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Dissertation Research Proposal


I. Background

Persistent poverty is evident to the traveler in Vietnam. In the midst of the bustling cities or the productive farmlands, the many faces of poverty are a constant reminder that the dream of development has yet to be realized. Although government reform efforts (known as doi moi) have caused the GDP to rise, the gap between rich and poor continues to grow. Economic development is uneven and new social inequities are forming. And yet the Vietnamese are persistently optimistic. Most believe that life will be better, some day, and that “development,” that elusive ideal, is written in their future. This optimism is paired with a tradition of humanitarian service, producing a philanthropic sector that has begun to emerge since the advent of the doi moi economic and social reforms in the mid-1980s. Local Vietnamese non-government organizations (VNGOs) now form a small, struggling portion of this philanthropic sector.

This research project will explore the hesitant rise of VNGOs engaged in development work in Vietnam since the doi moi reforms began. Vietnam, a Socialist country, instituted this program of comprehensive economic and social reforms oriented toward developing a market economy in 1986.¹ Under doi moi, the Vietnamese state is attempting to create a market economy while retaining the one-party rule of the Vietnamese Communist Party. In the process, the state is focusing on development as a major theme and (in part) as justification for its continued legitimacy. In the midst of this huge social project, a very few, very small private non-governmental organizations (VNGOs) focusing on various aspects of development are beginning to form.

Western scholarship often uses ideas of civil society to explain the rise and the function of such organizations. This research will question whether the concept of civil society and its underlying assumptions are useful in explaining VNGOs in a Socialist Vietnam undergoing economic and social reforms. By looking at the formation of VNGOs in Vietnam, this research will seek to explore the discursive formations of “civil society” as put forth by academics and by the international development community and at the same time challenge the definitions of civil society used in the prevailing discourse. This research seeks to extend our understanding of how civil society is manifest in non-western societies, and how the theory is reworked as it is imported. It will also explore how the international development industry’s cooptation of the idea for promoting its agenda, and how Vietnamese are themselves adapting the concept. It is my contention that these co-optations and adaptations re-organize and recreate civil society discourse in particular ways in Vietnam, giving us insight into the way the theory travels.

¹ This is the date of the Party Congress that institutionalized the reform movement in Vietnam. Several reform-oriented policies predate that Congress.
The exploration of civil society is important precisely because the term is used ubiquitously in development practice. Its power seems to come from its general acceptance, and at the same time, its acceptance comes from its fluid (Fowler, et. al. say “fuzzy”) definition. The case of Vietnam will allow us to look at how the theory travels. How does a socialist country under market reforms, with tight social controls on citizens’ ability to meet, organize, and create an “associational sector,” react to and adapt to such a foreign, Western concept of social organization as “civil society.”

In the case of Vietnam, it is my contention (to be examined in this fieldwork) that the “fuzziness” of the term civil society is in fact causing a cautious response from the state, resulting in an exceptionally small number of VNGOs setting up shop. VNGOs are having a difficult time forming and operating precisely because they are labeled as civil society by external development actors. This label is a source of confusion and concern in the Vietnamese Party/government apparatus. At the same time, a small number of VNGOs do form and operate. My working hypothesis is that current civil society theory does not adequately explain the formation and operation of Vietnamese NGOs. The intent of the study is to better understand the workings, mission, and political economy of VNGOs in the context of international development and State reticence, and thereby to extend the current theories of civil society.

With all that in mind, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

a. How are concepts of civil society being contested and reworked in Vietnam through discursive and material practices of VNGOs, international development agencies, Vietnamese and Western scholars, and the Vietnamese State?

b. What does the formation of VNGOs reveal about the on-going negotiations over State-society relations in Vietnam, particularly in light of the đổi mới economic renovations?

c. What do the discourses that underpin VNGO and Vietnamese State conceptions of development reveal about the (hesitant) formation of civil society in Vietnam?

II. Disciplinary Context: Civil Society, Development, and Discourse

Civil Society Theory

In order to look at the specific case of civil society formation and civil society discourse in Vietnam, this research is grounded in theories of civil society in development. The modern concept of civil society can be traced back to the Enlightenment period, though some scholars trace the foundation for the ideas to ancient Greek philosophers. Although many different political and social theorists have used the term civil society over the past two and a half centuries, there is a startling lack of agreement about what the term actually means. Indeed, the political and ideological history carried in the concept of civil society is daunting. Civil society is a concept rooted in Western European and American political philosophy, turning tightly on issues of liberalism – liberal democratic theory and liberal economics. Hobbes (with his concern for the necessary evil of the state) and Locke (with his famous idea of the “social contract”) are progenitors of this idea in its modern incarnation. Tocqueville valorized voluntary associations as embodying civil society and as the essence of a particularly successful (antebellum) American democracy. Marx, Hegel, and Gramsci criticized the concept from historical materialist perspectives, asserting that civil society is a proxy site for class struggle. Eastern European and Latin American social scientists deployed the concept in explaining anti-totalitarian movements in the 1980s and 1990s.
The myriad of forms that civil society takes in the hands of theorists over the last two centuries makes for a confusing state of affairs. “Overall, such definitional complexities have resulted in a division between the sceptics who find this ‘reason enough to dismiss the concept as a mere abstraction without substance,’ and the faithful who may embrace the ‘multifaceted richness of the idea’” (McIlwaine 1998, quoting Fine, 1997) In her literature review of geographers’ engagement with civil society and development, McIlwaine is in good company when she aligns herself with the skeptics and ultimately decides that the concept is not useful because of its “lack of conceptual and definitional clarity” and the “untenability of the implicit assumptions” associated with the concept. (p.421)

For the purposes of this study, I am more interested in looking at how the idea of civil society is used and what work it does in the specific context of Vietnam under *đổi mới* reforms (particularly in relation to international development) than in what it actually “means” in a general sense. In fact, the very problem of defining the term reveals an extraordinary and complex set of dynamics and power relations surrounding its use. Edwards (Edwards, Foley et al. 2001) notes that “competing concepts of ‘civil society’ … almost invariably bear the marks of the political struggles within which they were born.” It is these struggles that are of interest to me and that I hope to explore in this study.

