CIVICUS CIVIL SOCIETY INDEX SHORTENED ASSESSMENT TOOL
CSI-SAT Vietnam

THE EMERGING CIVIL SOCIETY

AN INITIAL ASSESSMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN VIETNAM

Edited by
Irene Norlund, International Coordinator

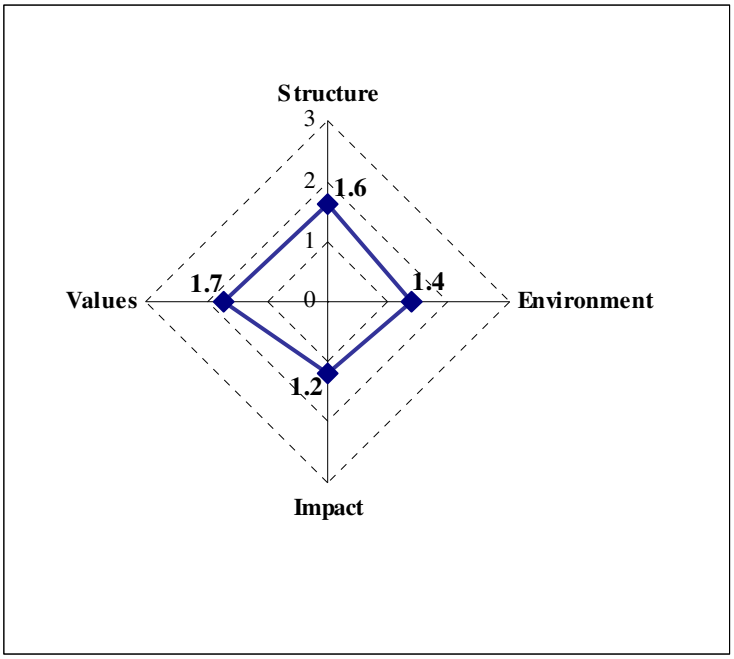
Dang Ngoc Dinh, National Coordinator
Bach Tan Sinh
Chu Dung
Dang Ngoc Quang
Do Bich Diem
Nguyen Manh Cuong
Tang The Cuong
Vu Chi Mai

Vietnam Institute of Development Studies (VIDS)
UNDP Vietnam
SNV Vietnam
CIVICUS Civil Society Index
Hanoi, March 2006

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From April to December 2005, the CIVICUS Civil Society Index Shortened Assessment Tool (CSI-SAT) was implemented to assess the state of civil society in Vietnam. The methodology for the project is based on a framework of 74 indicators, divided into four dimensions of civil society: structure, environment, values and impact. The National Implementation Team (NIT), consisting of the National Coordinator and the International Civil Society Expert, together with a group of eight researchers (civil society experts), collected the data, drew up sub-reports on the four dimensions and wrote a consolidated report which was submitted to the members of a Stakeholder Assessment Group (SAG) who discussed and scored the various indicators. The results were summarised in a graph referred to as the "Civil Society Diamond." The diamond graph is based on the viewpoints of the SAG, but the report also presents data and information from many other secondary sources. The Vietnam civil society diamond visually summarises the assessment's findings (using scores between 0 and 3) and indicates that civil society is operating in a slightly disabling **environment** (1.4) and has a **structure** of limited strength (1.6). Civil society practices and promotes positive **values** to a moderate extent (1.7) and its **impact** on society at large is relatively limited (1.2). Notably, the values dimension of civil society is the strongest and the impact dimension the weakest dimension (figure 1).

FIGURE 1: Civil Society Diamond forVietnam



The Civil Society Index (CSI) report for Vietnam highlights a number of features of civil society not previously investigated and a range of new insights. In brief, civil society can be characterised as being very broad-based through numerous civil society organisations (CSOs). However, not all organisations are deeply anchored in civil society, for example some members

of the mass organisations are automatically members in the public sector.[1]Another characteristic is that civil society is segmented into various organisations with different functions. On the one hand, the "old" mass organisations and professional associations, which are broadly accepted as an integrated part of society, and on the other, a "new type" of organisation that developed in the 1990s, but is not fully recognised by society, such as NGOs, CBOs and other types of informal organisations. The report focuses on four main types of organisation: mass organisations (MOs), professional associations, Vietnamese NGOs (VNGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs).[2] All organisations are seen together as part of the Vietnamese civil society, collectively called civil society organisations (CSOs). The core activities of most CSOs are directed towards poverty reduction, humanitarian relief, self-organisation and professional development, but little CSO effort is directed towards advocacy. On the whole, civil society is an important area of activity for citizens in Vietnam, but it lacks vitality in some respects and areas, among which advocacy is 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 not enabling.

