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The roles of civil society organizations in enhancing grassroots democracy in Vietnam

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List of Acronyms

CDC	Quang Binh Community Development Centre
CECODES	Centre for Community support Development studies
CIVICUS	World Alliance for Citizen Participation
CPV	Communist Party of Vietnam
CS	Civil society
CSDM	Centre for Sustainable Development in Mountainous Areas
CSOs	Civil society Organizations
DWC	Center for Promoting Development for Woman and children
FF	Fatherland Front
FU	Farmer Union
GDRs	Grassroots Democracy Regulations
GDD	Grassroots Democracy Decree
INGOs	International Non-governmental organizations
LEREs	The Center for Legal Research and Services
MOs	Mass Organizations
NGO	Non-governmental organizations
PAPI	The Vietnam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index
PCCM	Promoting Community Management Model
PPWG	People Participation Working Group
SEDP	Social Economic Development Program
SPERI	Social Policy Ecology Research Institute
SWOT	Strength weakness opportunity and threat
YU	Youth Union
THWU	Thach Ha District Woman Union
UNDP	The United Nation Development Program
VNGOs	Vietnamese Non-governmental organizations
VUSTA	Vietnam Union of Science and Technology associations
VIDs	Vietnam Institute of Development studies
VU	Veteran Union
WU	Woman Union

Abstract

Following the discourse on democracy, participation and their links to civil society, this paper aims to assess the roles of civil society organizations in enhancing grassroots democracy in Vietnam. By contesting different theories in the context of single-one Party and government, the research shows that the case of grassroots democracy and civil society in Vietnam are special and far from recent dominant views on democracy and civil society. The study argues that grassroots democracy regulations adopted by the government is inherently participation rather than liberal democracy which is prominent trend nowadays. It also finds that civil society in Vietnam is still under state's control and monitoring, differing from traditional perception that civil society is autonomous. Within the local democratic sphere of grassroots democracy regulations, civil society organizations in which Mass organizations and Vietnamese Non-governmental organizations are found distinct in relation to state and interventions have showed their roles in dissemination, capacity building, advocacy, facilitation to support people in realizing their participation rights to public affairs at local level. Their roles are constrained within the "narrow" environment with strong supervision from single-Party state and lack of supporting mechanism to their interventions. But more importantly, the research points out that the institution, including local government and people's attitude and capacity, local level political dynamics and mindsets to understand and embrace local participation, is the pivotal conditions to ensure effective grassroots democracy implementation. Therefore, the research concludes that the roles of civil society organizations in enhancing grassroots democracy will be sustained and have wider impact if they always bear in mind this transformative and structural change.

Relevance to Development Studies

"...Development can't be done "to" people. People have to become the agents of their own development" (Mamphela Ramphele, 2008 as cited in Fowler and Biekart, 2008: 119)

Grassroots democracy and civil society both encompass the idea of participation, which has become a core discussion in contemporary development. The grassroots democracy regulations which aim at giving rights for people to participate into local governance and civil society organizations with characteristics of "common interest" arena can be a process to enable people to become the agents of their own development. Studying the link of civil society and grassroots democracy is therefore important in development, especially in the context of Vietnam where democracy and civil society are still constrained in limited environment.

Keywords

[Democracy, Participation, Local participation, Civil society, Civil society organization, Grassroots democracy, Empowerment, Bottom-up, Advocacy, Monitoring, Agency, Institution, Mass organizations, Vietnam Non-governmental organization]

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background

In Vietnam, issues of democracy and participation have been contested a Communist single-one party country. While the communist and socialism ideology always put people's mastery at the centre of state development, the control by one party to some extent challenges the people participation process. Together with the market reform since 1986, the democratization process has also been put forwards not only by initiatives and encouragement of International donors and International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) but also the recognition of Vietnamese leaders regarding the importance of people's participation in policy and development program's planning, implementing and monitoring (UNDP Vietnam, 2006). The issuance of Grassroots Democracy Decree (GDD) No.29 in 1998 marks a step forward of this ideal. Concretely, it aims to recognize citizen's rights and the mastery of people. It has paved the way for later sets of legal documents and instruments for enhancing people's participation, government's service reform and accountability. The decree was revised twice in 2003 as Decree No.79 and latter upgraded to Ordinance No.34 in 2007 (See Annex 1 for Vietnam legal system). Under the Grassroots democracy regulations (GDRs), 4 main democratic dimensions are addressed: people have the right to be informed of local governments' activities, policies and laws; discuss and decide certain policies or programs; be consulted and discuss some major areas before the government decides; monitor and check the implementation and activities of local government in several fields.

Alongside with democratic process in Vietnam, civil society (CS) has developed significantly in term of number and diversity. They have actively taken part in poverty reduction and every aspects of socioeconomic and political development of the country. Recent studies explore several engagement forms of civil society with state and people, in which democracy promotion and enhancing people participation is one of issues civil society organizations can play a role in (Kerkvliet et al., 2008, Wischermann, 2010). Although the concept of "civil society" is still debated and not widely used in Vietnam, this has been so far seen as a "good thing" to be promoted for the sake of democracy and freedom, balancing the power of the state and the private sector, and enhancing efficiency, accountability, and "good governance" (Fisher, 1997 and Barber , 2001 as as cited in Salemink, 2005:103-104). Through different initiatives of organizing people and bringing their voice to political agenda, social economic policies and development programs, civil society organizations (CSOs) have been contributing to improving people participation in general and grassroots democracy in particular.

The relation between civil society and grassroots democracy in Vietnam has inspired this paper. The research tries to explore this link in an

analytical way to see what lies behind the debate of grassroots democracy and civil society in Vietnam.

1.2 Problem statement

The GDRs (Decree No.29 issued in 1998, Decree No.79 2004 and Ordinance No. 34 2007) have opened up the space for people participation in decision making stage and being involved in issues that directly affect their life at grassroots level. They have been so far the official legal framework that specifies people's rights to participate in government activities in Vietnam. It also primarily institutionalizes the famous Vietnamese Communist party (CPV)'s guideline "People know, people discuss, people do, people monitor". However, from the insight of literature analysis to empirical observation and implementation, this radical idea is still far from successful. Such a mechanism of participation is "clearly insufficient", constrained by "insufficient institutional arrangement", "absence of comprehensive legal framework for central-local relation", space for "active participation of civic associations in social political affairs" (Antonio, 2012: 115-116).

While dealing with participation issues in Vietnam, CSOs work actively in encouraging people to participate in socioeconomic and development policies and programs. Nevertheless, their role is often overwhelmed by the perception that they engage in public service delivery and supporting state's policy rather than the position of capacity building, policy recommendation, watchdog or challenging state's accountability. This view has contested their role in promoting grassroots democracy which does not only require simple service provision but more comprehensive interventions. Then the question should be what other roles CSOs can play to bridge the limitations of GDRs and enhance people participation at local level. It is more interesting to put their roles in a more ambiguous context like Vietnam. While the government still maintains centralized and top-down practice, it tries to open up a bottom-up space at lowest level, which to some extent gives confidence for CSO to support further in this field. It is a closed system but also a half-open but under a "narrow" autonomous space, whether CSO can play a role in fostering democracy and people participation. Can it be a 'boosting facilitator' for people capacity and power to influence government operation or just be a government's service provider? What obstacles and difficulties they face in enhancing democracy and participation?

In addition, many studies on the emergence of civil society in Vietnam which have been carried out over the past decades discuss different roles of civil society organizations in poverty alleviation, public services improvement but few of them probe the engagement of civil society organizations in democracy enhancement. This paper wants to explore more this aspect.

1.3 Research objective and research questions

The main research question is what roles the civil society organizations play in enhancing grassroots democracy in Vietnam.

The sub-questions the research will try to address are:

1. What are the discourses and empirical experiences of grassroots democracy and participation in Vietnam? (Weakness and challenges)?
2. Who are civil society organizations in Vietnam and what do they do?
3. Where do civil society organizations stand in this contemporary grassroots democracy debate and practice?
4. Do they support people to exercise grassroots democracy and if so, how do they help people?
5. What are their strengths, weaknesses and challenges in supporting grassroots democracy and participation?
6. What is the potential trend for civil society organizations to better support people to realize grassroots democracy?

1.4 Brief analytical framework

By discussing concepts and theories around democracy, participation, local participation and the links with civil society, I will use as lenses to look inside the on-going landscape of democracy, local participation and civil society in Vietnam. This comparison helps to identify which trend of democracy, participation and civil society Vietnam is reflected. The linking of global discourse with the country context will make the analysis much deeper.

When looking into the involvement of CSOs in grassroots democracy, several potential roles are examined based on available discourse on spectrum of civil society engagements in socioeconomic and political life. These roles will be analyzed as the main findings of this study.

Finally, from the insight of legal framework and practice for democracy and grassroots democracy as well as environment and history of CSOs, the research will point out positions, interventions and roles where the CSOs are contributing to enhancing grassroots democracy in Vietnam. Further discussions on challenges and potential changes for their better support to people's participation will be also mentioned accordingly.

1.5 Research methodologies and empirical evidences

This research is an exploratory study based on gathering and analysis of literature, collecting primary and secondary data sources. Two main case studies were used for illustration. Based on the field research and the 2 case studies, the empirical findings were made to supplement the analysis from literature review.

Data collection and analysis

Secondary data: this is the main source of the research. The data was searched and collected from academic literature, journals, books and legal documents. Besides, the author also used different secondary information from reports, evaluations, programs or policy papers of International organizations, donors, Non-governmental organizations (NGO) and research centres.

Primary data: The collection and analysis of secondary data build up the analytical frame and contextualization for this research while the primary data is used to clarify and supplement for the analysis. Primary data which was collected from the field research employed mainly in qualitative basis with interpretation, synthesis and comparison to help develop arguments and conclusions

Field research and Case studies

The field research was carried out in Vietnam in August 2012. Qualitative interviews with semi-structured and in-depth interviews were used to ensure both the flexibility of targeted interviewees but thorough information.

At first, interviews and discussions were made with different individuals including representatives from INGOs, Vietnamese NGOs (VNGOs), International organizations and scholars based in Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam, who have experience working in CS and grassroots democracy. This was a plenary exploration relied on the interviewees' experience to have a broad picture of what interventions of current CSOs in GDRs, what are their strengths and weakness and how is the implementation of GDRs up till now.

To deepen the identification and studying the roles of civil society organizations in promoting grassroots democracy, 2 case studies of one Vietnamese Non-governmental organization and one mass organization were selected. The selection of these 2 representatives is because VNGOs and mass organizations are much involved in grassroots democracy issues and supporting people participation. In addition, the differences of status and working condition of these types of organization interestingly illustrate vivid images and fruitful evidences for the diverse methods adopted by CSOs in supporting grassroots democracy. The Appreciate Inquiry or SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunities and threats) was used to assess their strategy and implementation, which then helps to withdraw key lesson learnt and findings. Following that, 2 field visits to the 2 organizations and sites where they are supporting people took place later. Interviews with representatives from Thach Ha District Woman Union, Thach Ha District, Ha Tinh province and Quang Binh Community Development centre, Quang Binh province brought about explanations and description of their support to local community. And discussions with people in the field were conducted to understand more the impact of their intervention. Direct meeting with local people including communes/wards' leaders, villages/sub-wards' leaders, woman union members and other people helped the author have deep insight of how GDRs are realized in their locality and their perception on the support of the organizations.

1.6 Potential risks and ethical challenges

Working on Grassroots democracy and civil society is broad and inter-related topic. Grassroots democracy and participation composes different aspects, which within the scope of this study, I could not cover all. The same issue to the study on civil society, the research could not discuss all types of CSOs rather than giving examples of organizations that involve much in grassroots democracy.

Regarding pragmatic risks, the topic is still sensitive in the context of Vietnam, which was a challenge in term of collecting data or carrying out interviews. Time constraint and uncertain willingness of interviewees was another risk to the research.

Chapter 2

Theories of democracy, local participation and civil society

This chapter aims to discuss some key concepts and mainstream theories on discourses of democracy, participation, local participation and civil society and to draw their links in this contemporary development.

2.1 Democracy, participation and local participation

Democracy and participation

There has been so far no agreement of definitions and theories of democracy. “There exists not only one theory, concept or model of democracy, but clearly a pluralism (or plurality) of different theories and models” (Campbell, 2008: 4). This controversial democracy conveys around current much discussed notions in international arena “political system”, “electoral system”, “freedom”, “human rights”, “equality”, “participation”, “empowerment”.