Civil Society in Development

As a starting point for this work, I have chosen to look at civil society using a Critical Development Studies approach.² Failures of modernization theory, structural adjustment policies, Third World debt, etc., in the 1980s led to a “crisis of development” (Watts 1995) causing large changes in approaches to development. At one extreme, what Watts (1998) calls the “(neo)modernization” discourse has developed, based on neo-liberal macro-economic ideas (“globalization”) and espoused by most of the larger international development agencies. The “New Policy Agenda” has revealed itself as “political and economic liberalization,” leading to a new “myth of development”: a combination of the “myth of the market plus civil society.”(Hulme and Edwards, 1997, quoted in McIlwaine 1998).

Post-development scholars (such as Escobar, Esteva, etc.), on the other hand, believe that “development,” practiced and as envisioned by neo-modernizationists, is part of the global problem of poverty. In short (and to paraphrase Esteva), “development stinks.” What we need are alternatives. Ironically, post-development interpretations (e.g., Escobar c1995) have come to the same conclusion as neo-modernizationists: namely that civil society is a critical component to any social progress, call it “development” or “alternatives to development.”

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² This research is grounded in Critical Development Studies (CDS), which emerged as an interdisciplinary framework in the 1990s in the form of feminist, post-modern and post-colonial critiques to development. CDS is growing in part as a response to 1) the failure of (“big-D”) Development (as an international project); 2) the continued and growing inequalities of (little-d) development (arising from the contradictions of capitalism) (see Hart, 2002, on the big-D/little-d distinction); and 3) to the failures of more traditional approaches to development studies to move the debate forward. Though highly interdisciplinary and embodying a number of strains of analysis, CDS incorporates a political economy approach to examining the ways in which global inequalities are produced and reproduced through the discourse and practice of development agencies. It is committed to empirical research that brings into question taken-for-granted categories of privilege and power, poverty and vulnerability. CDS is based on a belief in the centrality of the struggle over knowledge/power, its concern with the local effects of the powerful global systems that deploy development discourses to their own advantage and for their own purposes, and stresses the importance of empirical research (Lawson and Jarosz, unpublished).
This convergence of (fundamentally divergent) neo-liberal and post-development “solutions” to the crisis of development around civil society has brought the concept into prominence in the world of development practice. Major development organizations such as the World Bank and large international NGOs have adapted the civil society concept into their programs and their daily jargon. Strategies, project proposals, reports and evaluations are rife with the term “civil society” or one of several related terms (such as “New Social Movements,” “citizen mobilization,” “local NGO formation,” etc.). Gillian Hart (2002) lays out this ironic confluence of conclusions from such opposite political projects, yet she warns us that the similarity in conclusions in no way indicates a meeting of the minds. Rather, she reminds us of the "multi-layers struggles that have arisen, phoenix-like, from the ashes of market triumphalist claims of the Death of Development." (p. 650) It is within these struggles for the meanings of development – and for the vision of the future – that the struggle over the meanings of “civil society” has relevance.

And yet, what does the term “civil society” really mean in the context of international development? The answer is not at all clear. Or, looking at it another way, the answer is contingent: the term can take on a variety of meanings and assume infinite positive connotations precisely because the denotation is never nailed down. “Civil society” is an example of a “floating signifier… with a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable or non-existent signified.” (Chandler 2003) Different actors draw different meanings from the classical political philosophy theories in various combinations to create ideas of civil society to match development agendas.

Abrahamsen (2000) illustrates how these ambiguities can lead to the capturing and manipulation of entire aid projects. The “veil of imprecision” (McIlwaine 1998) surrounding the concept is typically ignored and simultaneously utilized to discursively construct the “‘rough pastiche’ that has become the accepted version of civil society” (Foley and Edwards 1996) which then becomes operational in Third World contexts. In fact, as mentioned above, proponents of civil society in development span the ideological spectrum from neo-liberal institutions promoting “free market” economic solutions to radical NGOs promoting “participatory” development practices to post-development scholars looking for alternatives to development.

It is not important to me to understand civil society, per se, but to understand how the concept is deployed – ideologically, rhetorically, and discursively – and toward what ends. In part, therefore, my research is directed at how the concept of civil society is constructed and used by VNGOs, how it is deployed for particular ends by their counterparts in international development agencies, how it is understood by Vietnamese Party/government officials, and how it affects VNGOs discursively and operationally. Keeping in mind Edwards’ admonition (above) that competing concepts of civil society are, in fact, political, the deployment of the term and concept of civil society in development becomes a rich subject for exploring the discursive and operational power of international development actors and ideologies, ands in turn the reworking of State-society relations in Vietnam. I believe that it is precisely the lack of “definitional and conceptual clarity” that MacIlwaine (1998) laments that gives civil society its extraordinary discursive, rhetorical, and material power.

**Discourse Analysis: A Window into “Civil Society”**

In not attempting to define civil society, I have, in effect, figuratively pulled back my frame of analysis to the level of discourse. I am not, as I said above, interested in what civil society is, but what the very concept, when deployed discursively, does, what using the concept in particular forms and in particular ways accomplishes for particular interests. How does civil society discourse work in Vietnam?
Discourse is not easy to define. Rose (2001) characterizes discourse as a set of socially constructed rules that allow us to think, talk and act in particular ways, and simultaneously prevent us from thinking, talking, and acting in others. These rules are invisible, “taken-for-granted” by society. Discourse is comprised of

groups of statements which structure the way a thing is thought, and the way we act on the basis of that thinking. In other words, discourse is a particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it. (Rose 2001)

Therefore, all knowledge is socially constructed along the lines of discursive formations; not all forms of knowledge are accepted or acceptable in a discourse. Only certain claims to truth will be considered legitimate. Therefore, discourse becomes a form of discipline, with power an essential ingredient in creating knowledge: “…all knowledge is discursive and all discourse is saturated with power.” (Rose 2001)

At the same time, truth claims are often contested. The nature and outcomes of these contestations are fault lines that can reveal relationships of power or imminent changes within a society. The challenge for the researcher, then, is in understanding the struggle over legitimating knowledge and representations (Jarosz, personal communication, 2003). Whose truth claims are legitimated, by whom, and in support of what interests?

