

Civil Society in Vietnam. Social Organisations and Approaches to New Concepts

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Summary

The concept of civil society is not familiar in the Vietnamese context, which is based on Marxist-Leninist concepts in the official political terminology of the one-party state maintained by the Communist Party. However, the term is increasingly being employed by scholars and practitioners, and even the state is beginning to open up to its use. The reasons for the change in the way the concept is perceived are partly due to international debates, the increasing role played by non-profit organisations and the change in Party policy, accepting the necessity of social work and education by organisations outside the state administration.

The Civil Society Index Project (CSI) is based on a common methodology developed by CIVICUS, a research NGO. This type of project has been carried out in almost 50 countries since 2004. The article presents the rationalities and methodology behind the project and the outcomes in Vietnam.

Vietnamese society, where social organisations have gained influence since the introduction of the reforms – called *doi moi* – in the 1980s. These reforms have grown from limited reforms made to introduce a market economy to general reforms that have spread to areas outside the strictly economic sphere, including reforms of social and political spheres. As one Vietnamese researcher recently put it, the economic conversion of the country marks a change in its mentality: whereas the state used to be the only mobiliser of resources, society as a whole has now become a driving force.¹ There is one key issue that has not undergone any change as yet, however: Vietnam is still a one-party state, which implies certain limitations with respect to organisational life.

The political character of the state is important for all types of social organisations, and the interaction with Party rule creates a special framework for social organisations that is different from those found in more democratic societies. On the other hand, it is argued here that there is a considerable civil society in Vietnam – one that also has quite an important impact. This claim has been refuted by a number of scholars who stick to the classic definition of civil society as “organisations separated from the state (and Party)”. The definition applied in this article is different, however, as it would make little sense to talk about social organisations without including those which have the approval of the Party-state as part of civil society because they are a very important and inseparable part of society, viz. the mass organisations. A society that failed to include at least some of the state-sponsored social organisations – called “socio-political organisations” in Vietnam – would be an amputated society. The definition of civil society has been broadened here to include all types of organisations and initiatives, whether they are state-sponsored or not, as this seems to be more appropriate in order to understand the character of civil society. However, it is important to analyse the extent to which the various organisations (initiatives or actions) are part of the present mainstream thinking of how society should develop or whether they create challenges to the present situation.

The primary aim of this article is to provide an overview of civil society in Vietnam as it is understood in that country and also an idea of where Vietnamese society is currently heading. Second, it aims to discuss some differences between Vietnamese perceptions of civil society and the perceptions of foreign scholars. The article takes the Civil Society Index study for Vietnam as its starting point. The CSI study will be outlined to help readers understand the methodology used.

The approach presented here perceives society on one hand as the social organisations and their activities, including pressure exerted on the state in direct and indirect ways, and the state on the other hand attempting to guide, lead and

¹ Le Viet Thai, “Planning Reform in the Process of Integration into the Global Economy. Factors relating to civil social organizations.” Presentation at the People’s Participation Working Group meeting “Overview of the Legal Environment Affecting CSOs”, Hanoi, 29.5.2007.

restrict social organisations in their bid to be part of society. While the state partly sets the framework for social organisations, it also responds to demands from organisations and society in general. The state is not perceived to be monolithic, but as a power that modifies and balances some of the contradictory forces and trends in society. Civic actions have been very strong on occasion, but most activities take place within the existing societal framework.

2 The Civil Society Index study in Vietnam

One of the most important sources of information for this article was the "Civil Society Index" study (CSI), which was carried out in Vietnam in 2005-06.² The theoretical understanding of civil society outlined in this article is based on the approach used in the CSI study. The survey allowed the definition of civil society to be adapted to the concrete contexts in each country. As there are many different definitions of civil society which lead to different analyses, the CSI study in Vietnam will be presented below. Accordingly, we shall not go into detail as regards the various other definitions and approaches that exist.

The CSI study is part of a worldwide project analysing civil society at a national level that providing results from various countries based on a common analytical tool to facilitate cross-country analyses. To date, reports from a total of 45 countries have been completed under the initiative of CIVICUS.³ The project started in 1999 and the reports from the 45 countries were finished in 2006-07.⁴ One of the weaknesses is that the individual country CSI projects depends on organizations interested to take the lead in the organization of the study, and the possibility to find funding at the national level. The final reports are of different quality and details. Comparative analyses of the country reports are still conducted by the CIVICUS CSI team in Johannesburg. In Vietnam the research NGO Vietnam Institute for Development Studies was the lead agency, supported financially and practically by UNDP Vietnam and the Dutch INGO SNV.⁵

The lack of broader information about civil society in Vietnam led to the decision to support the implementation of a Civil Society Index study (CSI) based on a methodology outlined by CIVICUS. The objectives of the CSI studies are to assess the state of civil society and generate relevant knowledge of civil society at the

² A short version summarising the CSI study, "Filling the Gap – The Emerging Civil Society in Vietnam", was written by this author and published by UNDP and SNV in Hanoi. The summary also served as a source of information for this article.

³ "CIVICUS: The World Alliance for Citizen Participation" is a research and action NGO based in South Africa. The country report can be found at www.civicus.org under the heading "projects/CSI project".

⁴ The first volume of the study includes country profiles from the 45 completed country reports published in May 2007. See V. Finn Heinrich (ed.) (2007), *CIVICUS Global Survey of the State of Civil Society. Volume 1. Country profiles*. Bloomsfield: Kumarian Press.