Many definitions and theories refer to democracy as a form of government which ensures the exercise of citizens’ rights and freedom (Sodaro, 2004 and Bühlmann et al., 2008 as cited in Campbell, 2008: 18-29) while others emphasize more on procedures and “agency” of people not only to determine who govern them but also rights to participate, decide in policy making process which directly affect their life (O’Donnell, 2004; Diamond and Morlino, 2004; Robert A. Dahl, 1971 as cited in Campbell, 2008: 18-29). The former concepts are close to the liberal democracy that is dominant and promoted trend nowadays. This tendency focuses on ***types of political system, individual liberal political and civil rights as freedom of speech, assembly, religion, property***, which have been used as a democracy measurement tools of many Western countries (e.g. The US) and several International Transparency organizations such as Freedom House and the Economic Intelligence Units. The later reflection on democracy ***deepens more on people’s capability and agency to fully participate in political, social and economic sphere***. This idea is elaborated thoroughly in the theoretical framework of O’Donnell (2004) when he framed “democracy” into two principles of human development and human rights. In his approach, human rights that are conventionally clustered into political, civil and socioeconomic rights and facilitate by a “democratic” state are necessary but not enough. The human capabilities to exercise these rights are the key factor. The interacting of human rights, human agency and democracy becomes like an “unbreakable vicious circle” in which “all the rights and capabilities associated with democracy, human rights, and human development directly pertain to, and enable, agency. This is the nexus of these three currents” (O’Donnell, 2004b: 55). Clearly, the model of democracy from O’Donnell is more comprehensive than the first simple model on political institution.

The two above introduced theories meet at the same points of showing main controversial concepts about democracy. They are electoral and political system, rule of law, human rights and human development/agency. I would like to “borrow” these themes to look into the democracy and grassroots democracy in Vietnam where I argue that democracy in this state may not comply with dominant views of liberal democracy or electoral democracy but primary steps for a participatory/direct or deliberative democracy have been put in place at least at the lowest level of grassroots (See Annex 2: the glossary for definition, UNDP Vietnam, 2006: iii). And human development/agency as a critical point for accessing the support of CSOs in Vietnam for enhancing this local participation, whether their efforts are contributing to people’s agency and whether the agency is enough to make change happen in limited institution of one-party country.

There is obviously a close link between democracy and participation. Democracy either a “liberal project” or “human development project” as mentioned earlier or in whatever forms, all ideally provide a sphere where people can participate into a political process and be involved into public policy and management. The idea of participation always entails the challenge within power structure, which enables people to “increase control over resources and regulations”, “influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources” or “participate in, and access information relating to, the decision making process” (Chambers, 2005: 103). Accordingly, participation is important in development practice since it inspires the question of empowering people to claim for their better life as Chambers (2005) also mentioned “through participation to enable those who are most marginalized, powerless and poor to achieve better life for themselves”. However, recent criticisms on participatory approach’s failure to engage with issues of power and politics (Hickey and Mohan, 2005: 237) has raised the question of relocating the “discourse participation” into more citizenship and civil society role focus with the vision in which people are empowered to have more “transformative” participation in claiming better rights and benefits based on challenging social structure and power.

With all the “romantic idea” of empowering people, participation is the pivotal entry for more high-level democracy that can assure the mastery and decision of people. As the works of Diamond & Morlino (2004) and Robert A. Dahl (1979) showed “participation” is one of important dimensions to ensure quality of democracy (Campbell, 2008: 24-26). This has been put in the main agenda of many interventions from donors and supported by INGOs and Civil society. But as mentioned above, if participation and democracy doesn’t answer the question of power relations, social and political structure where the changes should be made institutionally and transformatively from attitude, behaviour of both elites and people, the success will be still less than expected. These debates and features of participation are mentioned here because the case of grassroots democracy and the involvement of CSOs in Vietnam as explained detail later all reflect this on-going interaction.

Local Participation or Local democracy

Narrowing down democracy and participation into smaller geographical space, it is known as local or community participation. This involves the process of decentralization in which the national level carries out “the transfer of powers and resources to authorities representatives of, and downwardly accountable to, local populations, and can be considered an institutional form of participatory development” (Vedeld, 2003: 160 as cited in Bergh, 2004: 3). And towards Civic Driven change approach, local-level democracy is likely to be more relevant to the needs of citizens. Local elections demonstrate greater voter participation; the local public sphere is more approachable by ordinary folk. Expressions of solidarity and fellowship are more meaningful; ensuring on-going social accountability is more feasible at the level of local governments (Rajesh Tandom as cited in Fowler and Biekart, 2010: 147).

Participation in general and local participation in particular is often characterized as ladders. According to Chambers (2005: 105), there is no final ladder. The ladder can be summarized in the following basic steps:

- Manipulation: participation is contrived as the opportunity to indoctrinate in situations of ‘non participation’
- Information: stakeholders are informed
- Consultation: stakeholders answer questions can have a say
- Implementation: stakeholders from groups to implement activities
- Consensus building: stakeholders interact, and analyse problems and solution of project together
- Decision-making: stakeholders make collective decisions
- Partnership: exchange among equals working towards a mutual goal
- Self-management: stakeholders take initiative

(Wit, 2011, Course 4337, lecture slide)

Chambers (2005:105-107) emphasized final ladder and higher ladder does not mean the best, the ladders of participation are not enough, they need to be meditated and facilitated for equity among participants. This refers to the roles of outsiders to ensure those who are poor gain and do not lose, balance the power structure constructed in participation.

In this case of Vietnam, grassroots democracy is inherently local participation. And assessing roles of civil society organizations in enhancing this participation will also be put in their relation to the participation ladder.

2.2 Civil society and civil society organizations, link to democracy and participation

Why do civil society and civil society organizations have close link to democracy and participation? The definition of civil society has answered this question. It is always “source of debate and confusion” (Biekart, 2008). The wide use of Anheier (2004)’s definition characterizes civil society as “the sphere of institutions, organizations and individuals located between the family, the state and the market in which people associate voluntarily to

advance common interests”. Such common interest “sphere”, “realm” or later “arena” has suggested civil society as an appropriate way of serving democracy and/or process of democratization (Wischermann, 2010: 5).

Like democracy, the concept and development of civil society (CS) and civil society organizations (CSOs) are often underpinned by liberal democracy assumption rather than wider debates of the politics of development (Mercer, 2002). Chandhoke (2007) explained the liberal democracy’s shadow on the “confused” CS started in the context of authoritarian regimes in Eastern & Central Europe and Latin America where people had denied their citizen’s basic rights. It was CS with space for individuals and groups organization to demand for political and civil rights, freedom of all kinds and claim for autonomy from state, monitoring state power and citizen engagement. Besides, it involves the social values as “peopled by social associations, self-help and self-management organizations and characterised by mutual solidarity” (Chandhoke, 2007: 610). Therefore, the common understanding and criteria which are often mentioned as important for civil society and civil society organizations also circulates these 2 main ideas of state and society, such as the following:

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

(Nordlund, 2007: 8)

UNDP distinguishes different types of CSO including professional organizations, cultural and religious organizations, grassroots organizations, development based organizations (NGOs). Among them, NGOs have immerged as an active contributor for development thanks to the assumptions: reaching the poorest and marginalized groups; being flexible, fast, innovative and idealistic; having professional staff; belief in people/community; being independent and more radical; empowering people. But their challenges are donor’s dependency, sustainability of activity, and accountability to whom and how (Wit, 2012, Course 4337, lecture slide)

In this research, it is interesting to contest the conventional view of civil society as an independent sphere in the context of single-one party country and how all the story of CS evolution in development is translated into the Vietnam context.

2.3 Analytical framework

Based on several concepts and theories discussed in the previous sections, I will present and analyze how democracy and participation, civil society are conceptualized and manifested in the context of Vietnam, with a view to explore the role of civil society in promoting grassroots democracy. I am interested in finding evidence for the existence and clashing of these theories in the Vietnam context. Some criteria of democracy, CSOs and NGOs as

discussed above will be used to zoom into democracy, CSOs in Vietnam. The logic of analysis is from assessment of grassroots democracy decree (its stakeholder’s framework, implementation) to find space or position where civil society organizations are standing. Among CSOs, mass organizations and VNGOs with the 2 cases studies conducted during the field trip will be discussed deeply. After all, the theories and concepts mentioned at the beginning will be reflected again in the final analysis and conclusion to provide a critical look at the findings.

To give more detailed on involvement of CSOs in grassroots democracy, few potential roles of CSO in enhancing local participation in Vietnam are categorized as follows:

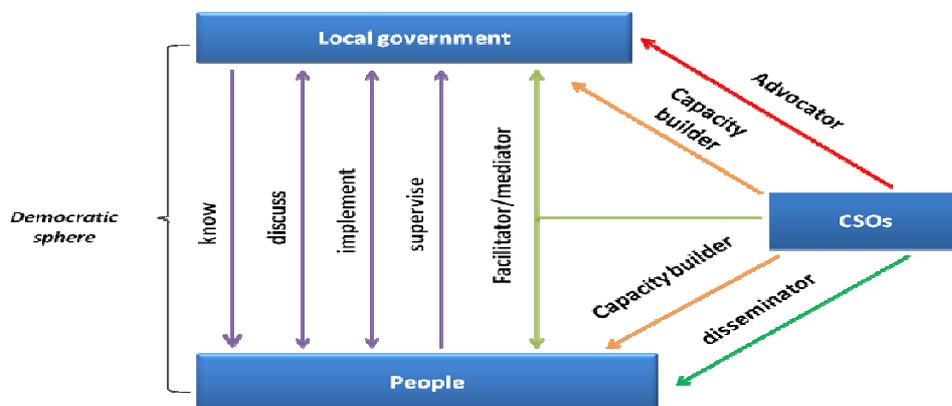
- Role as disseminators
- Role as facilitators
- Role as policy advocates
- Role as capacity builders

Such hypotheses on roles of CSOs are inspired by “process approach” from Hannah (2007: 38-43) when he looked at CS not what they really *are* like above discourse but what they really *do*. He has summarized some possible roles of CSOs between people-state relations. The advocator and monitor roles are inspired by this analysis (See Annex 3: Spectrum of Civil Society roles) and argument that CSOs is independent from state.

Moreover, the facilitator, disseminator and capacity builder roles come from a recent question whether development program developers or practitioner should implement development for people or facilitate the process. This is emphasized by outcome mapping of Sarah Earl et al. (2001:2) that partners as people and beneficiaries control change and external agents or development programs should only facilitate process by providing access to new resources, ideas or opportunities.

Last but not least, of course, an important area of CSOs engagement is “empowerment” but this will be analyzed as underlying values of the other roles and as discussed as community and people’s capture.

Figure 2.3: Visualized analytical framework of the role of CSOs in enhancing grassroots democracy



Chapter 3

Contextualization of democracy, local participation and civil society in Vietnam

3.1 Vietnam at glance

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is the easternmost country in the Indochina peninsular, member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). With the population of 87,840 million in 2011 among which 70% people living in rural area (the World Bank Vietnam), it is the world's 13th-most-populous country. Vietnam's experiencing long-lasting wars and external invasion for centuries has laid the burden on the development of the country. However, in the past 20 years, following the renovation reform, Vietnam has changed dramatically especially in economic aspects from one of the poorest countries in the world, with per capita income below \$100, to a lower middle income country with per capita income of \$1,130 by the end of 2010. The ratio of population in poverty has fallen from 58 percent in 1993 to 14.5 percent in 2008, and most indicators of welfare have improved (the World Bank Vietnam). Despite successful outcome, this economic development is unstable and unsustainable. Vietnam is facing increasing inequality, vulnerable groups and pollution as the negative side of development process.

Since the declaration of independence in 1945, Vietnam has been under the rule of single-one party system via Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). The party led the people and nation in the struggle for liberation from Western colonists for almost century and achievement of country reunion in 1975. The political system is operated following the mechanism of "leading of CPV, governance of the government and people's mastery". According to that, the CPV exercises the leadership and gives the direction in all matters. The government is the executive organ and supreme administrative agency, managing all state affairs. And the National Assembly is the highest body representing the voice of people, acting legislative and constitutional rights. Besides the party, government and National assembly, the political system of Vietnam is also composed of political organizations, social-political organizations, social-professional organizations and mass organizations under the Umbrella organization via the Vietnam Fatherland Front, hereinafter the Fatherland Front. This political system has the wide-spread cover from the central to the sub-level of commune nationwide.

Vietnam's administrative structure is very hierarchical, which is divided in 4 levels from the highest to grassroots: central, provincial/municipality, district/city and commune/ward/town. By late December 2010, Vietnam has 63 administrative units including 5 cities under direct control of central government and 54 provinces, 643 districts subdivided into 1111 communes/wards/towns (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2010). At each level of state administration of province, district and commune has their

respective People's Council and People's Committee as policy-making and implementing at local level.