The power of discourse comes through its ability to produce not only knowledge, but certain kinds of subjects. Rose (2001) explains that “human subjects are produced and not simply born.” The researcher must concern him/herself with “the social processes through which a range of subjectivities are constituted.” In the same way that medical discourse produces doctors, nurses and patients, civil society discourse produces NGO staffers, donors, state regulators, and development beneficiaries.

This study, then, will look at how discourses of development, VNGOs, and civil society are working in Vietnam to create constellations of knowledge and subjects. I hope to reveal the areas of contestation that give us insight into the social changes occurring in Vietnam, as well as identify domestic and international interests in promoting certain forms of discourse over others.

III. Vietnamese NGOs as a Case Study for Civil Society

Traveling Theory: Local NGOs and Civil Society in Vietnam

The literature on civil society in Vietnam is sparse and written from a number of different perspectives. Most of it comes from development agencies or from scholars studying development issues in Vietnam. Many of these writings propose a typology for including and excluding various organizations and/or institutions into a definition of Vietnamese civil society. (See for example Beaulieu 1994; Sidel 1996; Gray 1999; Pedersen 2001). Interestingly, my preliminary research in Vietnam (August 2000) found that the international aid and development community has so far identified only seven self-described “independent” VNGOs, all of which are located in Hanoi.

With so few VNGOs extant, and with a great demand from the international development community for local partner organizations, definitions of what constitute an “NGO” have been worked and reworked for the last 15 years in Vietnam. In the absence of “true” NGOs (whatever these are defined as) international development agencies have tended to focus on three other types of organizations in Vietnam as development partners, and hence some kind of “functional” NGOs:
academic and professional associations, government research institutions and Party mass organizations. Certain organizations in all of these categories have begun to participate in the development sector, often as subcontractors (“local partners”) for foreign development agencies. Therefore, in function, if not in form, many of these organizations begin to resemble NGOs, and international agencies frequently accept them as such while turning a blind eye to their affiliations with the Vietnamese State.

For the past 15 years, as the number of international development organizations in Vietnam has risen from under 10 to well over 300, donors have desperately searched for local partners through which to implement their development projects. In most cases the donors have been forced to use governmental partners, often contrary to their preferences. The mass organizations, research institutions and professional associations gave donors an opportunity to work with organizations outside the ministerial and administrative government structure. In the process, many international agencies have adopted rhetoric that categorizes these Vietnamese organizations as NGOs – again in function if not in form. Interestingly, These Vietnamese organizations have often completely transformed themselves into NGO-like entities in order to maintain the lucrative relationships with international donors.

As the concept of “NGO” experiences slippage in this environment, so too does the idea of civil society. Just as development agencies are bringing a selective concept of civil society into their work, Vietnamese scholars and development workers are attempting to bring an acceptable version of the idea into official (Vietnamese) development discourse. Vietnamese writers (such as Phuong 1994; Truong 1994; Bach Tan Sinh 2001; Bach Tan Sinh 2002; Hoang Thi Minh Hong 2002; Le Bach Duong, Khuat Thu Hong et al. c2002 [no date]) attempt to work with civil society theory without challenging the supremacy of the State or the monopoly of the Party over associational life, employing specific strategies that enable them to discuss the idea of civil society without deviating from the official line. These strategies take the form of invocations of Party doctrine, careful explanations of key or contentious words (such as “democracy”), and specific, conscious references to quotations from Ho Chi Minh.

My limited research on Vietnamese writing about civil society has been on Vietnamese nationals writing about civil society in English. Although the writers I have read so far come from either international NGOs or from Vietnamese government think tanks, the intended audiences have been either Western scholars or development agency staff who speak English. I note that this is a poor sample, because Vietnamese who write in Vietnamese for a Vietnamese-speaking audience in-country would perhaps (maybe certainly) use different rhetorical tools. However, it is still revealing that these English language writings on civil society do exhibit important strategies for making a concept of civil society palatable to the authorities who will undoubtedly read these papers.

The verbal, rhetorical and discursive practices and strategies used by these writers to incorporate the idea of civil society into the existing State ideology and specific Vietnamese conceptions of “democracy” (quite different from the liberal democracy under which the concept of civil society was born) in fact do a great deal of work. If civil society is to be an acceptable foundation for development practice in Vietnam in the future, it will be through these kinds of writings that the State will ultimately accept (some version of) the concept. In fact, by couching civil society concepts in certain ways, these writers are actually moving the theory in particular directions that are specific to the historical, social, and geographical conditions of Vietnam. The theory is traveling and being transformed in the process.
Why VNGOs?

NGOs are certainly not new to Third World development, yet their place in the discursive and material practice in development in Vietnam has not been fully explored in CDS scholarship. As Watts (1993) says of NGOs, "... it is surprising how little work has focused on the invention of institutions which produce, transmit and stabilize development 'truths'." (p. 263) This is particularly true of development in Vietnam where very little (or no) critical work on the formation of VNGOs has been done.

Watts continues by noting that the invention of development truths can be understood through the twin mechanisms of “professionalization” and “institutionalization.” I am aware of small grassroots organizations in Vietnamese that have been formed to assist less fortunate members of society. There is any number of hospital patient feeding groups, church- or temple-based charities, etc. I assert that – and intend to investigate whether – VNGOs, in contrast, distinguish themselves to the authorities and to potential donors specifically through their formal type of organization (“institutionalization”) and in their recruitment and training of personnel (“professionalization”).

