations, and their roles in society.

Conclusion: Civil Society Processes in Vietnam: "Appropriate Activities"

Casting their work as non-political allows VNGOs a great deal of organizational latitude opening doors to interacting with the varied, but ultimately extremely powerful agencies of the state. Ms. Ni, in her work with factory laborers, maintains relationships with various state offices. If her work was described as "political," the staff of these offices would be too frightened to interact with Ms. Ni, and her operation would be crippled. She relies on the slow and careful building of relationships in order to gain access and promote change. In contrast, an anti-sweatshop activist in the US certainly constructs his/her work as political, and gains credence through confrontation. These approaches may help us understand a crucial issue that arises when we apply the concept of civil society to the VNGO case. The "confrontational" model of change directly parallels the notion that civil society exists to "resist the state," to form a bulwark between the (ostensively expansionary) state and the individual. The anti-sweatshop activist fits cleanly into this model and can be held up as one form of civil society as understood in the West.

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However, Ms. Ni's "relationship" approach to engaging the state relies on negotiation and persuasion, built on the premise of cooperation toward a common goal rather than on confrontation. At the risk of being essentialist, there is a distinct Vietnamese – and perhaps East Asian – quality to this mode of conflict management and behavioral change activism. At the very least, as Ms. Ni's form of engagement is by far the most common among the VNGOs I interviewed or had contact with, it is an important factor in the attempts of VNGOs to make the changes in state behavior that promote their ideas of development for their constituencies. It is not, however, explained by the more common forms of civil society theory from the West.

Using the process approach to civil society theory allows us to see clearly that non-confrontational forms of engagement with the state can be considered forms of civil society. But which activities are to be considered as being "civil society activities" and which not? My continuum offers some ideas, but in the end it is only a heuristic. In fact, such judgments as to which roles are "appropriate" for civil society are essentially normative and therefore highly contested. Everywhere – but particularly in a Marxist-Leninist (or other authoritarian) state like Vietnam – there are certain activities that are sanctioned and allowed, and others that are not. In Vietnam, it is virtually impossible to engage in public criticism or other forms of open resistance to the state without severe sanctions such as imprisonment. The state does not consider such acts as legitimate functions of civil society. It does, on the other hand, allow non-state groups such as VNGOs to be engaged in social services work in line with state

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policies. It will even allow certain forms of advocacy work in support of those social service projects as long as non-state groups do not engage in criticism of state policy or ideology. This position is illustrated on my civil society activities continuum in figure 9, below, where state-sanctioned civil society activities can be found within the box to the right, and proscribed activities in the circle to the left.

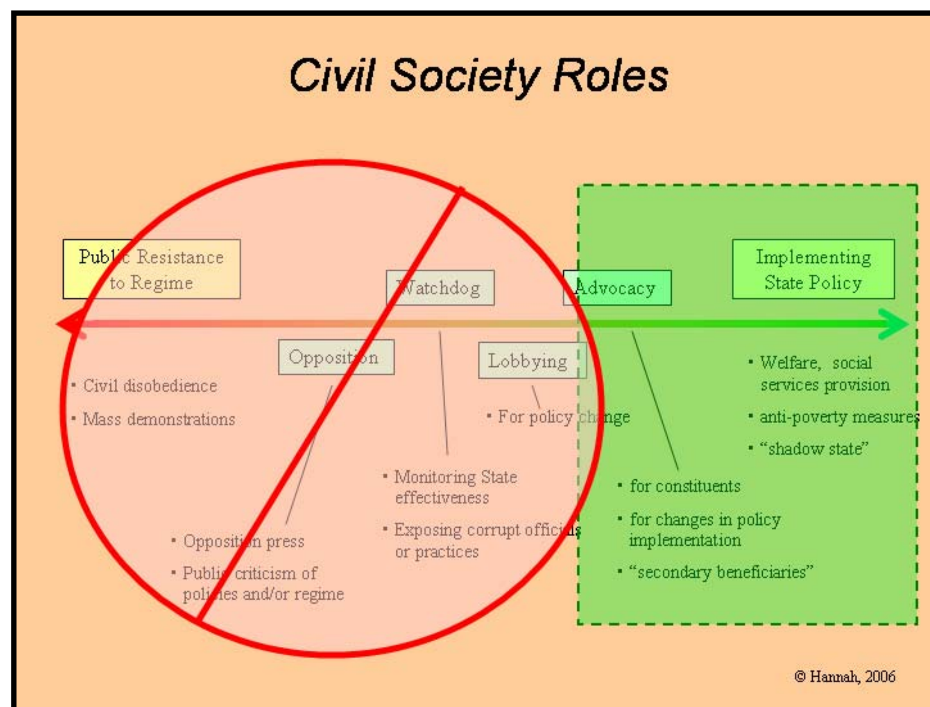

Figure 9: State Sanctioned Civil Society Activities

This position on appropriate VNGO roles is, as I mentioned, highly contested. Currently there is pressure, mostly from international donors, but also some from local VNGOs and even some pressure from some sectors within the Vietnamese state to expand this realm of allowable civil society activities. Generally this pressure does not challenge state legitimacy or even the right of the state to set the development agenda

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(as we see in other Third World countries). Rather it tends to challenge implementation of policy, corrupt or wasteful practices, etc.