3.2 Democracy and Participation environment

In parallel with economic development, with the market opening and intensive integration into global political socioeconomic trend, democracy and participation environment in Vietnam is of great concern to the international especially Western countries and donors. The picture of democracy and participation in Vietnam encompasses current different views and schools on democracy from the world but specialized into a typical style of its own.

Although the highest legal document-constitution clearly states "Vietnam citizens have the rights to: freedom of speech, freedom of publication, freedom of organization and assembly, freedom of religion, freedom of residence and migration within country and abroad" (Article 10, Vietnam constitution 1946), such criteria for democracy and freedom set by Freedom House based on political rights and civil liberties are still questioned. According to the the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2011 using the scale from 0 to 10 with 10 being the most democratic and 0 being the least democratic, Vietnam ranks from 2-2.9 point which is very low in the scale. It reflects to some extent the limited level of freedom and democracy in Vietnam. The fact of a single-one party ruling the country has diminished political liberty based on the liberal democracy's view. People have the right to directly vote for representatives of National Assembly and People councils at 3 levels (commune, district and province). Then the National Assembly representatives on behalf of people vote for the heads of the nation such as Chairman of National Assembly, President and Prime Minister. And most of them are party members, delegated by the CPV and very few cases if not to say not any cases are self nominated. The domination of CPV in all governmental organs or the limited separation of power between legislative body (National Assembly), executive body (the government) and judicial body (Inspection Institution and Supreme Court) to some levels don't meet the standard of an electoral democracy. In addition, regarding freedom of speech and media, all of media agencies including newspapers, magazines, and Television stations are under strict control of the government and direction of the Central Communication Department of the CPV. This narrow framework for media activities once again put Vietnam into international criticism wave for freedom of press and speech.

If taking the criteria as liberal democracy to mirror the democracy in Vietnam, it seems that Vietnamese citizens or civil society lack of autonomy and space for participation. However, the nature of a socialist republic country and the 'holy' ideology of "a country of people, by people and for people" (former President Ho Chi Minh) have been partly set in force by Vietnamese government and the CPV with the settlement of people's representative organizations and its attention to the democracy and people participation at the grassroots level. In theory, Vietnam has numerous institutions in which citizens and authorities can interact and through which people's opinions, concerns, complaints and suggestions can be listened (Kerkvliet et al., 2008:

11). These organizations are legitimated by the Party and Government and constitutes in the social political system, among which some organizations are considered civil society organizations (Mass organizations, the Fatherland Front). At the highest level is the National Assembly, downwards to province, district and commune levels are People Councils, and village level is the village head. More importantly, the issuance of Grassroots Democracy decree in 1998 has opened space for people's involvement in government's affairs at commune/ward/town level, reflecting the autonomy and the importance of people's decision making. In practice, the actual participatory and interactive spirit of these institutions does not always match with its promises (Kerkvliet et al., 2008: 11). But to some extent, this helps to reverse the mainstream of top-down approach which becomes the practice in governance of Vietnam. And it also shows that although Vietnam does not fulfil the model of liberal democracy, a deliberative or participatory democracy integrated into representative democracy (See Annex 2: Glossary on democracy forms, UNDP Vietnam, 2006: iii) has been formed in primitive stage, not yet in the whole system but at least at grassroots levels with grassroots democracy regulations, which will be discussed below

3.3 Grassroots democracy regulations and Local participation: a look at nature and purpose

Grassroots Democracy regulation was first issued in 1998 as the Grassroots Democracy Decree No.29 by the government amended in 2003 with the Decree No.79 as promulgating the regulation on exercise of democracy in communes and gained higher legal value with the enactment of Ordinance No.34 by the Standing Committee of National Assembly. This has put people participation in place which was before only the slogan of the CPV even though its legal effect is only at the grassroots level of commune/ward/town. In another way, Grassroots democracy regulations (GDRs) have framed local participation by which methods, avenue and subjects for citizen-official interaction have been formalized.

The birth of these regulations was “a response to rural unrests during 1996 and 1997 when protests against corrupt and exploitative local officials made the Vietnamese leadership consider how to formally strengthen management by the people” (Mekong Economics and Embassy of Finland Hanoi, 2006: 5). Accordingly, the lack of transparency in local governance and people's participation in public or common affairs has resulted in citizens' dissatisfaction and social instability. Grassroots Democracy regulations were issued to solve this problems at grassroots level. It aims at increasing transparent system and accountability of local authorities and enhancing people participation in policy planning, implementing and monitoring. The regulations require local governments act in more open and democratic manners through information publication, consultation, monitoring and votes from people and at the same time encourage people to actively take part in social and public management. Interestingly, the centralized democratic government which is often viewed by some Western countries as “authoritarian regime” is opening up the more space for participatory governance. This makes Vietnam a special

case in term of contradiction of a single-one party system and democratic management manner at grassroots level. To mention once again, as a counter-factor, Vietnam is not qualified for a democratic model under the criteria of liberal democracy but with grassroots democracy regulations, it refers to participation dimension in democracy and close to democracy model of Guillermo O'Donnell (2004). Democracy is not only human rights but both Human development and human rights and therefore he conceptualizes "human being as an agent", endowed with three attributes: an autonomy for decision making; a cognitive ability for reasoning; and a responsibility for actions (Guillermo O'Donnell, 2004b,p13 as cited in Campbell, 2008). The grassroots democracy regulations give people a chance to exercise these capabilities.

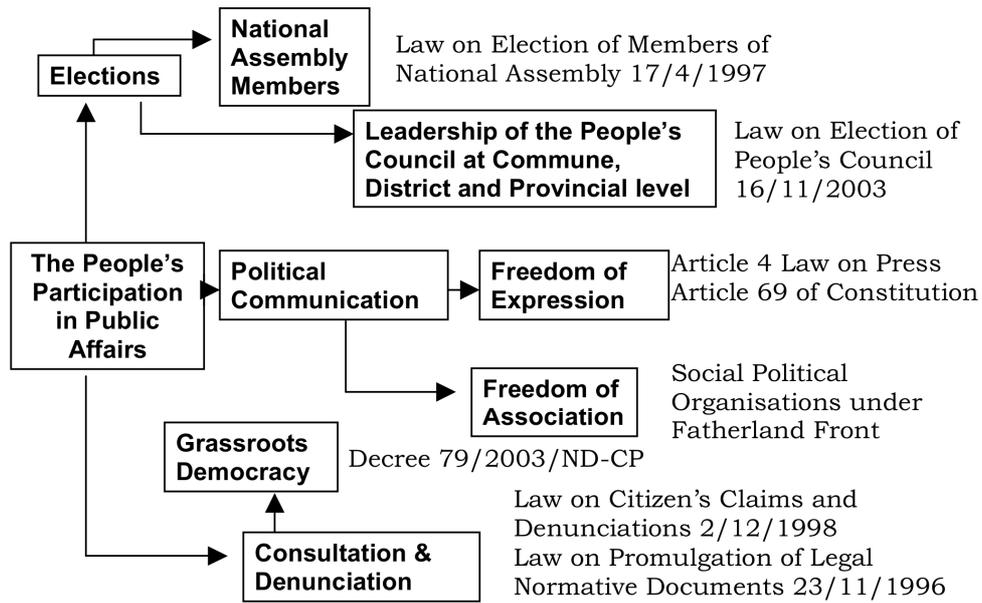
The regulations have covered all 4 basic levels in participation ladder as mentioned earlier "informing", "consultation", "decision making" and even a further step of monitoring the government. It is translated into the famous saying "People know, people discuss, people implement and people monitor". These 4 categories based on local government obligations and people's roles were first introduced by the Decree 1998 briefly and inadequately. The decree was not specific enough to give motivation for the government officials who are still reluctant to change the old top-down approach. The second Decree No.79 much specifies in obligations of the local government and role of people. The 3rd regulation known as the Ordinance No.34 on democracy at commune/ward/town added some more contents in operation guidelines and the 4 categories of people's rights. It is a progress in term of legal status and impact when enacted by Standing Committee of National Assembly. Under the regulations, the 4 ladder of participation as people know, people discuss, people do and people monitor were prescribed as follow:

- Works to be informed to people: commune development plans, land use plans, commune budgets, poverty alleviation plan, result of corruption investigations.
- Works to be discussed and directly decided by people: infrastructure and public welfare projects, discussion and votes for people monitoring board for construction
- Works to be discussed with people and decided by the commune administration: draft resolutions of commune people committee, social economic development plan, compensation for land and employment programs
- Works to be monitored and inspected by people: implementation of commune people council's resolution, settlement of complaints and cases of corruption

(Grassroots democracy Decree No.79; Grassroots Democracy Ordinance No.34; Antonio, 2012: 114-115)

These regulations have created a firm foundation for people participation in local governance, a tool for preventing corruption and changing governmental officials' working habit in a more participatory approach.

Figure 3.3: Democratic system of Vietnam



Source: (Duong 2004: 7)

3.4 Civil society in Vietnam

While grassroots democracy regulations are considered a further step of the Vietnamese Party and government in opening space for people, it is also expected to give more space for civil society organizations in Vietnam as a supporter for the process. In fact, numbers of civil society organizations has involved in enhancing grassroots democracy and people participation. The understanding of their nature, history and current status is the key to explore their role in this contemporary grassroots democracy.

3.4.1 Different perceptions of CSOs and the conditions

Civil society or civil society organizations are still new concepts in Vietnam. It is clearly part of a foreign agenda and closely linked to international aid and development (Salemink, 2006: 105).

Back in the history, civil organizations had close link with the Party and Vietnamese government during the war time. The leaders of Communist Party based on the alliance of different classes and people groups which formed so-called Viet Minh Front to create a collective power against French colonization and later the American invasion. The civil society was integrated into the Party-state (CIVICUS et al., 2006: 25) with the continuation of collaboration between the government and various civic groups in the course of reconstruction of the country after long-lasting wars. As in the North, civil society was transformed in the South into a number of Mass organizations (MOs) and other professional and cultural associations. Therefore, under the

Vietnamese authority's view, civil society organization is much more envisioned in the shape of these civic organizations or social-political organizations.

The norm "civil society" or "civil society organizations" and "Non government organizations" have recently "imported" into Vietnam since the renovation in 1986. The opening up of the country along with the course of economic reform has paved the way for a flow of international donors including the United Nation systems (UN), the World bank, Asian Development Bank, bilateral donors and INGOs into Vietnam with the rhetoric assistance to booster the economic and a democratic civilized society. Many of them came with the explicit aim of supporting or promoting civil society in Vietnam under the "partnership" or "solidarity" with domestic state and non-state organizations. During 1990s, VNGOs mushroomed as a demand for cooperation from these external supporters (Salemink, 2006).

The ambivalent attitude of Vietnamese leaders towards emerging civil society can be explained by the narrow political environment under the monopoly control of one Party and government which want to ensure the hegemonic power. As a result, only certain organizations prescribed by the state such as umbrella organizations, MOs and official religious organizations or other professional associations have formal legal standing. For other types of organizations, except INGOs which are welcomed by the government as the supporters and donors to the development when the country still lacks of resources and capacity, the wide-spread formulation and development of many VNGOs remains distance from strict view of many governmental officials. In fact, the term "non-governmental organization" is very close to meaning of "no government" or "anarchy" (vo chinh phu), which is conventionally linked to anti-government groups abroad. Thus, Vietnamese leaders and officials are reluctant to use and accept this "norm" for domestic associations in the fear of creating unexpected disagreement among society (Salemink, 2006; Kerkvliet et al., 2008). Consequently, there has been no complete legal constitution so far for independent NGO establishment and many VNGOs have to find their legal status under registration of the state's agencies or universities within the name of research, training centres or consultancy groups. Meanwhile, together with community-based organizations, they are strongly supported by international donors and NGOs alongside with civil society development agenda.

Until recently the rules and regulations for establishing such organizations and having legal standing are more accommodating (Kerkvliet et al., 2008: 12). The "socialization" policy which encourages the individuals, family and groups to be involved in solving public affairs rather than leaving all for the state is one of the impetuses for boosting the birth of many community-based groups and VNGOs participating in development process. The grassroots democracy regulations also facilitate this collective power mobilization. Despite more door-opened ground, legal framework for CSOs in Vietnam is assessed by many studies and research (CIVICUS et al., 2006; Kerkvliet et al. 2008) incomplete and insufficient. To be recognized as an organization requires a group very long-lasting and complicated procedure. Eventually, as mentioned

above, many VNGOs had to register their name under the umbrella organizations. Obviously, there is no domestic civil society sector that is independent or at least autonomous from the direct control of state in Vietnam as Saleminck (2006: 105) assessed. The Western conventional view on autonomous CS can't be applied in Vietnam. In spite of difficulties in term of legal framework, many groups just form and work actively regardless of name or registration to activate their social function as "common arena".