This process of institutionalization and professionalization will undoubtedly create specific forms of development subjects. The staff members of the VNGOs will 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, the re-invention of the VNGO worker as development professional will create a working environment that may resemble international organizations.

Of course, if 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 led by a knowledge elite, the development professionals, and to a powerful political economy driven by huge donor budgets.

As my colleague Sarah Wright wrote in her dissertation proposal (2001, unpublished), “the struggle over the definition of knowledges, power and territory has been a key area of interest for the critical development, post-colonial and feminist literatures…” A further question then arises: Is the official resistance to VNGOs from the Vietnamese State an issue of State security, or is it a manifestation of the struggle over knowledge? In other words, is it

- a (Leninist) concern for the Party’s monopolization of organizations and associations? Is it a concern that allowing VNGOs to enter into service realms where the government has withdrawn will undermine the legitimacy of the state? Is it fear that VNGOs will form the bases from which political demands on the state will be pressed forward?

- Or is it official concern that international “development truths” (re-invented through VNGOs) will undermine official visions of Vietnamese development?

In the context of the đổi mới reforms, these questions take on even more importance.
Đổi mới, VNGOs and the Renegotiation of State-society Relations

It is hard to overestimate the importance of the đổi mới market reform process in Vietnam, though its 17-year history has been uneven. Đổi mới experienced a euphoric beginning in through the latter half of the 1980s, followed by a clamp-down/withdrawal in the early-1990s, then periodic openings and closings through the end of the millennium. From the start, đổi mới has been as much about managing contradictions as it has been an economic program. Its very goal of inserting a “small capitalism” within a “large socialism” is a contradiction. The tension between capitalist accumulation and socialist management has been clear throughout its 17-year history. Although the Vietnamese State has always seen đổi mới as strictly an opening of markets and not an opening for political reform, the road has been bumpy as the State struggles to find the right balance of markets, social freedoms, and state controls. The only constant has been an unrelenting refrain of neo-liberal triumphalism. (Kolko 1997), as a rare example of a dissenting voice.)

And what of civil society under these conditions? Marxist-Leninism, the foundation of the Vietnamese Communist Party, asserts a monopoly over “associational life” and group activity throughout Vietnamese society; gatherings unsanctioned by the party of government are not allowed. Therefore the Tocquevillian conception of civil society as people coming together to form voluntary associations (commonly promoted by international development agencies) is one that is antithetical to the Marxist-Leninist ideal. And yet, mainstream international development theory/practice asserts that such comings-together are necessary. There is also evidence of pressure from the Vietnamese people for the ability to come together to form groups to address development problems. It is in this rapidly changing context that VNGOs are struggling to find a place.

This contradiction – the one between the Marxist-Leninist monopoly over associational life and the pressures both from outside agencies and from within the society to allow for civil society to form – is central to my study. If civil society (as promoted by development agencies) depends on the formation of independent voluntary associations and is positioned outside of the market and the state, and if it is (at least somewhat) in opposition to those two, then how can we explain the specific case of civil society in a Marxist-Leninist State with a growing capitalist market economy?

Ostensibly a purely economic project, đổi mới has had a huge effect on restructuring social relations in Vietnam. Through this process, State-society relations are being reinvented on a daily basis. VNGOs find themselves at a nexus in this re-formation of Vietnamese society. Through their daily practices, they must perform a complex dance between domestic and international ideas of development and civil society. In some sense, VNGOs are the canary in the coalmine; the State response to these organizations may prove the viability of future forms of civil society throughout Vietnamese society.

IV. Methodology

The research questions I have posed for myself are not ones that lend themselves to quick and precisely measured answers. Instead, they require a familiarity with context and subjects that comes from sustained interaction. This research will rely on interpretation of information that while subjective, is grounded in empirical study and experience. Ethnography, open interviews, and

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Nguyen Trong Chuan, et. Al. (2000) note that the entire realm of “social policy” in Vietnam is being reconceived under đổi mới.
discourse analysis of relevant texts is a strong combination of techniques to make the kinds of discoveries necessary to answer these questions.4

Lurking below the surface of each of my research questions is the issue of how meaning is made – meaning about “civil society,” meaning about State-society relations, and meaning about “development.” Ethnography is a good tool for relating everyday activity – what Herbert calls process – with the socially encoded meanings it enacts and/or creates. (Herbert 2000)

Ethnography as a technique is about making sense of people's making sense of events and opportunities that confront them in everyday life. (Herbert 2000, p. 551, after Ley, 1998) And though some of what we, as humans, do in our everyday routines consciously engages with larger social process and structures, much of it is not conscious but no less engaged. "Ethnographers unearth what the group takes for granted, and thereby reveal the knowledge and meaning structures that provide the blueprint for social action." (Herbert 2000) As an outsider who is looking from the inside, the ethnographer has opportunities for foregrounding the taken-for-granted and revealing connections and relationships not seen before. Markowitz (2001) asserts this in terms of understanding the development visions of local NGO as they are translated into mundane tasks, much like I hope to do in my research question #3:

Thus, the ethnographic staples of watching people as they work and asking them about what they do afford a starting point for seeing the ways development visions and policies are expressed in such mundane tasks as assisting people with microcredit applications, demonstrating the proper dosage of an antibiotic, or preparing a training workshop.

Of course, the mundane and everyday tasks take place within, are created by, and in turn recreate particular discursive environments. Interviews with government officials and international development agency workers will provide crucial background information about this discursive environment, as will bibliographic and other textual analysis work. In general, I have designed the fieldwork techniques to mutually support each other, providing me with the ability to triangulate on each question from different empirical perspectives. I listed each of my three research questions and how I hope to address them, below.

a. How are concepts of civil society being contested and reworked in Vietnam through discursive and material practices of VNGOs, international development agencies, Vietnamese and Western scholars, and the Vietnamese State?

