

Empirical Research on Societal Organizations in Vietnam

Hanoi, March 1, 2002 / Ho Chi Minh City, March 4, 2002

Are there any Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) at all in Vietnam? Yes, there are about 700 international NGOs active in this country with approximately 400 representatives. Are there also indigenous Vietnamese NGOs? Yes, but they are named differently. Non-government may sound too negative, might even imply an anti-government bias. The terms selected, namely civic resp. societal organizations, for the purpose of a research project and for workshops had a scientific-methodological rationale but were also an expression of political correctness. Societal organizations are a topic of great interest and significance in Vietnam, research on this topic and conclusions derived from findings are handled extremely carefully because they are regarded as being very sensitive.

The Volkswagen Foundation funded generously a German-Vietnamese research endeavour which brought together scholars from the University of Freiburg, Freie Universität Berlin and two Vietnamese institutions: National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Sociology, Hanoi and the Center for Sociology and Development at the National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute for Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City. (HCMC). Academic director on the German side was Prof. Dr. Jürgen Rüländ, and partners of the main researcher, Dr. Jörg Wischermann, were two teams led respectively by Prof. Dr. Bui The Cuong (Hanoi) and Prof. Dr. Nguyen Quang Vinh (HCMC). The main focus of the project comprised questions such as: Why and how do societal organizations in Vietnam come into being? How do governmental organizations react to the emergence of (which) societal organizations and how do governmental organizations and societal organizations interact? What are the different modes of relationship between these two groups and what are the various roles that have developed within these relationships? Which modes of interaction between societal and governmental organizations are dependent on which factors? In early March 2002 two workshops were conducted to present and discuss findings of the research project.

Dr. Wischermann, together with the leaders of the Vietnamese teams, presented the project report, and they did so in a superbly balanced division of labour. Here again it was obvious that not only the scientific competence of Dr. Wischermann was of great value, also his command of the Vietnamese language and his intimate knowledge of subtle mentalities were invaluable. Prof. Dr. Rüländ talked about the ambivalent relationship between NGOs and governmental organization in Southeast Asia. He presented a sound and indeed impressive analysis of their genesis, of the different de-

termining factors they have to contend with and concentrated on developments since the economic and financial crisis of 1997. This presentation was enriched by prognoses about possible future trends. Professor Rüländ's analysis benefited also from his distinguished research of many years.² This placement of the Vietnamese case into a larger context and a greater analytical framework was greatly appreciated and contributed much to the assessment of the project report. Both workshops bore testimony to the fact that knowledge about Europe and the USA is more common than information about neighbouring countries in the region. Werner Pfennig talked about strengths and weaknesses of the impressive NGO-Community in the Philippines. It was to the obvious delight of NGO-sceptics when negative consequences and exaggerations were mentioned. In order to prevent getting too much applause from the wrong side, such excess was put into proper perspective and the success of and the need for NGOs in individual countries and in the region as a whole were emphasized.

In a first phase of the project the research team identified about 700 societal organizations and standardized interviews were carried out with 257 representatives of different sorts of organizations (133 organizations in Hanoi and 124 in HCMC). These interviews clearly showed a time gap as far as founding of the organizations is concerned. The South took the lead, perhaps because here the urgency to solve problems was greater and the already existing capacity to solve problems was not sufficient. The boom-time for issue-oriented organizations was between 1990 and 2000. Until 1986 no single issue-oriented organization existed in Hanoi. In the South, it seems, the emphasis is more on practical work, whereas in the North political lobbying seems to prevail, perhaps aided by the proximity to Party and State.

In a second empirical stage of the research, in-depth interviews were carried out with 50 representatives of selected societal and governmental organizations. Throughout a hotly debated question was that of classification. As a starting point, three groups were identified: mass organizations, professional associations and issue-oriented organizations. In both workshops the question of classification was the first point to be picked up for discussion. Apparently this had nothing to do with the different participants of the workshops. In Hanoi mostly larger mass organizations were represented, including some well-known ones which enjoy considerable backing from higher places, for example, Highland Education Development Organi-

² See, for example, the study published by Arnold Bergstraesser Institute: Jürgen Rüländ and M.L. Bhansoon Ladavalva, *Local Associations and Municipal Government in Thailand*. Freiburg 1993. Jürgen Rüländ, *Janusköpfige Mittelschichten in Südostasien*. In: Becker, Rüländ, Werz (eds.), *Mythos Mittelschichten*. Bonn 1999, pp. 41–75.

zation (HEDO), but also Small and Medium Enterprises Assistance Centre (SMEAC) and the Research Centre for Gender, Family and Environment in Development. They spoke about their experiences which were discussed against the findings of the project. The second workshop in the South was also attended by representatives of societal organizations but primarily by academics who study such organizations and social change in general. Comments and reports in Ho Chi Minh City struck a different tone. It was informative to learn that after years of work, sometimes under extreme circumstances, these activities are now appreciated and supported officially.

The project as well as the two workshops covered new ground and at times it was like walking on rather thin ice, if that metaphor is permitted in connection with a tropical country like Vietnam. A political foundation first embraced the idea quite enthusiastically and wanted to co-sponsor one workshop. However, later they quite unceremoniously retreated. An enormously tricky subject was the participation of foreigners. There were abrupt refusals, new proposals and sudden changes. All this did not diminish the interest in the topic of research but the actual pursuit of the work and the organization of the workshops were quite often confronted with irritating challenges. It must be gratefully acknowledged that throughout all the travails the Volkswagen Foundation was full of understanding and support.

Werner Pfennig

Fourth Forum of the Collaboration Projects

Tokyo, 18 – 21 February 2002

Funding for environmental research derives predominantly from national sources. But there are exceptions. The Japanese government has generously funded the so-called "Collaboration Projects", an international study programme on the two issues "aging society" and "sustainable development" with some 40 research groups from roughly twenty countries. From 18 to 21 February 2002, the Japanese Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) convened the Fourth Forum of these Collaboration Projects under the auspices of the Japanese Cabinet Office and with professional support from Nomura Research Institute (NRI).

The environmental sessions covered a wide range of issues, most notably on waste, climate change, energy and new policy options. In the area of waste management, CSERGE exemplified UK experience in Norfolk. Resources for the Future investigated specific contracts on incentives for recycling work in the US. Kazuhiro Ueta from Kyoto University as well as