3.4.2 Diversity of organizations

Norlund (2007) clustered CSOs in Vietnam into certain types via mass organizations, professional organizations, umbrella organizations (such as the Fatherland Front (FF) or Vietnam Association of Technology and science (VUSTA)), VNGOs and Community-based organizations (CBOs). The CIVICUS et al. (2006) added INGOs, faith-based and informal groups into this category. According to a recent survey, organizations in Vietnam are widespread and diverse with approximately over 300 operate nationwide, more than 2000 register at province levels and tens thousands exist at lower level (Hoang Ngoc Giao, 2007: 3, Norlund, 2007: 14 as cited in Kerkvliet et al., 2008). Except MOs, professional organizations, umbrella organizations that receive financial support from the state, most of VNGOs and some CBOs rely on international donor's sponsors. And in certain cases, INGOs and external donors are counterpart or partners with MOs, umbrella organizations or research centres, very few organizations via cooperatives or CBOs are self-financed. This again reflects CS in Vietnam is a special case as Norlund (2007) mentioned if bringing all important criteria of CSO to mirror, very few organizations can live up them.

In the scope of this study, it is not a focus to discuss all types of organizations but I will present shortly MOs and VNGOs which will be shown below as main actors from CSOs involving in grassroots democracy.

Mass Organizations

Mass organizations include Woman Union (WU), Farmer Union (FU), Youth Union (YU), Labour Union (LU) and Veteran Union (VU). Together with its umbrella organization-Fatherlands Front, these are among the oldest and current forms of people organizations created by the Party in 1920s and 1930s. They are the biggest membership-based organizations with a broad network in the country. From the tradition function to "mobilize mass" activities for obtaining independence, construction and development of nation, their roles are nowadays legitimately extended in many socioeconomic and political areas. These roles can be summarized as follow:

- Represent for proper rights and benefits of members
- Participate in state and socioeconomic management
- Monitor the government and carry out social defence and policy recommendations
- Disseminate the party and government's policies and programs

- Mobilize people to comply with law and policies and act out their “mastery”
- Mediating social disagreements among members and between members with the government

(Charters of WU, LU, YU, FU, VU and the FF, Sakata, 2006: 4)

Such mixture of social and government-related responsibilities of MOs has created disagreement whether they are part of civil society and form of CSOs (Norlund, 2007: 7, Kerkvliet et al., 2008: 19). Based on classical definitions on one hand, MOs are not accepted in civil society because they are Party-sponsored and financially supported from the state. They are highlighted by certain interviewees “the extension hand of the Party” to ensure the “the mastery of people” in the way the Party and government want¹. On the other hand, MOs are not state-managed entities and more importantly, they represent the interests of major population and are engaged in society functions. For that, they play the role as CSOs. MOs are also partners of many INGOs in development course in Vietnam.

Vietnamese Non-governmental organizations (VNGOs)

Due to lacking legal platform, VNGOs often operate under the name of research centre or registered under umbrella organizations, university or provincial department. According to Michel Gray (1999), these VNGOs consists 2 types: (1) university-or hospital-based groups, (2) individuals who form their own organizations. The first form is often composed or led by academics whose have relations with university or other agencies. They are seen as NGO-like research centres and they perform applied research and other development services. The second form is established by individuals who used to be staff of INGOs. They serve the service as the 1st one. Both of them now become “favour” partners of INGOs and donors for its expertise and experiences. But they don’t have wide membership like MOs.

3.4.3 Engagement with state and development

Among engagement with the government and people, previous researches and studies highlighted service provider as the main support of CSOs to development course in Vietnam (Kerkvliet et al., 2008; Salemink, 2006; CIVICUS et al., 2006). Many have involved in development programs focusing on poverty alleviation, livelihoods, health care, education, sanitation, HIV Aids. In such activities and projects, the CSOs are both co-operator and implementer of state’s policies or program. These cases often concern MOs, research centres or agencies under the umbrella organizations which is funded by the government. As for VNGOs or other types that are outside the auspices of the party and government structures, they provide services to INGO or multinational and bilateral donors in their agenda for development intervention

¹ Interview with Dr. Nguyen Quang A

and civil society promotion. The contribution of CSOs as service provider has helped to improving the quality of public services, especially reaching people at grassroots level more effectively and closely than the counterpart-governmental organizations (CIVICUS et al., 2006).

Through providing services, many organizations have tried to bring people together around their common issues, form groups and interact with state in a constructive ways –conveying their concerns towards authorities and suggesting state agencies to improve existing programs and pointing out shortcoming or misbehaviour of them if any (Kerkvliet et al. 2008: 23). This engagement is no doubt one of the missions of MOs and the FF in theory. But because their close link to the state and government, many scholars, developmental workers are suspicious about their real position (Kerkvliet et al., 2008, Norlund, 2007). Other INGOs and VNGOs with explicit aims to support community, through different means and methods, channel people’s interests and values of community to the government. Advocacy or participating into policy making process is another involvement of CSOs in public area. Like the previous engagement, this is also a mission of MOs and the FF while for VNGOs and CBOs that are supported by “the outsiders” try to advocate for “good practice” integrated into ideal concepts of community development, ownership or participatory planning. Many NGOs have allied with each other to set up coalition, networks or working groups in different thematic issues to lobby or advocate for policies and programs that meet the needs of people. Furthermore, holding the government accountable is also acknowledged as another engagement of CSOs in Vietnam by some recent reports (Kerkvliet et al., 2008: 32; CIVICUS et al., 2006). However, within the limited political environment, just only such agencies under state and party’s structure have the official mandate to take this right even though in fact, this is not really taken in place substantively. Organizations outside this scope involve in this monitoring stage through supporting people.

In summary, the concepts and practices of CSOs in Vietnam are newly emerging and forming. The Western view on an autonomous civil society does not comply with the context of a single-one party country like Vietnam when the current CSO landscape is the mixture of the governmental-sponsored organizations and self-established organizations with support from external donors. But this limitation can also be an advantage of Vietnamese CSOs since there are already in place institutions which officially mandate to represent for people voices and demands (MOs and the FF). And more than service delivering, literature review has proved that CSOs have involved in supporting people’s raising opinions, policy advocacy and monitoring.

Chapter 4

Grassroots democracy: from theory to reality and the interaction of actors involved

4.1 The interaction of actors involved

Before going to analyze the role of CSOs in enhancing grassroots democracy, it is important to deepen the stake holders involved in the framework of local participation under GDRs. Accordingly, the regulations promulgate rights and responsibilities for both people and the local government. People are as the right-holders and the local authorities are as right-bearers. In this frame, CSOs in which only MOs' and the FF's obligations are officially tied in the regulations serve as a supporter and of the democratic process.

From the local authority's side, Commune People Committee is the main responsibility holder to organize the implementation for all the contents of "4 rights" people are entitled. This arrangement includes publishing or make announcement for new policies and programs as circulated in things people are allow to know; arrange topics to be discussed with people; approve plans; give instruction and coordinate with relevant organizations to carry out plans and policies; responding to petitions, complaints and suggestions from people, people inspection board, community supervision board, MOs and the FF. And Commune People Committee has to report to People Council.

People as right-holders must be aware of their entitled rights and benefits. At the same time, they also have responsibility to participate into community/village/commune's public affairs such as construction for public infrastructures, vote for village heads and other leaders of commune, give opinions and suggestion for related plan and policy at local levels, which are prescribed in 4 rights "know, discuss, implement and monitor". Consequently, rights and benefits always go with obligations in the 2-way interaction between people and state.

In this relation between state-people, CSOs as a "common arena" should be a channel of conveying common issues and concern of people towards government. In the case of grassroots democracy, MOs and the FF are somehow responsible for this but more dominantly are the co-operators with government to implement these regulations. Other type of organizations especially VNGOs are not mentioned in this framework but in practice, as mentioned in the section of context of CSOs in Vietnam, through different engagements especially in "channelling people's voice", advocacy and holding the government accountability they are also playing a role in bringing GGRs from theory to real substance.

Based on 4-right-categories, different mechanisms facilitating the implementation have established, for example through meeting between People Council, People Committee, MOs and people, especially the village

meeting every 6 months. Information is published on loudspeaker system, posting at Commune People Committee or village's cultural house. Decision made by people follows the majority vote coordinated and organized by village head, MOs or the FF. People monitoring is carried out with the set up of People's Inspection board or Community's monitoring board. Individuals submit their questions or complaints and receive reports through their representative organizations (MOs) or through village head's forwards to commune level. In parallel with certain mechanisms, a steering committee system for GDRs was also in existence from the centre to village level to mainly disseminate, implement, monitor and report the grassroots democracy activities.



Notice board on Grassroots Democracy Ordinance No.34 implemented posted in Tuong Son Commune People Committee, Thach Ha District of Ha Tinh province and Dong Son sub-ward communal house, Dong Hoi city of Quang Binh province.

4.2 From theory to reality

If nature and purpose of GDRs are considered as a step forwards a more democratic civilized society of the Vietnamese Party and government, the implementation and impacts after 14 years are problematic and criticized. Many reports, evaluations, studies have been made to have a deep look in the grassroots democracy process (UNDP Vietnam, 2006; Plan International 2005, Ngo Huy Duc, 2008; Embassy of Finland Hanoi, 2006; CECODES et al., 2011; Duong, 2004; Antonio, 2012). Most of the assessments acknowledge the improvement in local government's performance and people's participation but mention many problems in which operation mechanisms, people and local officials' awareness and capacity are 3 main reasons leading to ineffective implementation.

Firstly, several mechanisms have been created to support people's getting information, discussion and monitoring but the direct implementing

mechanism including steering committees from centre to village level together with coordination among related organizations are very weak on both papers and real action. Plan International (2005: 7) evaluated:

A Democracy Regulation implementation system has been set up from the central down to local levels but vertical and horizontal linkages are not strong. Monitoring and evaluation of the Democracy Regulation implementation has not been regularly conducted nor specific criteria for monitoring and evaluation have been available. Similarly, responsibilities and duties of organs and agencies at all levels have not been legally regulated [...] supervision roles of MOs have not been brought into full play. People are aware of the necessity of supervision and have direct interests in involvement of supervision of activities that are locally implemented. Local supervision mechanism does not exist and supervision capacity of agencies is still limited. There is no clear division between rights and duties among concerned agencies and individuals in terms of supervision.

Moreover, although GDRs as pointed out earlier is a basic step for deliberate or participatory democracy, its framework and practice shown by Antonio (2012: 115) “ fail to create new mechanism of participatory institutionality” or “participatory proceduralism” which have been crucial to participatory governance”. Accordingly, the existence methods for people-state exchange are insufficient. In addition, the mechanism set up by the regulations misses the role of civil society, only mentioning the tasks of MOs and the FF but lack of concerning the significance of other type of CSOs which can be supporters of democratization process. Some local professional or interest-based associations and organizations were established but have not been supported by local authorities and other MOs. The internal and external relations among local government, MOs and other civil society organizations have not been proliferated. Therefore their potential capacity to help people to increase their participation in social economic and community management is limited (Plan International, 2005: 9).

Secondly, although GRDs has become a national propaganda which is committed by the Party and governments at all levels, literature shows that awareness and skills of local officials on the regulations are limited. The poor performance of local staff in implementing GDRs results from 2 main reasons of their capacity. The first one is, as shown by Fforde (2003: 7), the long-lasting issue of the low educational level of officials and local representative bodies. The second one lies at lack of skills and methods: investment in materials and design for training methods are ineffective and adequate; methodologies to carry out information dissemination, consultation and response to supervision and claims from people are weak (Plan International, 2005). More specifically, grassroots democracy requires a participatory process when local officials should be more open and invoke people’s participation but in reality, most of staff from People Committee lack of skills to bring people in place as a co-policy makers or local governance co-operators.

The third reason for poor practice of grassroots democracy lies at the awareness and capacity of people who are the main actors of changes at

locality. People's understanding about their rights under the regulations and the exercise of these rights are very low. It is proved recently by the on-going project on the Vietnam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI) based on measuring citizen's experience. This was made across all 63 provinces in the country and interviews with sample of 13,642 citizens (CECODES et al., 2012: 1). Among people interviewed, only 34% people were aware of the Grass democracy ordinance No.34 while 65% of them said they knew the slogan "people know, people discuss, people implement and people monitor". The civic knowledge on formal regulations or 4 basic principles embodied in such slogan is very important for people's local participation. "It may enhance accountability, improve grassroots monitoring of government agencies, and check potential abuses of power by local authorities. However, if citizens are not aware of their rights or role in participating then oversight of government agencies may suffer" (CECODES et al., 2012: 16). Not fully understanding their rights, people also lack of capacity to exercise these rights.