⁵ The author acted as an international expert on civil society during the CSI project.

national level by engaging civil society stakeholders. In an action-orientated process between the stakeholders and the governments, the goals are to generate a self-understanding of civil society, to strengthen civil society and to generate discussion about the state of civil society and ways of improving its situation. In each country, a national Stakeholder Assessment Group (SAG) was established as a core feedback mechanism for the national team organising the study. The SAG in Vietnam consisted of twelve members comprising eight representatives from civil society organisations, two researchers and two members of the government administration. In Vietnam as well as in other countries where basic research about civil society is still limited, a shortened version of the methodology was applied, viz. the Civil Society Index Study – Shortened Assessment Tool (CSI-SAT).⁶

The national team of co-ordinators and researchers met with the Stakeholder Assessment Group to discuss and adjust the project approach and methodology in May 2005. The core methodology consists of identifying the conditions of civil society with respect to four dimensions: 1) the structure of civil society; 2) the socio-economic environment for civil society; 3) the values of civil society; and 4) the impact of civil society activities. CIVICUS has developed seventy-four indicators to be assessed and discussed by the SAG in accordance with the methodology. The SAG produces a score for each indicator in a predefined scoring matrix and when taken together, the scoring of the four dimensions constitutes a civil society “diamond” representing the strengths and weaknesses of the four dimensions. Each indicator is given a score from 0 to 3 and the indicators are aggregated to create a four-sided figure, the “diamond”. The process took place in several rounds, with a preliminary report outlined by the researchers before the first scoring and the full country report written between and after the scoring meetings. The final diamond reflects both the information and data collected in the report and the scoring of the SAG.

The approach suggested by CIVICUS for analysing civil society may appear fairly simple and clear-cut. However, the simple approach has an epistemological background deriving from different approaches to civil society developed in the academic discussions conducted over the last few decades. The objective of the Civil Society Index (CSI) is to be a tool and a conceptual framework for assessing the state of civil society at the present time and at a national level through a framework that seeks to accommodate cultural variations in different conceptualisations of civil society, while still adhering to basic, universal values. It

⁶ Most of the surveys are full CSI studies, whereas the CSI-SAT provides a less elaborate initial study. The main differences between the two types are that the shortened version (SAT) does not include a national survey of CSOs, there are no organised regional discussion fora for CSOs and no surveys of press reports about CSOs are conducted. It is important to carry out these three elements in a second round or in other studies on civil society in Vietnam. The CSI-SAT study is mainly based on secondary sources, fieldwork by the researchers for other projects and reports from various organisations.

strives to avoid Eurocentric analysis by pointing to the fact that collective citizen action is a feature common to all societies and as such is perceived as an adequate concept for describing the universal reality, regardless of its philosophical roots.⁷ At the same time, the methodology is also meant to generate self-understanding in a specific national context and to be a tool for cross-country analyses.

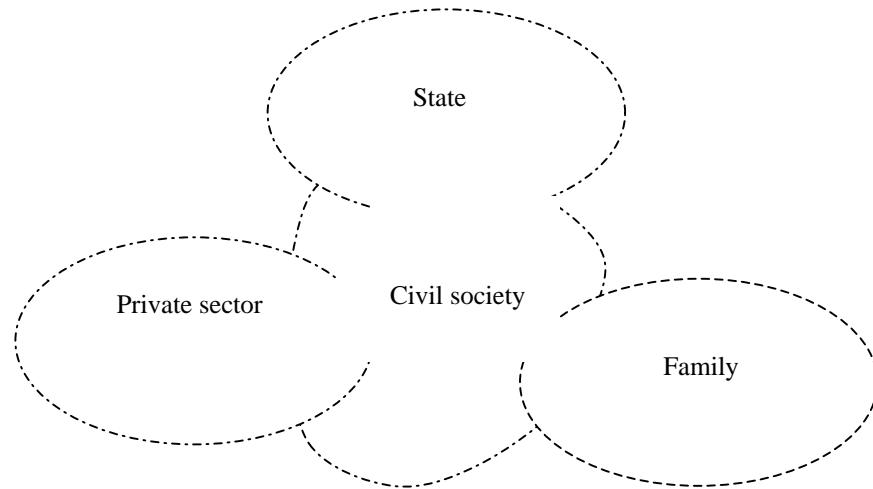
Civil society has been defined as *the arena outside of the family, the state and the market where people associate to advance common interests*.⁸ The significant point about this definition – graphically presented in figure 1 – is that it is broad and open, and it emphasises the fuzzy borders between civil society and the various sectors, which is of central importance in a country like Vietnam where the associational sector closely *interacts* with the state. Civil society is not *separated* from the state, as some definitions suggest. It also aims to take account of the *functions* of organisations rather than their forms, which is to say that it includes any efforts to support activities and values promoting the well-being of the citizens through charity, philanthropy or other means. The definition is broader and more flexible than others that only include organisations or associations as the core of civil society because informal groups and coalitions are also counted. This expands the definition of civil society beyond a purely associational sector to include broader activities “to advance common interests”. The CSI assessment based on the predefined questions is in itself historical, a snapshot of society taken at a given moment in time. The SAG assessment provided an approach to civil society based on the perception of the stakeholders. The idea of this methodology is to make the stakeholders agree as much as possible through the discussions; such agreement was not possible in a number of respects, however, and the scores differed considerably. In the Vietnam study, the history and changes over the last decade were considered to be of central importance to any understanding of the emerging civil society and were therefore included in separate chapters.⁹

⁷ CIVICUS (2005), *Civil Society Index – Shortened Assessment Tool (CSI-SAT). A Guide for CSI-SAT* Implementing Agency; CIVICUS; Heinrich, Volkhart Finn & Mahi Khallaf (2006), *Assessing Civil Society in Cyprus and Across the World – The Civil Society Index*. CIVICUS. Available from: <www.civicus.org/new/default.asp> [Accessed on 25.6.2007]; Anheier, Helmut K. (2004), *Measurement, Evaluation, Policy*. London and Sterling VA: CIVICUS and Earthscan.

