



From Policy to Practice and Back 15 Years of SEI Engagement in Vietnam

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STOCKHOLM ENVIRONMENT INSTITUTE

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The author with Ede ethnic minority villagers during fieldwork on impacts of resettlement due to the construction of the Song Hinh dam. Photo: Dr Vu Ngoc Long

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eva Lindskog worked for Stockholm Environment Institute between 2000 and 2014, based in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam until 2011. Most of her work, for SEI and previous employers, involved field research in Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. Her particular areas of interest are the social and cultural impacts on communities of economic and policy interventions, mainly in rural areas, along with how institutions respond to such changes. She has also cooperated with research institutions in the countries of the Mekong subregion, aiming to strengthen their influence on policy formulation, implementation and follow-up. Eva holds an MSc in Vietnamese history, literature and language from Hanoi University and a BSc in Sociology at Stockholm University, Sweden.

FOREWORD

It's all too easy to assume that we “understand” a country and its needs well enough to offer authoritative policy advice after a few meetings with national policy-makers, a two-week field visit and a literature review.

But the reality is quite different. As Eva Lindskog clearly shows in this report on learning from 15 years of SEI engagement in Vietnam, any country at any given time is a complex of cultures, traditions, explicit and implicit power structures, socio-economic drivers, history and geography. Most efforts to research and advise by outsiders barely scrape the surface, leaving them prone to misapprehensions, arrogant assumptions – and wasted opportunities to promote sustainability.

If this report goes beyond the standard territory of SEI's work, it is with a purpose: to reveal the backstory, the dynamics behind the dynamics, the soul, of modern Vietnam. Eva shows how centuries of Chinese domination left their mark on social and political relations, from upland villages to the corridors of power in Hanoi. We learn some of what linguistics can tell you about social hierarchies – and how your interlocutor might be thinking about you. We better understand the true role of the foreign researcher, both its privileges and its limitations. And she does it all in a highly engaging way.

Eva is uniquely placed to offer such insights, not only because she worked in Vietnam and other parts of Southeast Asia for almost two decades, much of it with SEI. A sociologist by training, she has an acute eye for the subtle ways in which people's interactions with history and society shape their experience and their actions. And she has a genuine fascination with Vietnam, and with human foibles, with the intricate psychological and social constructions through which people interpret and communicate about their world.

When Eva retired in 2014, SEI lost an invaluable asset for our continued work in Vietnam and Asia. But we wholeheartedly thank her for leaving us with this thoughtful distillation of her unique experience and insight. It stands as an enjoyable and informative guide to any researcher, inside or outside SEI, who plans to work at the interface of environment, society and policy in Vietnam.

Jakob Granit, PhD

Deputy Director, SEI

ABBREVIATIONS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
CEMA	Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs
CERDA	Centre of Research and Development in Upland Areas
CRES	Centre for Natural Resources and Environmental Studies
CSDM	Centre for Sustainable Development in Mountainous Areas
EIA	Environmental impact assessment
FDI	Foreign direct investment
HDI	Human Development Index
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LEP	Law on Environmental Protection
LUC	Land-use certificate
LWG	Local working group
MONRE	Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
NGO	Non-governmental organization
ODA	Official development assistance
PMB	Project Management Board
PRA	Participatory rural appraisal
Programme 135	The Socio-economic Development Programme for Extremely Difficult Communes in Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas
SEA	Strategic environmental assessment
SEMLA	Strengthening of Environmental Management and Land Administration programme
SIA	Social impact assessment
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SOE	State-owned enterprise
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

NOTE ON VIETNAMESE NAMES

Vietnamese proper names are traditionally written in the following order: surname, middle name, given name. However, there is a recent tendency to reverse the order, particularly among émigrés and authors published outside Vietnam. References to Vietnamese authors here are given with the traditional order except in the case of Hy Van Luong (originally Luong Van Hy), a well-known scholar living outside Vietnam. Also, Vietnamese authors are listed in references using their full names to avoid confusion, as there are relatively few common Vietnamese family names.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to illuminate the complex interactions as Western discourses on development and sustainability have been introduced in a setting where long-standing tradition and recent history have combined to create a highly centralized political and economic system, and to draw lessons for future cooperation by researchers working for institutes such as SEI. The Vietnamese party-state¹ has proved remarkably resistant to Western donors' and other development actors' free-market agendas. And yet the relationship remains harmonious, and experience suggests that at least some progress towards a sustainability agenda is possible – even if it does not always precisely fit the external partners' original visions.

Section 2 gives an overview of Vietnam's turbulent history, including the centuries of Chinese domination, French colonization, the struggle for independence and the emergence of modern Vietnam. It looks in depth at the past few decades, during which the Vietnamese party-state has made fundamental policy changes, abandoning the former strictly planned economy and prioritizing market forces, while remaining nominally communist. This history helps to explain the deep roots of the current centralized power structure, as well as the inherited cultural dynamics at village and household levels.

Section 3 describes the evolution of development cooperation between Vietnam and – largely Western and international – donors and development actors in the post-cold war period. In particular it explores the apparent contradictions between their respective agendas, and how these have been resolved in practice.

The tendencies and dynamics described in chapters 2 and 3, and the interplay between Western development agendas and the Vietnamese policy-making and reality, are illustrated in section 4 with a selection of projects in which SEI has been a partner. In particular, this section examines what encounters between Vietnamese realities and external development cooperation seem to be fruitful from a sustainability perspective, and which have faced obstacles and why.