Beyond all above reasons, the invisible barriers hindering substantive practice of grassroots democracy and people's participation at lowest level lock on the willingness and mindset of local leaders, officials and people

Participation of people into local public affairs is still a formality. It depends on awareness and educational level of people. Meetings held by the government and other related organizations are often very general and people don't participate much. Voting at village level and People Council at 3 levels is also put in formality and for "well-recorded disease"

A substantial grassroots democracy relies on the attitude from the government whether they really want to realize this democracy. It is not only attitude and willingness but also capacity.

(Interview with Mrs. Do Thi Thanh Huyen_ Local Governance Policy Analyst-United Nation Development Program (UNDP) Vietnam)

Concluding point

In summary, linking these issues in realizing grassroots democracy with the stakeholders involved, the weakness of the implementation is not only the mechanism itself but also the capacity and awareness from local government people. And this is where MOs, VNGOs and other CSOs are assumed to take the roles to support participation of people at grassroots level.

Chapter 5

CSOs' engagement with grassroots democracy from literature to empirical evidences

This chapter shows how CSOs engage with grassroots democracy. I go from literature review to empirical evidences through the 2 cases studies of Thach Ha District Woman Union and Quang Binh Community Development Centre.

5.1 Grassroots democracy, civil society and development from literature

It is not until grassroots democracy regulations come into effective that CSOs supporting people's participation or local democracy. The notions picked up from international discourse development of "participation", "bottom up" approaches and later "ownership", "empowerment", "equality" have swept over Vietnam contemporary development through the introduction of INGOs and donors since they began working in the late 1980s and 1990s. VNGOs, CBOs and even state-sponsored CSOs as MOs quickly become partners of these "external supporters", adopting and promoting the participatory approaches. Many early projects sponsored by donors promoted people's participation by focusing on local development contributions with community-based management initiatives (UNDP Vietnam, 2006: 8). It aims at "more efficient and productive resource management, a reduction in dependence on external resources, increased equity, increased local initiative and accountability and a strengthening of economic discipline" (Care International Vietnam, 2003 as cited in UNDP Vietnam, 2006: 8). And these "bottom-up" approaches were welcomed as a potential alternative in the context of a "top-down" and centralized-state like Vietnam, which receives lots of criticisms from the international and showed its failure late 1980s (Salemink 2006 : 121). Such coincidence is not necessarily meaning to undermine the influence of CSOs especially from INGOs in more grassroots democratic governance but to emphasize that the policy of "grassroots democracy" or "socialization" is somehow inspired by efforts of CSOs and INGOs to promote local participation.

There is an undeniable agreement that grassroots democracy regulations' issuance has opened up space for citizen participation and action as noted earlier, it also gives more confidence for CSOs, international NGOs and donors in raising participation issues. Based on the existing legal frame work for local participation, many organizations are working more to deepen grassroots democracy or integrate it into various development projects and programs. Networking to support grassroots democracy has been also set up. Since 1999, a working group on people participation called PPWG (people participation working group) has been in operation, gathering different VNGOs, INGOs and Donors and aiming at enhancing people participation in the development and poverty reduction process (PPWG strategy paper 2007-2010). This initiative at least provides an exchange and coordination platform

for CSOs in advocating and promoting for “an enabling environment for effective people’s participation” (PPWG strategy paper), facilitate dialogues and understanding among different stake holders. If in the eyes of the government, grassroots democracy will help to fight against corruption, stabilize the images of the CPV and political status and increase citizens’ responsibility and contributions, International donors and NGOs lay more expectation in this policy: through participation in decision making that affect their future, people become empowered; vulnerable or exclusive groups will have more voice and equality in development; accountability and transparency from local authorities will be increased through “monitoring” and “petition lodging” mechanism prescribed by the regulations (UNDP Vietnam 2006: 10). And within the two-sided structure like Vietnamese civil society (state-sponsored organizations and external donors-sponsored organizations), MOs and the umbrella organizations are more supporting the government’s purposes while VNGOs and other organizations assisted by the international donors absorb and bring in the spirit of “empowerment”, “equality” and “good governance” from their supporters.

Although the desire of a civilized democratic environment seems to be still far from success, it is important to understand the implication underlined in the interventions of CSOs in local participation. It will help to have more deeper and critical look for findings and analysis on the roles of CSOs in enhancing grassroots democracy.

5.2 The 2 cases studies

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the 2 case studies of one mass organization and one VNGO aim to give a real glance of CSOs’ intervention in GDD. The choice of THWU and CDC matches with the analytical framework of actors involved in grassroots democracy. They are the representatives of MOs and VNGOs whose roles and interventions are much focus within the scope of this study.

Moreover, the fact that mass organization like THWU is state-sponsored while CDC is supported by an international donor always will give an interesting comparison in how they envision their role in enhancing grassroots participation and what different methods are used to support people.

5.1.1 Thach Ha District Woman Union

Thach Ha District Woman Union (THWU), Thach Ha District, Ha Tinh province belongs to the system of Vietnam Woman Union at the district level and a member of the FF. Like other members of the FF, Woman Union in general and THWU in particular have both state-supporting and social functions (See section 3.4.2 Chapter 3). With the membership network of 35.268 women over 30 communes and 1 town, THWU’s function is to represent and protect proper rights and benefits of women in the district; contributing to the Party and government management; mobilize women

member to comply the Party and government's policies and promote gender equality (Woman Union charter).

In supporting grassroots democracy, THWU was one of the main responsible organizations for the regulations implementation in the district. The dissemination for the regulations were finished years ago and now, "the spirit of the GDD is integrated into all activities of the woman union"- Mrs. Xuan_Vice president of THWU shared. The work "to know" has been maintained as a core mission by THWU, new policies and regulations from the centre down to the district and commune level reach the people thanks to the network of WU staff at communes. The District and commune staff also comes to villages and woman groups to give more explanation of new policies, encourage and guide people to set force the policies. The democratic manner has affected in their working and communication. Plans and activities of THWU are developed based on the discussion and consultancy from the member, THWU staff collects people's demand and priorities to have the input for their plans and strategies.

In the past, all the plans and programs came to people in top-down way without consultation or listening to people, people had to comply them but now, not only our Union but the local government also apply the bottom-up approach to include people's opinion before designing any social economic development program or issuance of a policy. (Interview with Mrs. Bui Thi Xuan-Vice president of THWU)

In the work "to implement" in GDRs, THWU also takes part in the process of mobilizing people to make contribution to development of public infrastructures. With the closest reach to woman members, Communes' WUs play a role as connecting people to local government by facilitating their participation in meeting with the authorities. If there is any misunderstanding between people and the government, they will be the "body" in between to solve this conflict.

Recently, THWU has been strengthening the coalition of members in the Fatherland Front at district and commune level to help people in 6 communes affected by Thach Khe steel mining project. This is a big project approved by the Prime Minister and has been carried out in 6 communes of Thach Ha District since 2007. Although the mining is just exploited partly, its exploration's activities have been creating serious impact on people's livelihood and environment. People's lacking of cultivation land, pollution, waste, damaged public facilities are the issues that people are facing. The investment for infrastructure from the higher level authority to these 6 mining communes is stopped. Plan for resettlement and job changing is not clear. People is living in instability and fear of not being able to stay, neither to leave (Recommendation report for 6 Thach Khe steel mining communes THWU 2008). Under the support of Oxfam Solidarity Belgium, THWU together with other MOs and the FF of the District and the 6 communes conducted initial assessments of the affection and collection of people's issues. Based on these evaluations, they have made several recommendations towards the project management board, local government and higher level related organizations to urge them to response to people's need. THWU coordinates with its coalition

carry out direct dialogues at 6 communes between people, the government and project investors. The dialogue is the opportunity for people to speak up their concern and recommendations regarding the compensation price, improvement for the environment and infrastructure, urging for early resettlement plan. The government and project management board have been asked to response to people's claims right at the meeting. All recommendations and promises have been later recorded in written for the following up. Besides, before these meeting, THWU supports people to prepare their recommendations and train them in presentation skills to better convince the government and other attendants.

Support from THWU:

All the information of Thach Khe mining regarding its plan, the affection is updated by the Woman Union to us. We also receive free vocational training organized by THWU to prepare for our job changing in the new resettlement areas. (Interview with Mrs. Tran Thi Nhung_village 8_Thack Khe commune)

The direct dialogues between people and the government are very meaningful and necessary since such meetings at commune level, especially with the attendance of leaders from district or higher levels are very rare. People expect more and more dialogues in the coming time. (Interview with Mrs. Pham Thi Nga_President of Thach Khe commune WU)

THWU assessed themselves as having multi-functional roles supporting their members in exercising their rights in GDDs, as THWU considers themselves as a disseminator, advocator, mediator between government and people and part of capacity builder. However, although advocacy and social monitoring and defence as the core function, THWU admits that they are still weak at this aspect

We can monitor policy and make recommendations towards issues at local level but we cannot reach macro policies or programs decided at higher level. Our staff still lack of policy analysis and presentation skill. (Interview with Mrs. Nguyen Thi An_Vice President of THWU)

5.1.2 Quang Binh Community Development Centre

The Community Development Centre of Quang Binh (CDC) is a VNGO established and operating within the centre province of Quang Binh. With the objectives to develop and enhancing community self_management capacity, it aims at supporting people especially the poor and disadvantaged in Quang Binh to actively and sustainably participate into socio-economic cultural and environmental development, contributing to improving their life quality. The community-based and rights-based approach has been recently enhanced through the program Promoting Community Management Models (PCCM) by CDC.

The PCCM has been carried out in 3 provinces of Nam Dinh, Quang Binh and Hoa Binh since 2007 under the support of Swiss Development

Cooperation. This program is coordinated by the Center for promoting development for Woman and children (DWC), a VNGO based in Hanoi and directly implemented by other VNGOs at the provinces, in which CDC is the acting organization in Quang Binh. CDC targets at communities in 9 urban commune/ward areas in Dong Hoi city of Quang Binh. Interestingly, this community management model as shared by Mrs. Pham Thanh Hoai_ the director is initiated by the Ordinance No.34 on Grassroots Democracy. In fact, the ideal of participatory community development was introduced to people in many projects of CDC before but in an imposed and promoted way rather than letting people answer the question of why they need to do that and decide what they want to do. The GDRs which recognize people rights to know, to be discussed, to implement and to monitor shed a light in CDC's new approach:

People have their all rights to make decision and manage their own affairs related to their community and it is ensured by legal framework, the ordinance. Why don't we leave them space for design and decide what they want to do but impose a ready-design participatory community project (Interview with Mrs. Pham Thi Hoai_Director of CDC).

And since then, The GDRs have become the compass in all activities of the community management model. Usually, the very first activity when CDC brought PCCM to a community is to provide information to people about their rights prescribed in GDRs through training, leaflets or handbooks. Besides, a small budget will be granted to support the community or village/sub-ward for implementing their initiatives. More than that, CDC staff also conducts training courses on planning, facilitation skills for some key members at community to help them carry out community planning in a democratic manner. Up till now, in sub-wards supported by CDC, many have raised the fund bigger from the contribution of community, they discuss how to use this fund by priority and effectively, for example to invest into public infrastructures, to support poor family and other common affairs.

Not only facilitating their discussions, decisions and reinforcing their capacity, CDC also support people to have the opportunity to exercise their right "to be discussed" by the organization of direct dialogues between people and the local authorities. This is the second component of the program which is carried outside the scope of regular meeting of People Councils or People Committee with people. Participatory approach is the difference that CDC helps to bring to these dialogues. If the meeting between people and People councils and People committees are often made in one-way communication way, in which people just listen and don't raise opinions, the dialogues involve the opinions from people, direct response from the authority to people's recommendations or claims. Thanks to this, people can address their issues timely and raise their needs and opinions contributing to common affairs of the village and ward.