⁸ CIVICUS (2005), op. cit.

⁹ Norlund, Irene, Dang Ngoc Dinh et al. (2006), *The Emerging Civil Society. An Initial Assessment of Civil Society in Vietnam*. Hanoi: CIVICUS, VIDS, SNV, UNDP. Available from: <http://www.civicus.org/new/media/CSI_Vietnam_report%20.pdf>

A shorter version of the project is also available: Norlund, Irene, “Filling the Gap – The Emerging Civil Society in Vietnam”, Hanoi: UNDP/SNV, January 2007 <www.undp.org.vn>

Figure 1: The fuzzy boundaries of civil society's arena

3 A brief history of CSOs

Civil society in Vietnam was limited and weak before the *doi moi* period (“renovation”), which put the first reforms in place with which to create a market-orientated society. This was done by the Communist Party in 1986, which was under pressure to address acute poverty and liberalise the collective landholdings. As society opened up, the private sector was permitted to operate besides the state sector. Foreign investments and development aid encouraged the reemergence of a private sector. After the collapse of the USSR and the Eastern European regimes that had contributed to the Vietnamese economy in the late 1980s, Vietnam was forced to re-orientate its foreign relations very quickly. When the USA and Vietnam normalised their relations with each other in 1994 after the twenty-year embargo that followed the American war, the door opened up for closer relations to allies of the USA, both in Asia and Europe. Consequently, European and Japanese development agencies and the multilateral banks increased development co-operation during the early and mid-1990s. Organisational life changed during this period, with an increasing number of international NGOs (“INGOs”) setting up offices in Vietnam and with the number of small local NGOs multiplying. Moreover, the space for local initiatives broadened both for grass-roots organisations and mass organisations, often serving the role as partners in development projects at the community level, as well as for new professional organisations and community-based organisations (CBOs).

4 Civil society organisations in Vietnam

The Civil Society Index (CSI) report for Vietnam highlights a number of features of civil society and a range of new insights. In brief, civil society can be characterised as being very broad-based due to numerous civil society organisations (CSOs). Not all organisations are deeply anchored in civil society, however. Public-sector employees are automatically members of at least one mass organisation, for example.¹⁰ Another characteristic is that civil society is segmented into various organisations with different functions. On one hand, there are the “old” mass organisations and professional associations, which are broadly accepted as an integrated part of society, and on the other, there is a “new type” of organisation that developed in the 1990s, but which is not fully recognised by society yet, such as NGOs, CBOs and other types of informal organisations. Many types of organisations currently exist in Vietnam, but four main types are particularly significant at the moment: mass organisations (MOs), professional associations (PAs), Vietnamese NGOs (VNGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs). All of these organisations are regarded as being part of Vietnamese civil society and are collectively called “civil society organisations” (CSOs). The core activities of most CSOs are directed towards poverty reduction, humanitarian relief, self-organisation and professional development; little CSO effort is directed towards advocacy. On the whole, civil society is an important area of activity for citizens in Vietnam, but it is significant that it lacks vitality in some respects and areas, with advocacy being one of the weakest. The environment for civil society is one of the main factors for its relative lack of vitality as the conditions for forming organisations are restrictive and there are limitations in activities concerning advocacy.

Which organisations truly belong to civil society is a frequently discussed topic. At one end of the spectrum, the classic definitions do not accept the mass organisations as part of civil society because they are Party-sponsored and to some extent part of the Party structure. It is argued here that they should be considered as part of civil society after all, which is due to their importance for social life, especially at the grass-roots level, and they should be accepted for this contribution to organising people at local levels (district, commune) and the grass-roots level. Moreover, it is often felt that the local organisations do not follow the central rules very strictly. It is unrealistic to talk about social organisations without including the mass organisations, although they are becoming increasingly independent at the lower level because of funding from non-state sources. In the ongoing discussion of the new Law on Associations, one of the heated issues of discussions in 2006 was

¹⁰ The five mass organisations (or socio-political organisations) include the Women’s Union, the trade unions, the Youth Union, the Farmers’ Association and the Association of Veterans. The Fatherland Front, which is the umbrella organisation of the mass organisation and other organisations, is also counted as a mass organisation.

whether the mass organisations ought to forfeit their privileged position and become “associations”. Potentially, they may become a more powerful force of change.

At the other end of the spectrum of civil society, there are a number of organisations that were not dealt with much in the CSI study. One group consists of faith-based organisations that are important in the country, which has several large religions, but these bodies have not been subject to much research yet. Other types of organisations include the neighbourhood groups in the cities, which are in the same situation as the faith-based organisations.¹¹ Research on other CSOs is not impressive, but some information is available in the CSI study.¹²

The discussion in Vietnam continued after the completion of the CSI study, both at state-financed research institutes and among the NGOs. The criteria often mentioned as being important for CSOs usually include characteristics such as the following:

- non-state and non-market
- voluntary organisations
- self-management
- self-finance
- non-profit organisations.