The evidence that the concept of civil society is, in fact, being reworked is clear from Vietnamese writings on the subject and foreign donors attempts to influence the formation of VNGOs and VNGO-like organizations. In my study, I ask Vietnamese officials and international donors for their perspectives on VNGO formation, and look at their responses in light of media reports, donor reports, and other texts to reveal background discourse (most probably competing discourses) on civil society formation.

Within this discursive context, I will look at what VNGOs are saying and what they are actually doing.5 The form of work they undertake, their sources of funding, their relationships to

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4 According to Markowitz (2001), Gusterson calls these types of combinations of qualitative techniques “polymorphous engagement.”
both local and central State authorities will reveal their struggle for survival. The fate of the VNGOs will be an important indicator of how the concept of civil society is (re-)defined in Vietnam.

b. What does the formation of VNGOs reveal about the on-going negotiations over State-society relations in Vietnam, particularly in light of the đổi mới economic renovations?

A fundamental question that arises from the đổi mới reforms is what, exactly is the role of the Vietnamese State? Are VNGOs (and other forms of civil society) necessary in a Communist country with a market economy? Vietnamese official State reaction to VNGOs – and the various forms of VNGO-State interactions – will provide a window on broader themes in Vietnamese changing social structure.

To approach this question, I will rely a great deal on official expressions of the purposes of VNGOs, the trajectory of development in general, and the nature of State-society relations under đổi mới. Juxtaposed against these official pronouncements, I will place my own readings of the VNGOs’ understandings of themselves, their purposes, their visions of development and their hopes for their own futures in Vietnamese society.

c. What do the discourses that underpin VNGO and Vietnamese State conceptions of development reveal about the (hesitant) formation of civil society in Vietnam?

In classic Vietnamese Marxist conceptions of development, State-led industrial manufacturing was to drive the country into the modern (socialist) era. The change to a market economy (đổi mới) and the presence of hundreds of international development agencies in Vietnam has worked to undermine the purist communist approach, but many elements of that form of developmentalism remain. And yet, under the influence of powerful development actors (such as the World Bank), the Vietnamese State is facing increasing pressure to accept civil society as a crucial element in development.

Again, official statements and interviews with authorities will reveal the “party line” on development philosophy in Vietnam. But a closer look at subtexts, donor priorities and specific projects may reveal more about the official version of development.

Participant observation in the VNGOs and interviews with their staff will show me where their visions of development match with/diverge from the official line. If there is divergence, how the contested visions of development are managed will be a crucial piece of information in this study.

V. Research Plan

Study Site

I have chosen to site this study in Ho Chi Minh City, the largest city in Vietnam and the center of commerce for the country. Vietnam is (of course) a far from homogeneous geography. Great political, administrative, and social differences exist in different regions of the country. For the purposes of this study, it is important that I acknowledge that the administrative environment in Ho Chi Minh City can be much more restrictive to foreign researchers and to local and international

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5 Herbert (2000) notes that "the ability to contrast deeds and words provides ethnography with insights unallowable by any other methodology, even open-ended interviews."
NGOs than in Hanoi. (There are historical and political reasons for this.) This difference explains, in part, why a large majority of foreign research projects are carried on in the northern part of the country.

I have chosen to work in Ho Chi Minh City for a combination of personal, family and research-based reasons, not the least of which is my impression that a successful study in Ho Chi Minh City will be more indicative of the pertinent issues than similar work in Hanoi. I am of the opinion that in terms of the development sector, Ho Chi Minh City is perhaps more “typical” of the rest of Vietnam than is Hanoi. As the site of a large number of development agencies (which were, in previous years, required to open their offices there), Hanoian authorities have developed a more open and understanding attitude toward the development agencies – both foreign and domestic.

Ho Chi Minh City, on the other hand, struggles with the place development agencies (including VNGOs) should inhabit. It is, of course, this struggle that I wish to examine and document.

Alternative Study Site

During the first three months of my study, I will actively evaluate the possibilities for completing my research in Ho Chi Minh City. If after that time it seems that this study is not going to move forward, based on discussions with local scholars, institutions and perhaps government officials, I will move the study to Hanoi. I have good contacts there as well, and I understand the international community more completely; I am confident that the work would progress there with fewer problems, though perhaps with less payback than in Ho Chi Minh City.

Data Gathering I: Textual Data

To gather data for this study, I will use a) bibliographic and textual analysis, and b) multi-population and multi-sited ethnographic techniques.

Bibliographic and text-analysis work will concentrate on publications from international development agencies, official Vietnamese (State-run) press, legal documents, and related texts about development and civil society in Vietnam. I have located a small number of papers written by Vietnamese authors in English on the subject of civil society in Vietnam. I will continue to search out such texts, both in Vietnamese and English. I recognize that “texts” not only refer to documents, but also include other forms of representation, such as news accounts, cartoons, photographs, etc.

The Bibliographic and text data I collect will be crucial in establishing the discursive context for the ethnographic data that forms the heart of this study.

Data Gathering II: Ethnography and Official Interviews

Ethnographic techniques will rely on participant observation and qualitative semi-structured interviews with three different populations:

1. The staffs of up to three different Vietnamese NGOs;

2. Staff and/or spokespersons from international development agencies in Vietnam, such as the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program, U.S. Agency for International Development, and international NGOs;
3. Officials from relevant Vietnamese government agencies and/or the Vietnamese Communist Party.

This study design employs what Markowitz (2001) has termed “studying across” and “studying up” methods. Whereas most traditional (especially anthropological) ethnography has been conducted in a situation where the researcher is in a position of relative social and political power (“studying down”), I expect that my work will be conducted with social peers among VNGO and international development workers (“studying across”) and among government and party officials (“studying up”). That said, I am conscious of the fact that my presence is far from neutral, nor is my social/power standing uni-dimensional. There are serious ethical dilemmas involved in this form of ethnography just as there are in the more “traditional” methods. My study procedures for each of these populations follow.