Civil society in Vietnam was limited and weak before the *doi moi* period ('renovation') which put in place the first reforms towards a marked-oriented society. This was done by the Communist Party in 1986, which was under pressure to address acute poverty and liberalise the collective landholdings. As the society opened up, the private sector was permitted to operate together with encouragement from foreign investments. After the collapse of Eastern European regimes in the late 1980s, Vietnam had to reorient the country's foreign relations. When the USA and Vietnam, after the 20 years embargo that followed the American war, normalised relations the door opened up for closer relations to close allies of the USA in Asia and Europe. Consequently, European and Japanese development agencies and the multilateral banks increased development cooperation 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 the number of small local NGOs multiplying. The space for local initiatives broadened both for grassroots organisations and mass organisations, often serving the role as partners for development projects at the community level, as well as for new professional organisations and Community Based Organisations (CBOs).

Examining the current **structure** of civil society in Vietnam reveals that it is broad-based and comprises a large number of groups, organisations and associations. The breadth of civil society is particularly large due to the large membership of the mass organisations. Among Vietnamese citizens, 74% are members of at least one organisation; 62% are members of more than one CSO and, on average, each citizen is a member of 2.3 organisations.[3] The groups with the largest membership include mass organisations, women's groups, social welfare groups, local community groups, sports and recreation groups, groups for education, arts and music and professional associations. Some of the groups are government, or party-sponsored, a fact which causes debate over whether or not they should be included as part of civil society. However, they have become more independent since the *doi moi* reforms of 1986 and, given their considerable

[1] Mass organisations denominate the originally state sponsored organisations with broad popular base like Women's Union, Farmers' Association, Labour Organisation, Youth Organisation.
[2] VNGOs are organisations set up in the 1990s by individuals or groups with a humanitarian or development purpose.
[3] According to World Values Survey Vietnam (WVSV) 2001.

expansion at the grassroots level during the 1990s, they constitute an important arena for citizens' activity in many communities. The mass organisations are sometimes less participatory, in the sense that people may be members without being actively involved. Nevertheless, they provide an important connection between the centre and the communities which can be used in different ways, according to the needs and interests of each community. Another type of organisation, the VNGO, has been appearing since 1990. Mainly active in the cities, VNGOs have added a new dimension to organisational life. They have a narrow membership base, but provide services to disadvantaged groups that were previously excluded (eg. ethnic minorities, HIV/AIDS sufferers, invalids and Agent Orange victims).[4] In recent years, community groups have begun to flourish in the rural areas, mainly in support of essential services, though cultural and recreational groups have also expanded considerably. Volunteering is widespread, but the depth of citizens' participation varies greatly from organisation to organisation.

In terms of their structure, many organisations belong to various umbrella organisations. However, these do not always function well. They are sometimes bureaucratic and do not always coordinate the activities of their member-organisations. The VNGO networks are particularly weak, having only been established in recent years. In general, CSOs lack financial resources. Some mass organisations therefore receive support from central or provincial governments for their core expenses. Many CSOs receive support from foreign donors and INGOs to implement projects and conduct research. Professional organisations are more dependent on membership and local resources than the VNGOs, and CBOs are often sustainable on their own resources, but foreign donors and NGOs are beginning to support this type of informal groups as well.

The **environment** for civil society in Vietnam presents quite a mixed picture of conducive and less conducive factors. Poverty reduction has progressed at a spectacularly rapid pace since the 1990s, with the number of people living in poverty falling from two-thirds to about one-quarter from 1990 to 2005. The socio-economic conditions have fundamentally changed with the diversification of the economy, the establishment of a market economy and the increasing small-scale private sector. In the last decade Vietnam has experienced an active integration into the world economy and a multiplication of organisations within all fields of activity. The SAG assessed state effectiveness as high given Vietnam's level of development. However, the general level of corruption is also deemed very high and causes problems even within organisations that handle large budgets.

Whereas political competition and some political rights are limited, leaving room for considerable improvement, the government takes social rights very seriously and during the 1990s worked in collaboration with CSOs to improve social conditions. With respect to political rights, the results of the CSI-SAT on rule of law and corruption in society are not positive, reasons for this include the restrictive and complicated laws for establishing an organisation, and advocacy activities not being encouraged. These factors create obstacles for the further development of civil society. Basic freedoms, such as the freedom of expression, are limited and international sources rate Vietnam's press freedoms as very low; however, the SAG found that room to manoeuvre is considerably greater than the international sources suggest.

[4] Agent Orange was spread during the American War in Vietnam (1964-73) to destroy the forest. Today many children are born with genetic defects.

Socio-cultural factors are fairly conducive for cooperation, with the family being the core unit and the party as another organising factor. Level of trust is fairly high in Vietnam, with 41% of citizens saying they trust their fellow citizens. Surprisingly, the level of trust is not much higher among those who are members of a CSO compared to those who are not, indicating that civil society may not in itself strengthen the level of trust. Trust in a society with Confucian norms and strong family values might be generated in other ways than through civil society and this result points to a special type of civil society in Vietnam, due to the strong influence of political institutions. Citizens not only trust each other, but also have a high level of trust in the state and its institutions, quite unlike many countries in Eastern Europe, where the level of trust is low. There is close cooperation between the state and mass organisations, whereas relations between professional organisations and the state are less direct and relations between the state and VNGOs are generally cooperative. However, this is mainly because of good personal relations between state officials and the leaders of organisations. Some VNGOs find they have greater difficulty cooperating with the state (more so in Hanoi than Ho Chi Minh City), which somewhat limits their autonomy. Finally, the SAG does not consider the private sector very important for civil society, as it does not often engage with CSOs or charity.