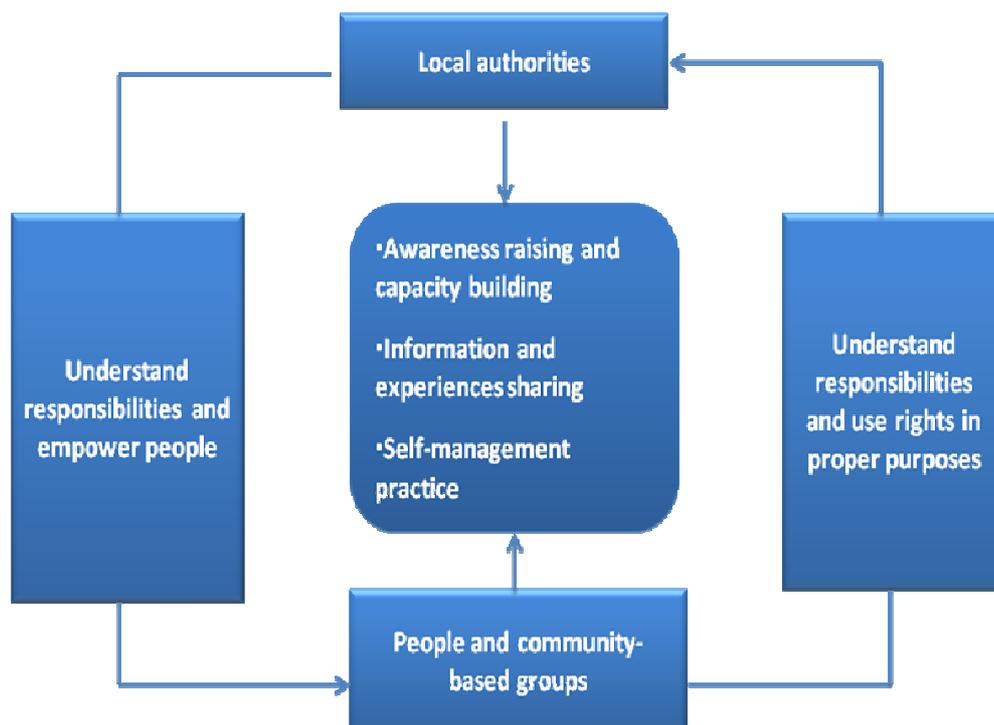
The third activity in this model is to support local government staff to renovate local social economic development planning process. Social economic development plan (SEDP) is an important plan of each local government and at higher levels. It is one of issues which people are entitled to be discussed on.

In the normal practice at communes, the ready-made plan or design is brought down to people for adding their opinions if needed. The new planning process introduced by CDC applies the bottom-up and more participatory manner. Needs and recommendations are collected from the people first through their representatives before the draft of SEDP is developed. Then this draft will be discussed again with people or representatives of people and other relevant parties including related government agencies and private sectors to mobilize finance and human resources. This component has helped to increase capacity of government officials in “listening” to people and “being more transparent”. On the other side, people have more chance to participate into SEDP process to make it more close to their needs:

People consider this new planning procedure is very practical and useful because more than anyone, they understand better their available resources and their needs. After that, when the plan is implemented, it is easy to get consensus from people since they participated at the beginning. (Interview with Mr. Nguyen Van Hao_head of Sub_ward No.8, Dong Son Ward, Quang Binh Province)

When asked about their roles in GDRs enhancement, CDC staff assessed their role as advocator, capacity builder and facilitator is as the dominant roles among their interventions

Figure 5.1.2: PCCM approach framework



Source: translated from PCCM approach framework
http://www.cmm.com.vn/Uploaded/Portal12/Download/Tintuc_cgs_vn_tailieu_201091415h36m50s.pdf

Chapter 6

Discussion and analysis on main roles of CSOs in enhancing grassroots democracy

After going from literature review to the two case studies for CSOs' engagement with grassroots democracy, this chapter is the synthesis and analysis of their interventions. Combining this with the discussions and interviews with different respondents during the field trip, the following roles of CSOs in contributing to enhancing grassroots democracy are highlighted. These findings also conform to the hypotheses I has pointed out in the Chapter 2.

6.1 Disseminator

When grassroots democracy regulations were first introduced and implemented, mass organizations like THWU are the coordinators of the local governments to disseminate these policies to people through their broaden network of members. Undertaking the responsibility of policy dissemination, mass organizations transmit propagandas on GDRs and other policies, programs and legal documents to the people as part of their contribution to fulfil people's "right to know". However, the quality and depth of these disseminations have not been evaluated since it seems people's understanding of the GDDs in particular and of other policies is still low. In the case of THWU for example, when discussing with some villagers as well as members of THWU in the 2 communes of Thach Khe and Tuong Son on the content of grassroots democracy Ordinance, 3 interviewees gave a blurred understanding of what grassroots democracy is. Instead of explaining the four rights and how they can exercise these rights at their communes, people emphasized more simply at meetings at village and commune levels and on how much contribution people made to public infrastructures. They also did not forget to mention the support of THWU in provision of information and new policies from the government².

The information comes to people from mass organizations in rather passive way than critical way. Ideas and plans from the government conveyed to people in the forms of "has to do or should do" with hardly any question on whether or not these plans are suitable for the people, even less with asking people for alternatives. Mrs. An_vice president of THWU shared that they could only make recommendations on policies or programs issued by local authorities but with policies from the national level, they could do nothing but

² Interviews with Mrs. Tran Thi Nhung_village 8 Thach Khe commune, Mrs. Duong Thi Thu and Mrs. Duong Thi Thanh_Ha Thanh village, Tuong Son commune

disseminating and implementing. Another case study made by Wit et al. (2012) in the Vung Ang economic zone, in the same province of Ha Tinh, also pointed out some unexpected roles of MOs and the FF of Ky Phuong commune regarding supporting land clearance and resettlement for the economic zone construction. Instead of helping their members claim for fair compensation, proper job changing and resettlement plan, these organizations (WU, FU, YU) sided with the state in trying to convince people for moving through dissemination and mobilization actions (Wit et al., 2012: 25-27, 47). This reflects again the “conflicting” nature of MOs or the FF in the civil society world. On one hand, they help people to be aware of their rights and benefits with updates on new policies and programs that directly affect them. On the other hand, they also support the government to convince people to comply with new guidelines from the government.

Also helping people to be conscious of their rights, VNGOs like CDC approach people with more attention to substance of understanding GDRs. Not having a broad network of people and groups like MOs but VNGOs have strengths in participatory methods, right-based and empowered approaches towards benefits of community and society especially vulnerable groups (poor people, woman and children, ethnic minority), which are somehow adopted from international NGOs and donors. To support people to have deeper understanding of their “4 rights” and responsibilities of the government in GDRs, they have brought information to people through different channels such as in handbooks, leaflets or by organizing workshops, trainings and forming groups to exchange the knowledge. CDC in the case study takes awareness raising for beneficiaries as the first and important step before supporting them exercise their rights. Another 2 examples came from my discussion with scholars and representatives from other INGOs and VNGOs are LERES (Center for Legal Research and Services) under the Law Faculty of Vietnam National University in Hanoi and CSDM (Centre for Sustainable Development in Mountainous Areas)_ a member of VUSTA. LERES³ as a legal centre carried out many law propaganda and consultation in which GDRs was also a core topic to villagers, village heads, local officials and mass organizations staff in many provinces across the country. CSDM raised awareness of people on GDRs by distributing posters, leaflets to villages and organizing dissemination courses in project sites (Phu Tho province and Hanoi)⁴. In this aspect, VNGOs have been complementing to the dissemination role of MOs and the FF.

The role as disseminator of MOs and VNGOs has helped increase the awareness of people and local officials in their rights and responsibilities under GDRs.

³ <http://www.leres.org.vn/english/gioithieu.htm>

⁴ Interview with Mr. Dang Duc Nghia-Project officer of CSDM and Mr. Cuong-Project officer of CSDM

6.2 Capacity Builder

Raising awareness is an important step to support people participate into the local governance. But “to know” is just only a very basic element of the participation ladder and not enough for people to fully take part in public affairs. The “agency” of people, from knowledge should be translated into action. This human capability in democracy as mentioned by O’ Donnell before is the focus of intervention from CSOs, especially from INGOs and VNGOs through capacity building for people.

The role as capacity builder in grassroots democracy by CSOs is showed mainly through training in knowledge and skills for people and local officials or facilitating participatory planning. These interventions meet the capacity limitations of people and local officials as analyzed in Chapter 4. Having the rights to discuss, implement and monitor the local government and public affairs but people lack the capabilities to exercise these rights and local staff is weak at skills in dissemination, mobilizing people’s involvement or consultation with people. With the strength in methods and skills, VNGOs have been contributing to bridging these gaps by introducing new methodologies and skills to people and local staff including participatory planning, facilitation skills, community analyzing and evaluation, project management/monitoring and evaluation, presentation or recommendation skills. These concepts and methodologies once again came in Vietnam together with flow of assistance and aids from INGOs and international donors (Salemink, 2006) and they have become core set of capacity building to people and government. Thus it makes sense that VNGOs which mostly receive support from these outsiders and get familiar with these new methodologies are the adopter and implementer of them. And behind all such capacity reinforcement is to facilitate the “bottom-up” democracy when people are more equipped with basic skills to participate in this process. CDC’s community development model is an example: the granting of the ownership to community in using their fund and making priority for their investments requires people to act in collective action. CDC support people in planning and facilitation skills to help beneficiary community have more effective planning. They also work with local officials on renewing their way of working in more bottom-up planning with consultation from people. The interaction both with people and government addresses the capacity building at “agency” and “structure” angles. The right-holders are enabled to realize their entitlement and local authorities as rights-bearers take their responsibility more substantial. This is also a further step from enhancing the right “to know” to the right “to implement” and the right “to discuss” of people.

However, as VNGOs’ intervention is often limited within the scope of projects or programs and they don’t have network of membership like mass organizations, the expansion and sustainability of their capacity building is open to doubt. In the case of CDC is the same, not all members of villages or officials within a commune or sub-ward are trained but only a number of people receive this support. The remark is how the knowledge and skills from those core trainees can be exchanged and transferred to others. Although many INGOs and VNGOs like CDC try to organize study trips, workshops for exchanging between people, these efforts are still like “the sand in the sea”.

This question again leads to the debate on politics of participation in development, whether all new skills and methods and pilot models of community-self management and bottom-up planning introduced by CDC and other organizations will be institutionalized in the manner of people and government at grassroots level or only used as “technocrat intervention”. The discussions with CDC representatives and people who participate in PCCM project, they showed their satisfaction with their strengthened capacity and the new way of working of the local governments. They saw PCCM as “**an empowerment**” to people through providing them opportunity to gain capacity and participation

Empowerment by capacity enhancement:

Before, people did not care much on the public affairs and gave responsibility to the sub-ward head and local officials because they did not really involve into a democratic discussion or participation. Since the PPCM, awareness and self-management capacity are improved considerably (Interview with Mr. Nguyen Van Hao_head of Sub_ward No.8, Dong Son Ward, Quang Binh Province)

Awareness and capacity of people increase significantly: discussion, prioritizing and developing small projects because people are the owner and participate in the project at the beginning. (Interview with Mrs. Nguyen Thi Nguyet_head of sub-ward No.7, Nghia Ninh Ward, Quang Binh Province)

The results of CDC’s intervention as well as many VNGOs working on enhancing capacity of people to some extent has brought change in people’s attitude, knowledge and skills. However, the impact is still limited. Wider and sustainable change in people and local government capacity can’t be achieved with “single by single” project or program, it need a “huge” movement aiming at structure and power as Hickey and Mohan (2005) mentioned. This is the point CSOs should strive for but requires more collective and long-term efforts.

MOs and the FF, on the contrary, have the potential to bring much broader change thanks to its wide networks and membership. Nevertheless, it depends on their position whether they really support people or favour of the Party and state. This is always questioned among academics and development workers. Furthermore, MOs and the FFs lack capacity to take a proper capacity building role. As some studies have showed MOs and the FF as representative organizations of people’s voice towards local government are still very weak at policy advocacy and monitoring capacity to support people in monitoring public affairs (Plan International, 2005). Therefore, they sometimes become partners and target groups of capacity building from INGOs and VNGOs. THWU is such a case when the organization also receives support from an international NGO (Oxfam Solidarity Belgium (OSB)). As shared by representatives from OSB, they chose MOs like THWU as partners since they believe MOs are the mandate “actor for change” in Vietnam and they wish to improve their “supposed to be” representative role for people rights instead of supporting the government. With the assistance from OSB, THWU staff had chances to attend trainings on different skills and methods. They have shared

these experiences to their members and people through organizing other trainings for people in Thach Khe mining areas regarding recommendations and presentation skills. This helps people to be more confident in raising their opinions and expectations in the meetings with the government.