**Vietnamese NGOs**: I will study up to three different local development NGOs in Ho Chi Minh City to explore the legal, social and theoretical basis for their work. For each of the subject organizations I will volunteer time to work for them in tasks they identify as useful (e.g., translations, document preparation, internet connectivity, etc.) While working for a period of several weeks, I will observe the workings of the organization. I will also interview staff about the mission, visions, funding and operations of the organization. (See sample interview topics and questions in the addendum.)

**Types of information sought.** Through these observations and interviews I will be looking for several different and seemingly disparate types of information. These will all come together (with data from the other two populations) to test against various conceptions of civil society. From the Vietnamese NGOs I will be looking for

- Their conception of “development” – what it is and what it means for Vietnam’s future;
- The mission and vision of their organization;
- What type of beneficiaries do they serve?
- The legal/administrative status and structure of their organization;
- The history of their organization;
- Funding sources and contracts with international agencies.
- Their familiarity with the current laws and procedures for legal operation in Vietnam. Are these laws and procedures seen as adequate or not? Conducive to development work or hindering?
International Development Agencies: I will conduct semi-structured and open-ended interviews with staff of major international development organizations. The organizations will fall into three major categories: multilateral agencies (e.g., UN agencies or the World Bank), bilateral agencies (e.g., US Agency for International Development – USAID – or Swedish Development Agency – SIDA), and international NGOs (e.g., Care or Save the Children). These organizations will add information about the political economy of Vietnamese NGOs as well as the vision and formation of international development discourse (to compare and contrast with local Vietnamese NGOs’ visions and aspirations). (See sample interview topics and questions in the addendum.)

I will employ a “snowball sampling” technique for identifying participants. I expect to conduct interviews in between 5 and 10 different agencies.

Types of information sought. I am looking for international actors’ perceptions of the situation affecting Vietnamese NGOs in three main areas:

- What are the linkages between Vietnamese NGOs and international development agencies? (I expect to find a range of linkages including contracts for work from the international agencies to the Vietnamese NGOs, training conducted by the international agencies for Vietnamese NGO staff, etc.)
- To what extent do these linkages affect the visions, missions, and status of the Vietnamese NGOs?
- What are the main issues (from the foreign agency staffers’ perceptions) for Vietnamese NGOs in their ability to “do development work” in Vietnam?

Vietnamese Government and Communist Party Officials: I will conduct semi-structured and open-ended interviews with official from Vietnamese Government and/or Communist Party organizations that have responsibilities that involve the legal, policy, or administrative status of Vietnamese NGOs. These officials will help me to understand the policy and administrative environment within which the Vietnamese NGOs operate. (See sample interview topics and questions in the addendum.)

I will employ a “snowball sampling” technique for identifying participants. I expect to conduct interviews in between 5 and 10 different offices.

Types of information sought. I am looking for two major types of information:

- What are the current laws governing the formation and operation of Vietnamese NGOs? What administrative procedures are Vietnamese NGOs required to adhere to in their operation?
- What is the general policy position of the Vietnamese government/Communist Party about the formation of Vietnamese NGOs? Is there a place for Vietnamese NGOs in the development plans for the country? Are there policy or ideological reasons why so few Vietnamese NGOs have formed to date?

VI. Data Analysis

Writing in the Field. Ethnographic and discourse analysis techniques necessarily rely heavily on interpretation of experiences and texts. Done well, they place the researcher at the center
of the research, obliterating any fiction of an Achemedian view of the world. They rely on the ability of the researcher to capture social interactions of many types – often as related by informants – and record them in a coherent fashion, recognizing that the researcher’s own interests and positionality are a fundamental part of the process. As Geertz (1973) says,

"what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to…"

After many months collecting data in Vietnam, I will be attempting to put together the information I have gathered into dissertation. In doing so I will be relying on my notes and my memory – both highly selective devices – for the analysis. I am greatly concerned about having sufficient data, both in terms of quality and quantity, when I begin the analysis and writing phase of this research. To address this concern I will dedicate a large part of my time “in the field” to writing. Having come to this decision, I am aware of both the pitfalls and the potentials of ethnographic writing. Again, Geertz (1973):

"[ethnographic] writings are themselves interpretations, and second and third order ones to boot...They are thus 'fictions;' fictions, in the sense that they are 'something made,' 'something fashioned' ... not that they are false, unfactual, or merely 'as if' thought experiments."

Even as “fictions” and “constructions,” ethnographies are powerful tools that give insight into human action, motivation, and meaning. I have, therefore, begun devising a set of scheduled writing tasks that I will adhere to during my fieldwork. I envision doing a significant amount of writing for each hour of participant observation or interviewing. This writing will take the form of field notes, summary reports, e-mail messages, theoretical briefs (to myself), and a number of other types of documents. These will create a bulk of foundational information – not just raw data, but preliminarily digested and organized “thick descriptions” and theoretical explorations – that I will use as the basis for the final analysis. Writing, as Harrington (2002, personal communication) is fond of saying, is “learning made manifest.” It is also a process of analysis in and of itself.

**Post-Fieldwork Analysis.** When my term of fieldwork is over, I will focus on a fuller analysis of my data and preliminary writings. Using “thick description” writing and discourse analysis techniques.

Much of my findings will be in the form of interpretations of my own experiences: participant observations, readings, interviews, etc. Through the analysis of various “texts,” discourse analysis attempts to uncover in Rose’s words, “the way a thing is thought, and the way we act on the basis of that thinking.” (Rose 2001) This work is necessarily intertextual, and my methods have been designed to provide me with a variety of texts to use in my analysis. Bringing these texts (both those I “find” and those I write) together with observations of material practices to reveal the nature of the discourse is the challenge for this kind of analysis. Discourse is powerful because it is productive. I will probe the data for clues to how particular discourses of development, civil society, and NGOs produce material effects, particular subjects, and (perhaps contesting) truth claims within Vietnamese society. And of course this work must be grounded in theory and historical and geographic particularity.
VII. Conclusion: A Case of “Traveling Theory”

As Vietnam struggles with the social implications of its đổi mới economic renovations and its striving for dreams of development, the issue of whether VNGOs will be allowed to thrive will continue to be central to questions of civil society development there. As preliminary looks at development agencies’ Vietnamese authors’ writings on civil society have shown, the concept is being imported into Vietnam in a piecemeal, highly selective manner. State pressure is precluding ideas of opposition while hesitantly allowing (or more precisely, not forbidding) ideas of non-profit service. This process is evidence of theory being re-worked “on the fly” for appropriate integration into a specific geographical context. The theory is traveling and being transformed in the process. The examination of VNGOs presents an opportunity to examine the larger issues of international development and civil society discourses and practice in a grounded, historically and geographically particular manner.