Very few organisations can live up to these criteria and some Vietnamese researchers find that the mass organisations cannot qualify as part of civil society. Some researchers have attempted to classify the organisations according to other criteria, like membership: the traditional mass organisations, professional organisations and community-based organisations all have members, whereas NGOs, research institutions with an NGO status, education, training, social funds, charity funds and non-profit companies do not. Faith-based organisations, informal groups and international NGOs (INGOs) are different from the other types of organisations, which explains why they are grouped separately.¹³

¹¹ Some time after the completion of the CSO report, David W.H. Koh published a book that deals with the neighbourhood groups and Party relations at grass-roots level in Hanoi (*Wards of Hanoi* (2006), Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies). In recent years, several conferences about rituals and religious organisations have been organised which will surely shed more light on this aspect in the near future as well.

¹² The first large study of issue-orientated organisations was carried out by Bui The Cuong, Nguyen Quang Vinh and Jörg Wischermann in 2000. They have published a number of reports and articles, one of which can be found as Annex 5 in the CSI report (2006), *The Emerging Civil Society*, op. cit. Other studies are referred to in the CSI report. A recent contribution to the analysis of civil society in Vietnam was made by Joseph Hannah in his PhD dissertation (2007), *Local Non-Government Organizations in Vietnam: Development, Civil Society and State-Society Relations*, Department of Geography, University of Washington, Seattle.

¹³ Presentation by Nguyen Thi Bich Diep: “Overview of the Legal Framework for CSOs” at the People’s Participation Working Group meeting, Hanoi, 29.5.2007.

5 Vietnamese civil society from a quantitative perspective

As mentioned previously, the CSI study's categorisation is mainly based on the function of the organisations. There is a broad overlap between the activities of the organisations, which makes it difficult to distinguish the different types of organisations on the grounds of their daily functions. For instance, the Vietnamese NGOs – and the INGOs – often use the mass organisations to carry out poverty-reducing and educational activities. The Red Cross is also one of the large organisations, but its membership often overlaps with that of certain other mass organisations. Another example is the credit and saving groups that are often supported by the Farmers' Association or Women's Union. Business organisations are both independent organisations and part of the Women's Union, for instance. The purpose of most of the organisations is to support the livelihoods of people in general and in particular poor, disadvantaged people in various ways.

There is no data available that might allow a clear assessment of Vietnamese civil society to be made; however, in quantitative terms, its dimensions are huge if mass organisations and organised faith-based organisations are included. If they are left out of the calculation, civil society may well appear meagre, but in reality this is not quite the case because of the spread of rural collaborative groups in recent years and the formation of innumerable informal groups, which pursue the aim of improving people's livelihoods as well as recreational, spiritual and educational ends. Nonetheless, it cannot alter the fact that the mass organisations are the largest organisations in the country (see table 1).

Table 1: Main categories of civil society organisations

Category	Types of organisations included in category	Relation to the state	Vietnamese definition	Membership/ number of organisations
Mass organisations	1. Women's Union 2. Farmers' Association 3. Youth Organisation 4. War Veterans' Association 5. Worker's Organisation (trade union)	Fatherland Front	Socio-political organisations	1. 12 million 2. 8 million 3. 5 million 4. 2 million 5. 4.3 million
Professional associations and umbrella organisations	1. Umbrella organisations like the Red Cross, the Vietnam Union of Science and Technology	1. Fatherland Front 2. Registered with an umbrella organisation. Central or	1. Socio-professional associations 2. Social and professional associations; VUAL has	1. The Red Cross has 5 million members and VUSTA has around 1 million members

	Associations (VUSTA), the Vietnam Union of Arts and Literature (VUAL), the Agricultural Co-operative Alliance, etc. 2. Professional associations	provincial organisations	some belong to the NGOs	associations in every province 2. 320 national PAs and around 2,000 local ones
VNGOs	Charity organisations Research NGOs Consultancy NGOs Educational NGOs Health NGOs	Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA), Line Ministry, Provincial or District People's Committees	Social organisations; NGOs	320 organisations identified in 2000; 200 social funds; 800 science and technology organisations
Community-based organisations	Service- and development- or livelihood-orientated; credit and saving groups; faith-based organisations; neighbourhood groups; family clans; recreational groups	Indirect affiliation to other organisation or Civil Code. Many are not registered.	1.Rural collaborative groups; 2.Faith-based organisations; 3.Neighbourhood groups; 4.Family clans	12 million members of credit groups; rural collaborative groups 1-200,000; No figures are available for any other informal groups.

The faith-based organisations include Buddhists (7-9 million), Catholics (6-8 million), Protestants (600,000), Hoa Hao (1.5 million), Cao Dai (1.1 million) and Muslims (90,000). At least 550 international NGOs operate predominantly in Vietnam. In 2006, 2,700 grant projects were supported with a total of 216 million USD.¹⁴ However, it is still not clear if these organisations are part of Vietnamese civil society or not. Some maintain that they are not part of civil society because they are foreign-based and they do not have a membership base in Vietnam. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the INGOs represent important role models for some of the local NGOs and also provide funding for them. Most of the staff are Vietnamese, but from a Vietnamese perspective they are regarded as funding organisations rather than implementing organisations. In the discussion related to the draft of the Law on Associations in 2006, it was a debated issue whether INGOs

¹⁴ Report from COMINGO Annual Meetings with INGOs, Hanoi, 8.2.2007.

should have the right to be established in Vietnam by foreigners who have resided in the country for a long time. The issue has still not been settled.