The SAG assessed civil society's **values** as positive and at a fairly high level, with the highest score among the four dimensions. The CSI-SAT methodology divides this dimension into two factors: 1) values practised within civil society and 2) values that are promoted in larger society. The promotion of values, such as poverty reduction, non-violence and gender equity are particularly strong. According to the SAG, all CSOs promote these values, but to a more limited degree than practising certain internal values. Exceptions include tolerance, gender equity and transparency, which are promoted more in society than actually practised by organisations internally. Statistical data shows that the share of female leaders is considerably higher in CSOs than in the public sector, but it is still not equitable.

The values of democracy, tolerance and environmental sustainability promoted by civil society were seen as less strong by the SAG, and were viewed at a lower medium level. Environmental organisations have begun to emerge and an understanding of the importance of the environment is being taken more seriously by both people and the state, though until recently only a few organisations pursued this goal. The most problematic area is transparency, which the SAG rates as low. The rules of transparency are generally not applied in either society or within CSOs. There is no general evidence about the level of corruption within CSOs, but large-scale corruption seems to be not widespread. A culture of petty corruption has penetrated society, and also exists in CSOs. However, it is believed to be lower than in society overall. CSOs have mainly taken on the role of service delivery organisations and have not strongly pursued advocacy. Still, the participatory principles introduced in recent years, with support from INGOs and donors, have been broadly accepted in governmental projects. The Grassroots Democracy Decree of 1998 opened the space for more active participation in decisions at the commune and village levels, where informal groups are playing a more active role.

The **impact** of civil society in Vietnam was the most difficult dimension to assess. Objective data is limited, especially because, with respect to many activities, the impacts of CSOs and of the various levels of government cannot be clearly separated. Due to their focus on service delivery, various CSO activities often supplement each other, work in parallel or even overlap.

However, it was found that CSOs of all types reach down to the grassroots level better than similar government programmes and policies. In that regard, CSOs have had an impact ensuring that disadvantaged people and the poor have been included in policies, such as those for HIV/AIDS, children's rights, Agent Orange victims and gender issues.[5] However, one exception must be noted, few organizations reach the most remote areas, such as the regions inhabited by ethnic minorities in the Northern Mountains and the Central Highlands. Mass organisations, and others, may even have a limiting effect on the development of indigenous knowledge, due to their policies of "mainstreaming" development thinking and activities.

Mass organisations have more direct impact on national policies than other types of CSOs, though some of the large professional associations have recently been permitted to comment on laws passed by parliament.[6] VNGOs use other channels, such as lobbying and pressuring individual members of the National Assembly, usually through personal connections. CSOs do not consider their main purpose to be holding the state or state-owned enterprises accountable (and even less private corporations) because they do not pursue advocacy in the usual sense of the word. Nevertheless, there are examples of communities and workers raising their voices in response to unfair or unethical treatment of people or the environment. At the community level, mass organisations constitute a very important organic link between the various administrative levels, from the centre to the communes and villages. This is particularly the case for the Women's Union and the Old Aged Association, which serve as means to promote activities, initiatives, funding and ideas at the grassroots level. Furthermore, VNGOs and INGOs support projects all over the country for disadvantaged groups and communities. The fairly high level of trust and the rich associational life have played a key role in leading to the rapid reduction of poverty in Vietnam.

This first assessment of civil society in Vietnam has shown that there is considerable potential within civil society for further participation by individuals organised to work towards a better society. Currently the fragmentation of civil society may appear to be a disadvantage, but could turn into an advantage if society opens up further and if the various groups and organisations connect more strongly and improve the division of labour so that each one can focus on what it does best. Simultaneously, organisations should work on deepening the involvement and responsibilities of their members.

The purpose of the CSI-SAT project in Vietnam was to describe civil society in Vietnam and provide a first analysis of its strengths and weaknesses, and of the opportunities and threats to it, as part of an action-oriented learning process. This was done with the hope of providing a basis for enhancing people's participation in decision-making at all levels, through a dialogue with the organisations and the public administration. The other purpose of this study was to initiate a broader discussion in Vietnam about civil society. Such a discussion should lead to further activities which can contribute to strengthening Vietnam's civil society through dialogue between CSOs, the government and society at large. There is a clear need for further studies on

[5] People exposed to the herbicide Agent Orange during the American war in Vietnam give birth to a high rate of handicapped children.

[6] Vietnam Union for Science and Technology Association (VUSTA) recommended the Law of Education to be postponed in 2005. It also suggests changes to the draft Law on Associations planned to be passed by the National Assembly in 2006.

the situation of civil society in the provinces and communities, as well as on the role and performance of umbrella organisations. There is also a clear need to improve the environment and support for CSOs so that they can develop into stronger organisations advancing the living conditions of Vietnamese people.