This specificity of the reception of the concept of civil society in Vietnam at this time, makes this empirical study a valuable one. We have not seen many specific case studies on how the theory of civil society has been incorporated into (and transformed by) existing ideas at such a micro level, as this study hopes to do. Therefore, the importance of this study is two-fold. First, the empirical study itself, looking at VNGOs as civil society-type organizations, struggling in Vietnam to find their place and to find their role, has its own intrinsic value. Secondly, seeing how this work is part of a larger discursive process for creating a new form of social institution in Vietnam – in other words, seeing how the theory is traveling and how it changes when it finally “lands” in the specific place of Vietnam, in the specific conditions of đổi mới, is an extremely important piece.

VIII. Contacts and Work Schedule

I expect this fieldwork to begin very slowly. Working in Vietnam requires clearances, which in turn require personal intervention by people who have nothing to gain by their intervention. This means that personal connections and networking are crucial. Establishing an institutional sponsor through these personal contacts is the first major step and may take months to accomplish.

I already have good contacts to the University of Social Sciences and Humanities through their Vietnamese Language program. My challenge there will be to enhance my contacts in their Geography department and in their Center for Poverty Reduction. I also have one outstanding contact in the National Institute for Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City, and one good contact with a progressive scholar in the Open University. I have tentative contacts in the International NGO world, and my experience in this realm should help solidify these contacts quickly.

With that in mind, I hope to work along the following general guidelines:

| July ‘03 | Arrive in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Begin Vietnamese language training. I expect this training to continue for most if not all of my stay in Vietnam. Begin networking among Vietnamese scholars, looking for a Vietnamese faculty sponsor and a sponsoring institution (such as a university). Begin networking among international NGOs and other contacts to locate VNGOs. No list or directory has been published to date. |
| Aug-Sep ‘03 | Visit Hanoi. (Perhaps give a presentation on “Civil Society” at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in response to a recent call for papers for... |
Continue networking tasks in Hanoi.
If I have a research sponsor (and clearances), begin interviewing international
corporations and government/party officials in Hanoi.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sept –Oct ‘03</th>
<th>Determine whether to continue work in Ho Chi Minh City or move to Hanoi.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall ‘03</td>
<td>When I have clearances, contact potential VNGOs to propose work. Begin</td>
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<td></td>
<td>participant observation of 3 VNGOs in sequence, 2-3 months each.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>When I have clearances, interview Vietnamese government and Party officials</td>
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<td></td>
<td>in the Ho Chi Minh City area.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When I have clearances, interview international development agency</td>
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<td></td>
<td>representatives in the Ho Chi Minh City area.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perhaps give a presentation on “Civil Society” or VNGOs at the Economics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University as part of their “Development Issues” colloquium series.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Winter ‘04</td>
<td>Second visit to Hanoi. Additional interviews with State and international</td>
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<tr>
<td>(after Tet)</td>
<td>agency officials.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spring ‘04</td>
<td>End fieldwork. Relocate for analysis/writing phase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I have identified three possibilities for funding the analysis/writing phase:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>fellowships at ANU (Canberra, Australia), NUS (Singapore), and UW.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spring ‘05</td>
<td>Dissertation defense</td>
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References


"Ethnography is an underused methodology in geography. This neglect is especially injurious to the discipline because ethnography provides unreplicable insight into the processes and meanings that sustain and motivate social groups. These processes and meanings vary across space, and are central to the construction and transformation of landscapes; they are both place-bound and place-making. Ethnography’s potential contribution to geography is thus profound. The aversion to ethnography may derive from three major criticisms frequently directed toward it: that it is unscientific; that it is too limited to enable generalization; and that it fails to consider its inherent representational practices. Considered responses to these critiques, however, restore ethnography’s significance for geographic study."


Studying globalization challenges disciplinary traditions that implicitly privileged a geographically demarcated field and classic models of ethnographic fieldwork. Understanding transnational processes calls for innovative, multilocal research strategies that both capture people's perceptions of change and analyze the interconnecting systems. Although the study of large, "southern" NGOs that link international donors and community-based groups offers one such strategy, it also generates a series of methodological complications associated with discerning the contours of the ethnographic field itself and the researcher's position in the volatile NGO sector. These issues are addressed in relation to the author's current fieldwork in Andean southern Peru.


Bibliography of Civil Society in Vietnam


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Addendum – Sample Interview Topics

Sample Semi-structured Interview Topics and Questions for Vietnamese Government and Communist Party Officials

1. Legal/administrative environment for Vietnamese NGOs.
   a. What is the legal and administrative status of Vietnamese non-government organizations?
   b. Can Vietnamese NGOs form and operate without formal affiliation to government agencies or mass organizations?
   c. What are their reporting responsibilities?
   d. What is their tax status? Are they tax-exempt?
   e. How can the legal/administrative environment be changed to improve conditions for Vietnamese NGOs?
   f. What is the status of the “new law” on Vietnamese NGOs?

2. Marxist/Leninist monopoly over public associations.
   a. Is it true that the Communist Party of Vietnam believes it should control all associations and groups?
   b. What is the Party’s position on non-affiliated NGOs in Vietnam?