But there is also a much larger force from within the state to maintain the current “line” between what is allowable and what is not and limit the roles civil society is allowed to play in Vietnam. I believe that this pressure to limit civil society

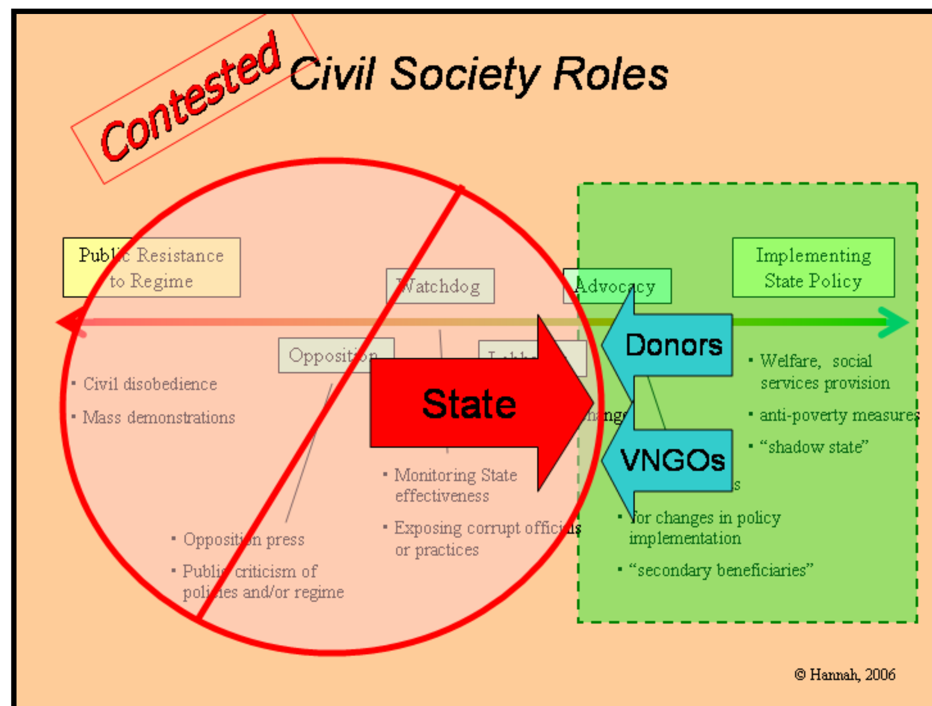

Figure 10: Contestation over Civil Society Roles

activity is mostly a conservative reaction, an unwillingness to embrace change without a clear policy – a Party Line – clearly governing the roles and limits of VNGOs in Vietnamese society. I had this very discussion with Mr. Cong, a Communist Party theorist in a tea shop in Hanoi. During the conversation, I sketched out my continuum

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of civil society activities, from full support of government policies on the right side (with the implied links to the State), though full opposition on the left side.

As one might expect, when I wrote down “Opposition” then “Public Resistance,” Mr. Cong frowned and knit his eyebrows, obviously uncomfortable with the way the conversation was headed. On my paper, I drew a box around the right half of the continuum, enclosing “Implementing State Policy,” “Advocacy,” and “Lobbying.” These, I indicated, were acceptable activities of organizations in Vietnam today. (See figure 10 above.) He nodded a qualified agreement. I then took out a red pen and drew a large “X” through the left half of the continuum, canceling out “Public Resistance” and “Opposition.” These activities, I said, are clearly *not* acceptable in Vietnam today. With visible relief, he agreed, this time without qualification. So, I continued, it seems to me that Vietnam is going to allow NGOs to undertake certain civil society roles (those on the right side of my continuum), but not others (those on the left side of my continuum). Again he agreed more enthusiastically, drawn into my argument. So, I asked, where do the Party and the government draw the line between what is acceptable civil society activity and what is not? How can you prevent NGOs or associations from “sliding down” this line toward unacceptable activities?

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Mr. Cong leaned back and looked me right in the eye. He held up his right index finger, pointing to heaven, and said with a smile on his face and in his voice, "Ah, that is *precisely* the question!"[111]

[111] This anecdote can also be found in Hannah (2005).

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