6 The four dimensions of civil society

6.1 Structure

An examination of the current *structure* of civil society in Vietnam reveals that it is broad-based and comprises a large number of groups, organisations and associations. 74% of Vietnamese citizens are members of at least one organisation and 62% are members of more than one CSO. The mass organisations are in some cases less participatory in the sense that people may be members without being actively involved.

One of the few representative surveys carried out in Vietnam that questioned people's perceptions, the World Values Survey (WVS) came to a similar – even higher – result in its first survey conducted in 2001. On average, each person was found to be a member of 2.3 groups in Vietnam, according to the study (see table 2).

Table 2: Membership of various organisations and social groups in Vietnam, China and Singapore, 2001

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

Source: R. Dalton (2006) and World Values Surveys 1999-2002.¹⁵ The WVS is based on 1,000 interviews – rather a limited number, which means that very low figures are less reliable/representative.

¹⁵ The WVS – Vietnam can be found at <<http://www.democ.uci.edu/democ/archive/vietnam.htm>>. The survey is based on interviews with 1,000 respondents.

The number of people belonging to organisations is very high in Vietnam compared with countries like Singapore and China, which have comparable types of governance. In the China survey, the interviewees belonged to 0.39 organisations on average, while the number for Singapore was 0.86.¹⁶ These figures indicate a significant difference between the three countries: the government in Vietnam accepts and encourages certain kinds of organisations more than its neighbours do.¹⁷

The SAG came to the conclusion that civil society in Vietnam is broad-based, but not very deep or strong. Overall, the breadth of civil society was felt to be considerable because of widespread organisations at all levels and in all provinces; only the remote areas inhabited by ethnic minorities have few organisations. The depth of civil society was judged to be rather low because membership of organisations is not considered voluntary in many cases and members are often not very active. One of the indicators in the World Values Survey (WVS) included the level of political activism in Vietnam. Not surprisingly, this was very low: less than two per cent of the WVS sample had taken part in political activities, although a slightly higher share of six per cent said they had signed petitions.¹⁸ Charitable giving is considerable for a poor country and many initiatives take place both within and outside the state as it is a tradition to support people in need. The SAG gave this indicator a high score in terms of quantity, but a fairly low score in terms of quality. Voluntary work is also widespread in the organisations. The assessment of voluntarism was high in terms of the number participating, but again surprisingly low in quality. A general weakness was identified, namely the relative lack of umbrella organisations that can give effective support to smaller organisations, as well as the lack of informal networks. There are weak relations between various organisations belonging to the same type, and there are even weaker relations between organisations of different types, even though they often work together or in parallel on projects on the ground. The availability of financial resources was judged to be at an average level, whereas human resources, technical resources and infrastructure available for organisations were deemed to be low.

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

¹⁶ Russ Dalton (2006), Civil Society, Social Capital and Democracy. In: R. Dalton and Doh Chull Shin (eds.), *Citizens, Democracy and Markets Around the Pacific Rim*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁷ Dalton (2006), op. cit.

¹⁸ According to the WVS survey.

6.2 The environment for civil society

The assessment of the environment for civil society is based on seven issues: political context, basic freedoms, socio-economic context, socio-cultural context, legal environment, state-civil society relations and, finally, state-private sector relations. In the CSI report, data on the socio-political environment is partly based on international comparative indexes for issues related to the levels of governance, corruption and political rights. This created a considerable debate in the SAG.¹⁹ The socio-economic context was based on a number of economic criteria that are available from numerous reports from the government and donors. The socio-cultural indicators were mainly based on the World Values Survey – Vietnam as there is little other national data available on this type of information. Information about the legal environment came from local studies in Vietnam. Likewise, information about the relations between civil society and the state and between civil society and the private sector was based on various studies carried out directly in Vietnam.

The Stakeholder Assessment Group ascertained a number of weaknesses in civil society, but also identified various strengths. It found, for instance, that “political rights” in Vietnam still have some limitations, though not as many as foreign sources that claim that Vietnam is “not a free country” tend to say.²⁰ A core point made within the group was that citizens have the right to vote freely. There was, however, broad agreement that political competition is limited, since only one party is permitted. According to the SAG, rule of law is still only partially established in the country despite years of administrative and judicial reforms, and corruption is substantial in the public sector (as well as other sectors not included in the discussion). State effectiveness is assessed as being quite good in spite of fairly low scores on the international comparative data; decentralisation was awarded quite a high grade, with a considerable portion of state funds being distributed at the provincial level (44%). The distribution of funds at lower levels is less impressive, however.

Even though the *basic civil rights* (i.e. freedom of assembly, expression and association) are guaranteed by the Vietnamese constitution in principle, the SAG pointed out various violations of basic rights and consequently gave this indicator a moderate score. Press freedom was an issue of debate, but most found that the degree of liberty in this field was considerable, even if there are sensitive topics that are not discussed. This finding is in sharp contrast to international sources like Freedom House, which ranks Vietnam very low in this regard.

¹⁹ The discussions in the SAG took place at three full-day meetings during 2005. Some of the SAG members were very hesitant about using the large-scale comparative international databases on governance as these are based on criteria suitable for Western countries.

²⁰ See Freedom House, for instance. Its website is at <<http://www.freedomhouse.org>>.