Being trained and supported in presentation skills, many women in communes now more confidently participate and raise their opinions in meeting and dialogues (Interview with Mrs. Pham Thi Nga_President of Thach Khe commune WU)

In both cases of THWU and CDC, the capacity building mainly focuses on the ability to “know”, “implement” and “discuss” and misses capability to “monitor”. It mirrors previous evaluations on civil society in Vietnam through literature review that the role and capacity of “watchdog” or monitoring of CSOs in Vietnam is still weak (CIVICUS et al., 2008; Thayer, 2009).. The narrow political environment with strong and dominant control of one-party government also makes these “monitoring rights” more sensitive and not easy to access.

6.3 Facilitator or Mediator

The role of facilitator entails different involvements of an individual or organization to support a process or a group of people understand their common objectives and assist them to plan the achievement without taking any particular positions or imposing their ideas.

Not intervening deeply in people’s decision rather than mobilizing their knowledge and facilitating their capacity development, some INGOs and VNGOs see their role as a facilitator for participatory process of people in local governance. CDC and their cooperative organization, DWC explained the role as a facilitator is manifested by their various assistance to the community and local government. They are not doing and deciding for people but first raising people’s awareness and awaking their knowledge and capacity. More importantly, they connect people to the government, providing them chance to address their issues to the local authority. The direct dialogue between people and local government is the fruitful evidence for this facilitation. They are providing access, opportunities and ideas to people rather than doing for people as outcome mapping theory suggests.

Mass organizations like THWU shared the same facilitator role in their activity to conduct direct talks for the people in Thach Khe mining areas towards responsible relevant parties. Such mechanisms facilitated by CDC and THWU help to channel people’s needs and expectations towards local authorities. They also create direct participatory platforms for GDRs implementation, which is assessed missing by Antonio (2012) above. But theoretically, MOs and the FF with their close relation to the government recognize themselves as a mediator in bridging the misunderstanding and the gap between government and people (See section 3.4.2). To this extent, their role of facilitator in local democratic sphere is not clear since in some cases they also represent the will and order of the government, for example in policies dissemination.

To return to the case of CDC, their interventions as assessed by the staff and beneficiaries also help to ease the tension between the government and people. Then this impact also gives an added value to its facilitator role with the new role as mediator. The role as mediator of CDC works in this context since both local government and people acknowledge the benefits of community development model. The government see that people can self mobilize their resources and develop their community and less burden to them. People see that they are more empowered and through direct dialogue organized in participatory way, both government and people understand each other more⁵. But it is not always an appropriate role for VNGOs. Their facilitation in the field of people's capacity and participation may also lead to tension between people and local authorities if the local government is afraid to deal with increasing claims and recommendations or even criticisms from more knowledgeable and skilful people:

People like very much direct dialogue with the government but the government, on one hand, is busy with other affairs and, on the other hand, is afraid to solve all the problems raised by people in the dialogue. Therefore, the government does not always proactively carry out dialogue with people. We have not had direct dialogue again for the last 2 years (Interview with Mr. Nguyen Van Hao)

To link this point with the criticism of politics of development and participation, the question of power, social structure and transformation is important again. The changes must be made from both people and government's behaviours and attitudes. For this point, CDC at least has achieved some progress although it is very modest at their project areas

Understanding between people and government and between people and people:

Leaders of local authorities say that although PCMM activities take a lot of time but this is a good chance for the government to show its transparency and accountability. It makes people understand more about the government's activities. The local government feels more responsible and their relationship with people is better. (Interview with Mrs. Bui Thi Kim_Director of DWC)

Through directly participation in managing community project, people have chance to work with each other and make collective action. Therefore it helps to increase solidarity among community (Interview with Mr. Nguyen Van Hao)

6.4 Advocate

Policy recommendation and influence or advocacy is another involvement of CSOs marked by studies and evaluation of CSOs in Vietnam. But this

⁵ Interview with CDC staff and people in CDC project areas

engagement receives very poor comment from literature as among the weakest activities (CIVICUS, 2006: 11; Norlund, 2007: 18). Their role as advocator in enhancing grassroots democracy is not an exceptional. The impact on policy changes takes place but in very limited scope.

As for VNGOs whose status are not binding within government structure, to directly talk and make recommendations for policy changes towards the government are not a mandate by law or authorization from the government. But with “social defence” characteristic of a CSO, this role is valid to the common interest of people. Thus, their voice and influence are limited especially in the narrow political environment like Vietnam with domination and control of single party government. Under such restrictions, some of them chose evidenced-based (with pilot model) rather than direct talk as a way to advocate for practice of good local governance. The PCCM-pilot model of CDC is an example. Since recognizing the benefits of community-self management model and bottom-up planning, this model can be expanded more by the government. In CDC project area, Quang Binh People Committee made a decision to adopt the dialogue model in PPCM for applying in all meeting between People Council or government and people⁶. To give more evidence, an organization called Social Policy Ecology Research Institute (SPERI) working on community development work among farmers, noted in the report by Kerkvliet et al. (2008) gives another example of how VNGOs try to do advocacy or lobby for common interests of people. In this case, through its research and community development experience in sustainable agriculture, indigenous knowledge and especially the value of communal ownership and use, SPERI explains to local and national government officials and other audience and show them how the ownership of community and reservation of indigenous knowledge will lead to a sustainable development (Kerkvliet et al., 2008: 29 and 35). These efforts, hence, are still modest with the impact at lower level, not yet a big change at higher level.

MOs and the FF indeed have the advantage to take active advocator role since they have the mandate authorized by the party and government and representativeness sent by their members. In supporting people to realize their participation especially the right “to discuss” and “to monitor”, the advocacy role is shown through the collection of people’s needs/expectation and channelling them towards local government. Thus on behalf of people, mass organizations can advocate for policies and programs that support their members’ benefits and expectations. The coalition of THWU with other MOs and the FF trying to help community in 6 communes of Thach Khe steel mining areas prove to this argument. By making assessment on the impact of the mining on people’s life and expectations for resettlement plan, compensation and job change after moving, they translated them into recommendations to government and related parties and advocate for timely

⁶ Interviewee with Mrs. Pham Thi Hoai_director of CDC and Mrs. Bui Thi Kim_director DWC

response to this needs. These attempts contribute to the change in Thach Khe commune now. The Ha Tinh province People Committee has granted money to improve the damaged infrastructure in the commune due to the steel mine exploitation. But the resettlement plan and job changing plan for people are still no answer from the government⁷. Regardless of the mandate to be consulted and make policy recommendations, their “hybrid” form between party, state system and social function makes this advocator role of MOs and the FF are suspicious. The case of the Vung Ang economic zone as mentioned above showed the MOs indeed carried out “advocacy work” towards their constituents for moving out the area instead of advocacy towards the government for claiming fair chance for people. With THWU in this study, they don’t make clear their position on that, they said they are representing for benefits and rights of woman meanwhile have to disseminate government policy and take part in government management.

Despite the limitation of advocacy’s impact, their activities provide another mechanism for people participation, particularly in the right “to discuss”. Advocacy is also the way that helps to convey people’s opinions to the government.

6.5 Other findings and recommendations

Analyzing the ineffective implementation of GDRs at awareness, capacity of government officials and people, CSOs have tackled this weakness as the role of disseminator and capacity builder. These are the 2 dominant roles that they have shown so far. But more than this, they have created more mechanisms for people participation, which is still lack or ineffective at grassroots democracy sphere. For this reason, their facilitation plays an important role.

Besides 4 main roles identified above, monitoring and holding local government accountable is another involvement which is found in this study. But as many previous studies pointed out, in a country where the control of the one-party government is strong and criticisms that are related to the security and fame of the state have not yet really welcomed, monitoring by CSOS have a lot of constraints. This hinders their support to people’s supervision prescribed under GDRs. In the 2 cases of THWU and CDC, they chose to challenge this obstacle by capacity building for people in speaking up their claims in dialogues or meeting with the government. However, the recommendations from people are not well followed and responded to. Weak monitoring capacity is also a barrier to make CSOs especially MOs and FFs have very little contribution in this role.

⁷ Interviews with Mrs. Bui Thi Xuan-President of Thach Ha District Woman Union, Mrs. Pham Thi Nga-President of Thach Khe commune woman union, Mr. Hoang Van-Party secretary of Thach Khe commune, Mrs. Tran Thi Nhung_village 8, Thach Khe commune, Mr. Tran Xuan Hong-Long Tien village head, Thach Khe commune.

Interviewees in this study agreed that in comparison to MOs and its umbrella organization, VNGOs and INGOs are assessed to have better methods, tools and approaches which are close to grassroots level with “bottom-up” and “participatory” development while MOs have more favourable conditions with the supportive finance and mandate from the government and have wide range of membership⁸ This also coincides with what I have analysed from the literature review.

Interviewees, especially from VNGOs expressed the difficulties which challenge VNGOs in particular and CSOs in Vietnam in general are lack of financial support. Just only MOs, the FF and some NGOs under the umbrella organizations and close to state have regular financial support from the government while most of VNGOs depend on support from external donors. And when projects and programs are finished and INGOs or international donors withdraw from Vietnam, they have to stop their interventions or transform to other type of organization for existence. These reasons endanger the sustainability, independence and effectiveness of CSOs’ interventions in development and GDRs

Our organization has not had any long-term vision because at present, all our activities rely on financial support of external donors. If one day, they withdraw from Vietnam, we do not know how to find fund support for our activities. Therefore, to expect an expansion from our work is not easy [...] For coming years, we still have fund resource but after that, if we cannot find more, we may change our organization into consultancy group which offer service to the World Bank or the UN. (Interview with Mrs. Bui Thi Kim_Director of DWC)

Many interviewees showed their expectation that government will open more space and create better institutions for CSOs to involve and support people in all aspects of social economic development. As long as the government considers CSOs as a partner, sharing the responsibility and resources in development in general and grassroots democracy in specific, the role of CSOs will become more substantive

The government should create a mechanism to support activities from CSOs. They should see VNGOs as a partners and share responsibility and resources with them (Interview with Dr. Hoang Ngoc Giao and Mrs. Bui Thi Kim)

CSOs can also mobilize support from private sectors, which is still difficult in Vietnam. Companies or rich people prefer to do charity than development work for their fame and recognition in society. (Interview with Mrs. Bui Thi Kim)

Financial issue is not the top difficulty. If CSOs are dynamic and have good initiative for supporting people and community, they can still

⁸ Interview with Dr. Nguyen Quang A, Dr. Hoang Ngoc Giao, Dr. Nguyen Ngoc Dinh, Mr. Nguyen Ngoc Lam-Vice president of Cooperation and Development Fund, Mrs. Tran Chung Chau-ISEE

find fund raising. The most important thing is the environment and mechanism facilitating their support, is lacking. And the strong control system of one-party country somehow hinders these possibilities with its hegemony power. (Interview with Dr. Nguyen Quang A)

The later point shares the view with Antonio (2012) when he mentioned the institutional environment that facilitates grassroots democracy is very limited, including financial authority, model of public administration, and especially role of civil society actors (Antonio, 2012: 115). Then changes made by CSOs in GDRs is not enough, an institutional change should be made coherently to accommodate these interventions.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

This paper has examined the prospects and constraints for civil society organisations to enhance grassroots democracy in Vietnam. This chapter will first summarize findings and then give some reflections.

By comparing selected theories on democracy, participation and civil society with current context in Vietnam, I have pointed out the following main issues.

Firstly, although Vietnam does not fulfil the criteria of liberal democracy which emphasizes issues such as free and fair elections, freedom of association, freedom of speech and the press, the fact that the Government has adopted the GDRs shows a tendency towards more deliberate or participatory democracy at least at the lowest level. The grassroots democracy regulations are one important indication for a shift from the traditional top-down governance of the authoritarian Party and government to more bottom-up planning. However, if one considers the actual contents and operationalization, GDRs is more a “participation” project, rather than a democratisation effort. Vietnam cannot be seen as a liberal democracy, neither does it have common features of democratisation. Hence, it does not fit the assumptions under the conceptualization of 3 waves of democratization including a transitional social-economic development and better education, a structural transformation to class and power and changes in political system and elite’s agency (Grugel, 2002).

The GDRs focuses more on deliberative or participatory process in which people capability and agency is enhanced to participate in policy making and local governance. It targets 4 vital rights of “to know, to discuss, to implement and to supplement”. Nevertheless, many evidences show that the implementation is far from success (UNDP Vietnam, 2006; Plan International 2006, Ngo Huy Duc, 2008; Embassy of Finland Hanoi, 2006; CECODES et al., 2011; Duong, 2004; Antonio, 2012). This is due to lack of strong and substantial mechanisms, limitations as regards attitude, awareness and capacity of local government and people. But perhaps the key reason may lie in the lack of an overall institutional change to facilitate this process to promote real participation at all levels, and to allow an actual voice and decision making role of people. Thus, when one considers the potential and actual role of CSO organisations in the implementation of the GDRs, it must be kept in mind that the overall political (one party), administrative (capacity) and social (behaviour and attitude) context is not quite favourable and that all their efforts must take into account a relatively adverse and complex institutional context.