3. Vietnamese NGOs under Doi Moi (renovation policies).
   a. Vietnamese NGOs did not exist before the beginning of Doi Moi. In what way has Doi Moi made it possible for Vietnamese NGOs to form?
   b. Under Doi Moi, some social services and social welfare programs have had to be reduced, awhile at the same time social problems have increased in some areas. Are Vietnamese NGOs a useful way of addressing these social needs? How so/why not?
   c. Currently there are very few Vietnamese NGOs. In the Philippines there are over 20,000 local NGOs. Do you expect that in the near future there will be a “blossoming” of NGOs in Vietnam as there have been in other countries?

4. International linkages of Vietnamese NGOs.
   a. What are the connections between Vietnamese NGOs and international development agencies (such as INGOs, multi-lateral agencies, bilateral agencies, etc.)?
   b. Is it beneficial for Vietnamese NGOs to develop links with international development agencies through conferences, training, funding, etc? Why or why not?

5. The concept of “civil society.”
   a. The Vietnamese term for “civil society” is xa hoi danh su. How is this term understood by the Vietnamese government/Party?
   b. What are the positive and the negative sides to this idea of civil society from the government/Party’s perspective?
   c. Does civil society have a place in Vietnam today?
   d. What is the government’s/Party’s position on the World Bank and UN’s promotion of civil society to enhance development in the country?
Addendum – Sample Interview Topics

Sample Semi-structured Interview Topics and Questions for

**Spokespeople for International Development Agencies**

6. **Legal/administrative environment for Vietnamese NGOs.**
   a. What is your understanding of the legal and administrative status of Vietnamese non-government organizations (VNGOs)?
   b. How can the legal/administrative environment be changed to improve conditions for Vietnamese NGOs?
   c. What is the status of the “new law” on Vietnamese NGOs?

7. **International Development Agencies’ (IDAs’) interest in Vietnamese NGOs.**
   a. Why are IDAs interested in promoting the formation of Vietnamese development NGOs?
   b. How does your agency interact with VNGOs now?
   c. Would you say that your agency actively promotes VNGOs?
   d. Does your agency award contracts to or do joint projects with VNGOs?
   e. How would you perceive your future ties with VNGOs if the legal/administrative environment improved?

8. **Vietnamese NGOs under Doi Moi (renovation policies).**
   a. Vietnamese NGOs did not exist before the beginning of Doi Moi. In what way has Doi Moi made it possible for Vietnamese NGOs to form?
   b. Under Doi Moi, some social services and social welfare programs have had to be reduced, awhile at the same time social problems have increased in some areas. Are Vietnamese NGOs a useful way of addressing these social needs? How so/why not?
   c. Currently there are very few Vietnamese NGOs. In the Philippines there are over 20,000 local NGOs. Do you expect that in the near future there will be a “blossoming” of NGOs in Vietnam as there have been in other countries?

9. **The concept of “civil society.”**
   a. How would you define/describe “civil society”?
   b. What are the positive and the negative sides to this idea of civil society from your agency’s perspective?
   c. Does “civil society” necessarily have a meaning of promoting “democratization,” or can purely service-provision organizations also be considered “civil society.”
   d. Likewise, must civil society organization advocate social needs with the government?
   e. Does civil society have a place in Vietnam today?
Addendum – Sample Interview Topics

Sample Semi-structured Interview Topics and Questions for
Staff of Vietnamese Development NGOs

10. General Background about the organization.
   a. What is the nature of your work? What kind of development do you do? Who are your beneficiaries?
   b. When was the organization formed?
   c. Who was (were) the founder(s)?
   d. What is the mission of the organization?
   e. What is the organization/s “vision of development?” What are you trying to achieve and for whom?

11. Interviewee’s information
   a. What is your position in the organization?
   b. What are your duties? What do you do on a daily basis?
   c. How long have you worked for this organization?
   d. Have you worked for any other NGOs or development organizations before coming here to work?
   e. How did you get trained for this kind of work?
   f. Why did you decide to work for this organization?
   g. What do you think “development” means? Why is it important for Vietnam to “develop”?

12. Legal/administrative environment for Vietnamese NGOs.
   a. What is your understanding of the legal and administrative status of Vietnamese non-government organizations (VNGOs)?
   b. How can the legal/administrative environment be changed to improve conditions for Vietnamese NGOs?
   c. What do you know about the “new law” on Vietnamese NGOs?
   d. How has the legal/administrative environment for VNGOs made possible and/or hampered your organization’s work?

13. Links with International Development Agencies’ (IDAs’).
   a. Do you think IDAs are interested in promoting the formation of Vietnamese development NGOs?
   b. How does your organization interact with IDAs now?
   c. Would you like to have more contact with IDAs? If so, what kind of relationship(s) would you like to develop?
   d. Does your organization have contracts from or do joint projects with IDAs?
Addendum – Sample Interview Topics

e. Are there legal/administrative “complications” in having contact with IDAs?
f. How would you perceive your future ties with IDAs if the legal/administrative environment improved?

14. Links with other Vietnamese Development NGOs.

a. Do you know about other Vietnamese NGOs in this city? Elsewhere?

b. Do you have regular formal or informal contact with these VNGOs? If so, what form does this contact take? If not, why not and would you like more contact?

c. Are there legal/administrative “complications” in having contact with other VNGOs?

15. Vietnamese NGOs under Doi Moi (renovation policies).

a. Vietnamese NGOs did not exist before the beginning of Doi Moi. In what way has Doi Moi made it possible for Vietnamese NGOs to form?

b. Under Doi Moi, some social services and social welfare programs have had to be reduced, awhile at the same time social problems have increased in some areas. Are Vietnamese NGOs a useful way of addressing these social needs? How so/why not?

c. Currently there are very few Vietnamese NGOs. In the Philippines there are over 20,000 local NGOs. Do you expect that in the near future there will be a “blossoming” of NGOs in Vietnam as there have been in other countries?

16. The concept of “civil society.”

a. Do you know/how would you define/describe the term “civil society”?

b. What are the positive and the negative sides to this idea of civil society from your perspective?

c. Does civil society have a place in Vietnam today?