The *socio-economic context* is assessed on the basis of a number of indicators – eight in all. Vietnam is still a poor country, with a per-capita GDP of approximately 640 USD²¹ despite rapid growth and significant poverty reduction over the last decade. The situation is generally stable and free from major economic or social crises, and inequalities are moderate (below the benchmark of a Gini co-efficient of 0.4).²² The literacy rate is very high from an international perspective. On the negative side, the IT infrastructure is still below the benchmark established by the CSI.²³ Other negative points include the poverty level and the presence of some religious and ethnic conflicts. Overall, however, this indicator obtained a fairly good score because of the relatively high economic and political stability and the high rate of literacy.

The *socio-cultural context* in Vietnam is defined in terms of norms and attitudes that may be conducive to civil society, including “trust”, “tolerance” and “spiritedness”. These indicators are not very familiar to the Vietnamese public, but are often used by researchers to assess the context for democratic values.²⁴ Trust is seen as the glue that holds society together through networks and associational activity. The WVS trust indicators were accepted as a benchmark for the CSI study. The general question raised in the survey concerns the extent to which the interviewee thinks that most people are trustworthy (see table 3).

Table 3: Level of trust in various countries

Country	Level of trust as a percentage
China	52%
Japan	42%
Taiwan	41%
Vietnam	41%
Canada	39%
USA	35%
Korea	27%
Singapore	17%
Philippines	6%

The relatively high level of trust in Vietnam – 41 per cent – might be due to several reasons, even if the pattern among the countries does not provide a clear conclusion. Society's basic values are still largely orientated towards the family and a close circle of friends and relatives, a situation which might raise the level of trust higher

²¹ MPI (2006) SEDP 2006-10, Hanoi, March 2006, p. 19.

²² According to the Vietnamese Living Standard Surveys, inequality has not changed considerably: The 1992 Gini co-efficient was 0.34 and increased only a little to 0.35 in 2002. However, there is still a major problem of inequality between the Kinh people and the ethnic minorities, and the situation seems to be getting more aggravated.

²³ This point has developed very quickly in recent years and might be less of a constraint.

²⁴ Robert Putnam is one of the proponents of trust as an important factor for the coherence of society.

than, for instance, in post-Cold War Eastern European countries, where the level is generally very low.²⁵ The level of trust seems to be higher in general in countries influenced by Confucianism, although this is less so in South Korea and Singapore. Beyond the family-orientated and Confucian culture, an organisational culture involving Party and mass organisations and educational institutes has created a new layer of “comradeship” in certain countries that may also add to a relatively high level of trust. In China, for instance, a high level of trust prevails. One finding from the WVS in Vietnam indicates that people who belong to organisations do not have a higher level of trust than those who are not members, which means that trust – which is often translated as social capital – does *not* promote democratic values, but rather those of the existing political culture.²⁶

*Tolerance*²⁷ was deemed to be at a moderate level in society. With regard to various types of “social evils” like prostitution, drug addiction and homosexuality, however, the tolerance level was found to be low. The *spiritedness*²⁸ indicator investigates people’s attitudes to issues like taking bribes and falsification of taxes. 94 and 88 per cent respectively rejected these activities as “not justifiable”. However, the level of spiritedness recorded by the WVS appears to be higher than in reality, given how widespread corruption is; it perhaps demonstrates a discrepancy between people’s perception of their own values and the real situation. Different definitions of bribes/corruption are another possible explanation of the gap. The giving of gifts is commonplace in Vietnam and is an accepted practice in its society, but is considered a form of corruption by international standards.

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

²⁵ Dalton (2006), op. cit.

²⁶ This finding is specific to Vietnam. The authors of the WVS take it as proof of the possibility that trust does not necessarily lead to an increase in democracy.

²⁷ Tolerance is defined as the levels of acceptance of people of different ethnicity, religion, nationality and various forms of social or physical disabilities.

²⁸ Spiritedness is defined as the extent to which citizens disapprove of violations of public norms, like tax avoidance or free-riding.

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

The mass organisations are clearly not autonomous vis-à-vis the state, but their grass-roots groups enjoy more autonomy than those at higher levels. As for the VNGOs, professional associations, CBOs and even faith-based organisations, it was a point of discussion whether the state actually interferes much in reality despite its intention to do so. Certain SAG members found that their organisations were able to operate without much state interference. Most organisations have some sort of relationship with the state because of the entangled nature of societal structures. It was also argued that state interference protected organisations if facing difficulties like unjust treatment by local authorities or other organizations. By and large, the point is that “independence” from the state is not a major concern for most organisations. With respect to an indicator of co-operation with the state and financing of CSOs by the state, CSOs are the mass organisations that co-operate most with the state and obviously receive the most support from it, but these bodies still have to search for other funding options. Even VUSTA under the Fatherland Front is only partially financed by the state budget. Usually, the professional associations and the VNGOs only receive support from the state if they carry out certain tasks that have been agreed upon. The connections between the state and the CSOs are complicated and cannot merely be seen as an outcome of co-operation or non-co-operation in the context of the Vietnamese political culture. The indicators concerning “dialogue between the state and the CSOs” and “state co-operation and support for CSOs” were both judged to be at a below-average level.

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

6.3 The “values” of civil society

The analysis of the values of CSOs and how they promote values in society covers seven issues: democracy, transparency, tolerance, non-violence, gender equity, poverty reduction and environmental sustainability. The data for this dimension caused more problems than the data on the two former dimensions because values and culture generally receive less attention than the socio-economic and legal arenas, particularly when it comes to the internal conditions within organisations. Some general statistical data is available about organisations, such as data on leadership and gender, but case studies and project reports were used more

frequently because of a lack of general data. By and large, this left more space for the SAG members to influence the scoring by drawing on their own opinions and experiences. The SAG's assessment stressed poverty reduction and gender equity as strong values in a civil society, but it did not emphasise transparency.