Secondly, the nature of CSOs in Vietnam is a complicated story. When applying the concepts and of civil society from the western perspective to mirror the context of Vietnam, it makes Vietnam become a unique case with a mixture of both dependent and independent organizations from the state. One important feature common to all CSOs is a relatively high degree of state monitoring and control, which affects somehow their advocacy role in

supporting GDRs and the right of people to “monitor” the government. This paper has made a clear distinction between the MOs and VNGOs who involve much in grassroots democracy. As representative organizations for people’s rights and benefits, mass organizations have broad membership network, which is an advantage for their impact on social change. But its close relation to the Party and state make their role in civil society questionable. On the other hand, there are VNGOs whose finance and visions are more independent from state. They have more expertise on development issues and are closer to the community but they are more dependent on INGOs and international donors’ support.

Thirdly, weak mechanism and capacity of local government and people in GDRs are where CSOs come in to take their roles as disseminator, capacity builder, advocator and facilitator to enhance grassroots democracy implementation. Based on the differences in the relation to state and objectives, this research has found MOs and VNGOs have the following contribution to grassroots democracy:

1) The role of MOs: they are strong in dissemination and advocacy but weak at capacity building. The closeness to state make the first 2 roles sometimes dominant by the government’s will rather than on the side of people. MOs serve as mediator between people and state rather than being a facilitator.

2) The role of VNGO: they act as capacity builder, disseminator and facilitator. These are 3 roles of VNGOs show their strengths in term of methods and approaches. They also “cleverly” take on advocacy role even though it is not legitimately mandated to their organizations.

Behind the intervention of CSOs in GDRs, “the hand” of external forces (international donors and INGOs) influences the direction and approach of VNGOs and some MOs. Their introduction of concepts and approaches via “participation”, “bottom-up”, “empowerment”, “equality” have indeed contributed to changes in awareness, capacity of people and local government in different localities and contexts. It also improves to some extent the participatory mechanism under GDRs as pointed out in Chapter 6. However, the question which has been raised is whether and how it will be sustained and have wider impact; how to move beyond only “single by single” projects and program as one-time “technical interventions” but to create a social and political change in term of attitude, behaviour and policy both as regards the government and people. After all, this should be addressed if CSOs always bear in mind the politics of development and participation for transformative and structural change as Hickey & Mohan (2005) have correctly mentioned.

It is here that some CSOs via INGOs and VNGOs have tried to make a change and to institutionalize the frameworks of participation and local democracy. But as already addressed as recommendations, more open environment and inclusive mechanism for VNGOs and other types of CSOs (besides state-sponsored organizations) should be set up to ensure and expand their results. In this current limited environment for CSOs in Vietnam, this paper suggests to utilize the strengths and advantages of MOs and FF to create widespread and sustainable changes in Vietnamese society. With the huge network and position between people and state, they have the potential to

become a potential “efficient actor for change” if they know how to take this advantage and really show their position for benefits and rights of people and community. But even then, their very close ties to party and government will remain a constraint.

The final point for both GDRs and the role of CSOs in enhancing grassroots democracy relates to the core discussions in the development world: issues and concepts of agency and institution. The grassroots democracy degree is a step forwards in realizing people capability in participating in policy making and governance but the system of the single-one Party and government with uniform top-down way in all socioeconomic and political aspects is rather providing incentives, and encouraging their authoritarian rule rather than making a real participation possible. This creates the contradiction and incompatibility of GDRs with the system. Eventually, structure and agency are embedded. The GDRs as shown in practice cannot be implemented effectively since the institutional context does not support the process. This institution includes local government and people’s attitude and capacity, local level political dynamics with risks of elite capture, and, perhaps mostly- mind-sets that embraces local participation. Similarly, CSOs can play incremental roles in supporting grassroots democracy and making change at the localities if taking those elements into account. But to have more sustainable and huger impacts, they need a more accommodating and enabling environment (more autonomy and self dependence) to really take their roles effectively.

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Appendices

Annex 1: The Hierarchy of Vietnamese legal from the highest level to lowest level

- National Assembly: Constitution, Law, Resolution
- Standing Committee of the National Assembly: Ordinance, Resolution
- President: Order, Decision
- Government: Resolution, Decree
- Prime Minister: Decision, Directive
- Ministers and head of ministry-level bodies: Decision, Directive, Circular, Joint Circular (issued collectively by different ministries or by a ministry and a political and social organisation)
- Justice Council of the Supreme People's Court: Resolution
- Chief Justice of the Supreme People's Court/ Head of the Supreme People's Prosecutor: Decision, Directive
- People's Council: Resolution
- People's Committee: Decision, Directive

Source: Hauser Global Law School Program. Accessed 15 July 2012
http://www.nyulawglobal.org/globalex/vietnam.htm#_edn18

Annex 2: The glossary (adopted from UNDP Vietnam, 2006: iii)

Decentralization: Separation and distribution of authority, resources, and/or bureaucratic processes and jurisdictions to lower levels of government.

‘Deepening’ Democracy: A redesign of democratic institutions to expand the inclusion of stakeholders in decision-making processes, to design decision making processes that improve the quality and inclusiveness of public policy decisions and to improve the quality of information available to participants.

Deliberative Democracy: A system of political decision-making based on some form of consensus and representative democracy. In contrast to the traditional focus on electoral democracy, which emphasizes voting as the central institution in democracy, deliberative democracy places greater emphasis on public deliberations among the citizenry.

Direct Democracy: The direct participation of people in policy and management, particularly at the local level, through meetings and other forms of interaction with state authorities.

Electoral Democracy: A form of democracy founded on the exercise of popular sovereignty in which voters choose representatives to act in their interests. Usually also defined as democracy which has free, multi-party elections carried out regularly on the basis of a secret ballot and universal suffrage.

Governance: The overall institutional environment in which citizens interact and within which economic, political, legal and administrative authority are exercised to manage a country’s affairs at all levels.

Good Governance: An ideal type of professionalized governance conducted in a transparent and accountable manner. Usually defined as predictable, open and enlightened policy making (transparency); a professionalized bureaucracy; accountable government institutions; strong civil society organizations participating in public affairs; and all actors accepting the rule of law as a basis for their activities.

Indirect Democracy: Rule through elected representatives (also known as representative democracy). Indirect democracy can be contrasted with direct democracy, which involves the direct participation of citizens in governance.

Liberal Democracy: Usually defined as a democracy in which individual liberties and individual responsibilities of citizens are protected by law. Often characterised by universal adult suffrage, political equality, legal protection for civil liberties, majority rule, a constitution, and rule of law.

Ombudsman: A person or office charged with responsibility for investigating complaints and organizing mediation to achieve fair settlements to disputes, including those involving citizens and government agencies.

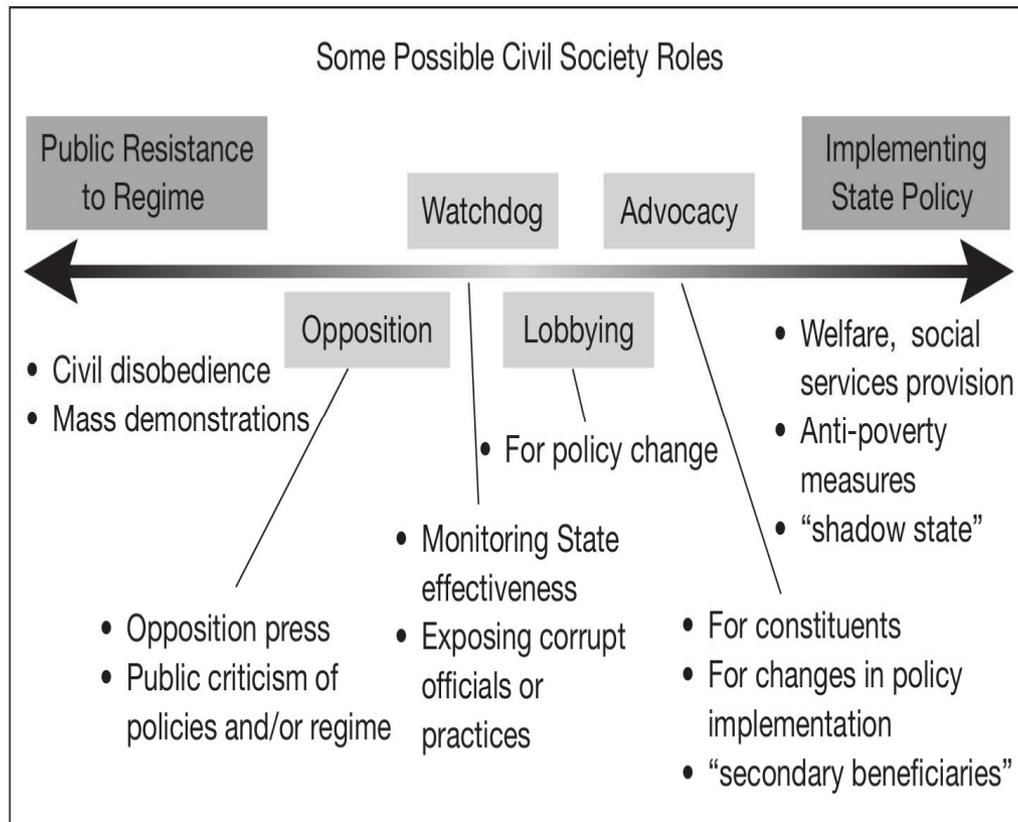
Representative Democracy: Rule through elected representatives (also known as indirect democracy). Representative democracy involves periodic elections to select representatives who reach decisions on law and policy issues on the behalf of electors and citizens. Representative democracy can be contrasted with direct democracy, which denotes the direct participation of citizens in public decision-making.

Participatory Democracy: A form of direct democracy that requires citizens to engage directly in public deliberations and law making rather than only participate in periodic elections to choose representatives (see also deliberative democracy).

Rule of Law: The principle that every member of a society, even rulers, must act in accordance with the law. The rule of law also requires that the powers of the state are derived solely from and limited by legislation enacted by a parliament or legislature or through the decisions of an independent judiciary.

Source: quoted from UNDP Vietnam 2006: iii

Annex 3: Spectrum of Civil Society Roles



Source: Adopted from Hannah, 2007: 93

Annex 4: List of interviews

A. For context information

1. Dr. Nguyen Quang A
2. Dr. Hoang Ngoc Giao-Lawyer, Director of Institute of research for policy, law and development
3. Prof. Ngoc-Dinh, Dang-CECODES Director
4. Mrs. Bui Thi Kim-Director of The Center for Promoting Development for Women and Children
5. Mr. Nguyen Ngoc Lam_Vice president of cooperation and Development Fund (C&D)
6. Mrs. Tran Chung Chau_ Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (ISEE)
7. Mrs. Do Thi Thanh Huyen_Policy Analysis UNDP Vietnam
8. Mr. Dang Duc Nghia and Mr. Cuong-Centre for Sustainable Development in Mountainous Areas

B. For case studies

Thach Ha District Woman Union

9. Mrs. Nguyen Thu Huong_Program Officer of Oxfam Solidarity Belgium
10. Mrs. Nguyen Thi An and Bui Thi Xuan-Vice presidents of Thach Ha District WU
11. Mrs. Pham Thi Nga-President of Thach Khe commune WU
12. Mr. Hoang Van-Party secretary of Thach Khe commune
13. Mr. Tran Xuan Hong-Head of village of Long Tien, Thach Khe commune
14. Mrs. Hoang Thi Hue-President of Tuong Son commune WU
15. Mrs. Duong Thi Thu-villager of Ha Thanh village/member of Tuong Son commune WU
16. Mrs. Duong Thi Thanh-villager of Ha Thanh village/member of Tuong Son commune WU

Quang Binh Community development centre

17. Mrs. Pham Thanh Hoai-Director of CDC
18. Mr. Nguyen Van Hao_head of Sub_ward No.8 and head of community management board, Dong Son Ward, Dong Hoi city, Quang Binh province
19. Mrs. Nguyen Thi Tuyet_head of Sub_ward No.7, Nghia Ninh Ward, Dong Hoi city, Quang Binh province
20. Mrs. Le Thi Do_ Village of Sub_ward No.8, Dong Son Ward, Dong Hoi city, Quang Binh province
21. Mrs. Ho Thi Ly_ Vice president of Hai Thanh Ward people committee, Dong Hoi city, Quang Binh province