With regard to *democracy* within organisations, the mass organisations practise "democratic centralism", which means they hold democratic elections, but that elected leaders also have to be approved (or even pre-approved) by the higher levels. The professional associations usually stage democratic elections, but Party members may exercise some influence on the outcomes. VNGOs have different types of leadership, but they usually focus on individuals and generally do not have a large membership base (there are a few exceptions to this rule, however). In general, CBOs hold democratic elections, but their leaders are often people from mass organisations, the administration or the village leadership. This mixed picture led the SAG members to award widely differing scores, depending on their definitions of democracy; some of them thought "democratic centralism" was democratic, while others did not. It was broadly agreed that the state decides on the framework for democracy. Generally speaking, democracy is viewed in a positive light by most organisations (though not all of them). The SAG did not find that the CSOs promote democracy very much in society, however.

Corruption within civil society is judged to be less common than in society at large; nevertheless, civil society is not free of corruption – a "petty culture of corruption" is widespread throughout Vietnamese society in general. Financial *transparency* was assessed in terms of the proportion of organisations that make their accounts available to the public. Opinions were divided in the SAG on this issue, but most of the members found that only a small share of organisations practise this form of transparency. There was broad agreement in the assessment group that CSOs in general do *not* promote the value of transparency in a substantial way in society, a logical result of the lack of transparency among the organisations themselves.

Tolerance is considered natural for civil society in Vietnam, in terms of accepting other people and promoting non-violence in a country founded on Buddhist and Confucian values. The population's experience of long wars in Vietnam also contributes to its support for peace and non-violence. It is also common for organisations to help various marginalised people, such as those with disabilities or other problems, poor women or people who are ill. Nonetheless, tolerance is lower with respect to the "otherness" of some groups, particularly drug addicts, alcoholics and criminals, according to the *World Values Survey – Vietnam*. Immigrants, ethnic minorities and people with AIDS are more accepted than those belonging to the first group, but tolerance is still limited to some extent.²⁹ The SAG was not convinced that tolerance is very high in Vietnamese civil society on the whole.

²⁹ According to the findings of the *World Values Survey 2001 – Vietnam*.

Another related subject that is part of the approach of the study was the identification of negative forces in civil society. It was assessed that examples of the “less tolerant forces” exist, such as the economic mafia, drug rings, trafficking of women, prostitution and so on. These forces are not considered to be positive ones, but civil society has not been very active in limiting their activities so far.

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

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

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

6.4 The “impact” of civil society

Civil society’s *impact* received the lowest score among the four dimensions examined by the SAG in the CSI assessment. The issues discussed included influence on policy, the accountability of the state and private sector, the response to social interests, empowerment of citizens and meeting of social needs. As in the case of the values dimension, data on the impact dimension was fairly sparse. It is easy to trace general developments in the country through poverty assessments and surveys on living standards, but it is more difficult to ascertain how much influence civil society actually has on the country’s policies or how much it actually supports social goals or empowers citizens. The sources of information used for this dimension

included case studies and reports from the government, donors, INGOs, VNGOs and researchers.

The SAG assessment stresses the impact that civil society organisations have had on poverty alleviation. The impact of civil society on human rights was discussed in terms of the different definition of human rights in Vietnam vis-à-vis the West. It is a “sensitive” issue in Vietnam,³⁰ and by and large civil society is not involved in human rights advocacy. In contrast, if the definition is also taken to include social and economic rights, civil society is actually very active in the field. Nevertheless, the score was quite low for this indicator. Civil society’s impact on social policies was also judged to be quite low.

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

“Responding to social interest” comprised two indicators. The first of these concerned how effectively civil society responds to high-priority social concerns. The SAG gave a fairly low score for this indicator. In contrast, the trust in CSOs was given a fairly high grade based on evidence from the World Value Survey of Vietnam. In this case, the mass organisations were the most trusted ones.

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

The extent to which civil society is able to meet societal needs is debatable. The SAG discussed whether civil society organisations are lobbying the state to provide services. It concluded that this *does* go on to some extent, but not very much because the idea of lobbying is not a very familiar one in Vietnam. As the “socialisation” process proceeds, civil society might gain more influence in the fields of health and education as it will have to take on more responsibility. The SAG also discussed whether civil society meets societal needs directly, but found

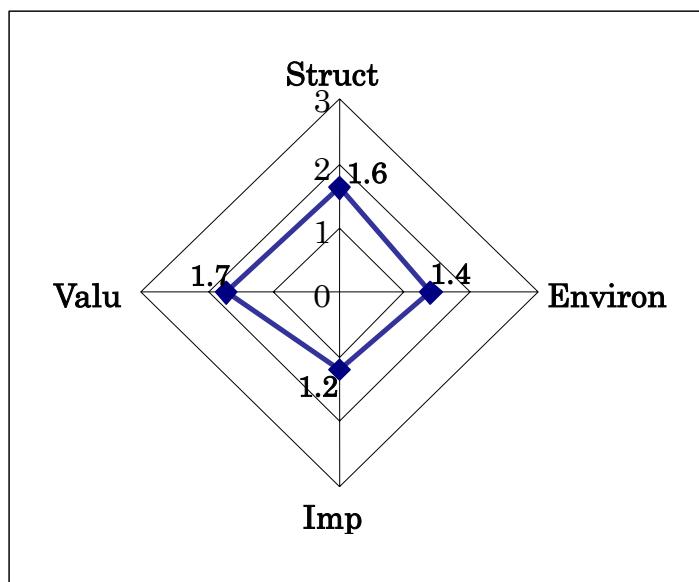
³⁰ The term “sensitive” means that people find they should be careful when discussing such issues.

that its impact was insignificant in comparison with government programmes. Civil society was felt to reach marginalised groups a little better than the government. The aggregate score for this indicator was at an average level.

7 The civil society diamond

The Stakeholder Assessment Group's aggregate scoring for the results of the four dimensions of the CSI in Vietnam is presented here as a four-sided figure, the "civil society diamond". The size of the diamond for Vietnam is small to medium (fig. 2).

Figure 2: The civil society diamond for Vietnam



First, the *structure* of civil society scored 1.6 on a scale of 0 to 3, indicating that organisational life and organisations are considerable, but they also face a significant number of difficulties. Second, the *socio-political environment* was given a below-average score of 1.4, which shows that there is *a certain amount of space* for organisations. Third, the *values* of civil society and the promotion of values in society were judged to be at a higher-than-average level, with a score of 1.7. The highest score among the four dimensions, this reflects some strong positive values (non-violence, poverty eradication, promotion of gender equity) and activities by civil society as well as several weak areas (lack of transparency in terms of both its

practice and its promotion in society). And fourth, the *impact* of civil society was given quite a low score of just 1.2, reflecting the SAG's assessment that civil society's activities have only had a very moderate degree of impact on the country so far.

The structure of civil society achieved a score of 1.6 out of 3. It shows a very broad-based civil society, but a complicated mixture of organisations of different origins, structure, legitimacy, purpose and financing. The depth of membership is actually substantially lower because members are not very active. This has an overall impact and weakens the structure. Networking between organisations is very weak, which diminishes the impact of their activities, learning and advocacy, and the umbrella organisations do not provide sufficient support infrastructure; capacity-building and infrastructure are some of the organisations' most pressing needs.

One of the main reasons for the weakness of civil society is its environment, which scored 1.4 out of 3. Political freedom and civil liberties are still limited in a number of areas; the legal environment is not an enabling one for most organisations, with the exception of the mass organisations, which enjoy special privileges from the state and the Party. The relations between the state and the CSOs in general are below average and relations between the CSOs and the private sector are also judged to be below this level.

The values dimension of civil society and how these values are promoted in society scored 1.7 out of 3. Values are characterised by organisations' involvement in areas like charity, voluntarism, peace and a fairly high level of trust and spiritedness within CSOs despite the erosion of traditional values in society at large as a result of modernisation. On the other hand, some values are neither practised nor promoted by CSOs, such as transparency and democracy, both of which will be important if the organisations are to become stronger and win more trust from society. Tolerance is at an average level, and civil society organisations promote it more strongly in society than they actually practise it. Participation is practised more commonly and is regarded as a kind of democracy.

The impact of civil society overall is judged to be quite low by the SAG, achieving a score of 1.2 out of 3. Considerable impact was identified with regard to poverty alleviation and empowerment of citizens. However, civil society does not have a strong impact on social policies at present. This might be because the state is still considered to be the driving force behind policy-making and implementation, and also because of the lack of an enabling environment. On the other hand, as there were no general studies to rely on, the low score could also be due to the lack of in-depth knowledge among the members of the SAG and the National Team about the activities and impact of civil society.

The SAG's assessment is a reflection of the information available about civil society and the normative opinions on how local stakeholders perceive the situation in Vietnam, combined with evidence from data in Vietnam and international

assessments. The diamond presents a broad picture of the state of civil society in Vietnam today, reflecting its strengths as well as its weaknesses. The SAG's meetings and scores provide a fairly positive assessment of the state of civil society in Vietnam and the possibility of conducting a dialogue with the state.

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

8 Conclusions

The CSI study points out that there is a vigorous, broad-based civil society in Vietnam that helps to "glue" society together. There is no doubt about the fact that Vietnamese society is undergoing a rapid transformation. The state has often responded strongly to demands from society and this was not always due to direct conflict or confrontation. Pressure is exerted in many ways, and in the situation of direct conflicts the state has acted quickly to accommodate the complaints or even enclose them by granting the right to exert more influence. New trends appear whenever the state and Party attempt to find new and more appropriate roles and leave more space for civil society initiatives, even if there is also a clamp-down on certain activities. Compared to many other countries with an authoritarian government, the state and Party have been encouraging associational life and the state does not seem to control as much and as strictly as many of the foreign sources tend to find. Speaking about state-society relations in Vietnam, David Koh says that in a few areas there really is a denial of freedom that many other societies have come to regard as being of fundamental importance. However, in most other areas, the ordinary Vietnamese experience more freedom to do what they want than other people.³¹ The CSI study comes to a similar conclusion, heeding the SAG group's assessment of civil society in Vietnam. There are differences in the way most Vietnamese understand their own society and the way foreigners see it, but the Vietnamese are increasingly interested in the world around them – more so than before. The CSI study does not provide any answers as to which of the different types of organisations among the CSOs will shape Vietnam's future, but there is

³¹ Koh, David (2006), *Wards of Hanoi*, op. cit., p. x.

probably a need for diversity among the CSOs as well. At the same time there is also a need for change if the organisations are to fulfil their role in a changing society. More transparency and accountability seem to be necessary and the state and society need to accommodate each other's wishes if they want to solve some of the social problems occurring during the transformation of society.

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