Section 5 offers concluding thoughts on how can an institute like SEI, seeking to bridge from scientific research and policy in the areas of environment and development, can best position itself to contribute to sustainable development in Vietnam.

2. THE MAKING OF MODERN VIETNAM

2.1 A long history of war and dependence

The history of Vietnam is intimately linked to that of its northern neighbour, China. Vietnam's first authentic historical figure, King An Duong Vuong, appeared around 250 BCE establishing the first known Vietnamese kingdom that was separate from any Chinese dynasty (Taylor 1983, Lockhart and Duiker 2006). With repeated invasions from the north, it was not until 939 CE that Vietnamese kingdoms could establish durable independence from China. Even then, in the subsequent millennium the "Land of Southern Viet", Nan Yue or Nam Viet, was invaded by the Mongols (13th century), the Ming (15th century) and by modern China, as

¹ The term *party-state* is used throughout this study. According to the 1992 Constitution of Vietnam, the "party" – the Communist Party of Vietnam – is the de facto ruler, and the state has the role of manager. However, they are most often referred to as one entity, *đảng và nhà nước*, in official texts and speeches. The Communist Party (in one form or another) has ruled the northern part of Vietnam since 1954 and the whole country since 1975.



The author interviewing an Ede woman during research on impacts on ethnic minority communities of resettlement due to the Song Hinh dam project. Ethnic minority women are among the weakest voices in modern Vietnamese society. Photo: Dr Vu Ngoc Long

late as 1979. The name Vietnam was first officially given to the country by the Chinese in 1803 (Taylor 1983), but fell into disuse until it was revived by Vietnamese nationalists in the early 20th century.

Even as the Vietnamese kingdoms resisted intruders from China, they themselves expanded their territories to the south (a process called *nam tiến*) into the territory of the Champa and Khmer. By the end of the 18th century, they had reached the area south of the Mekong River, and the kingdom had taken on its current shape. A few decades later, in the 1850s, Vietnam was invaded by the French, becoming part of the colony of Indochina for almost a century.

After the decisive battle of Dien Bien Phu, when Vietnamese forces finally defeated the French, Vietnam once again claimed independence, supported by the Geneva Peace Agreement. However, with tensions between the USA and the Soviet Union increasing, the USA supported the establishment of a separate state in the southern part of Vietnam as a counterweight to Communism in Asia. This led to another war, which continued until 1975 (Logevall 2012). Following the victory of the communist and national liberation forces, a unified Vietnam was for the first time able to enjoy sustained peace within its current borders. The victory was masterminded by the Communist Party, whose legitimacy has rested on this achievement as well as, since about 1990, rapid economic development that has benefitted the majority of the Vietnamese people (Thayer 2009; Le Hong Hiep 2012).

2.2 Legacies of the past

Today's Vietnam has been largely shaped by some of the world's most influential empires. The influence is mainly visible among the political elite, but also in the worldviews and behaviour of the people, most of whom still earn their livelihoods on the land.

Box 1: Ethnic minorities in Vietnam

The largest ethnic group in Vietnam is the Kinh (roughly 86% of the population), which dominates political power, economy and culture. However, the country is home to more than 50 other ethnic groups, most of them living in the northern mountains and central highlands with the exception of the Cham and Khmer, who traditionally lived on the southern coast and the Mekong delta. Most of these groups are marginalized and often considered poor and “backwards” (see “Working with ethnic minorities: beyond the mission civilisatrice” in section 4). A notable exception is the Hoa (ethnic Chinese), who tend to live in urban areas and enjoy similar levels of economic development as the lowland Kinh.

The most influential legacy for both the elite and the people of Vietnam is that of China. Vietnam, the Koreas, Japan and China comprised the East Asian classical civilization, dating back more than 2000 years. Even when Vietnam became independent from China, many of its leaders and dynasties were of Chinese descent (Qi and Lu 2007, Xiang 2008).

The most popular Vietnamese festivals – Tết (New Year) and Tết Trung Thu (mid-autumn festival) – along with the special festivities marking a baby’s first birthday are all direct copies or inheritances of equivalent Chinese celebrations. Furthermore, Vietnam followed the Chinese astrological system, with each lunar year in a 12-year cycle (giáp) assigned an animal sign. Perhaps more important from our point of view, the Chinese cosmology based on yin and yang (âm dương in Vietnamese) is deeply ingrained in Vietnamese thinking. This cosmology attributes health, peace and harmony to the proper balance of these two forces, from the cosmic down to the national and personal scales.

The history of Vietnamese language also reflects strong Chinese influence. Although the spoken language is of Mon-Khmer origin (like modern Cambodian), official writing continued to be done in Chinese characters after Vietnam gained independence from China, in what came to be called the “learned script” or Chữ Nôm (Edmondson 2006). The modern Vietnamese script using roman characters, Chữ quốc ngữ, was introduced by Jesuit missionaries arriving from the middle of the 17th century, and by 1917 had become compulsory, after the French eliminated the Chinese examination system. However, as much as 80% of the current Vietnamese vocabulary consists of Chinese loans (Edmondson 2006).

From a political and spiritual perspective, the Chinese socio-cultural impact on Vietnam from the 10th century CE took the forms of Buddhism, particularly during the first 500 years, and Confucianism until the 19th century. These allowed the elite to control the intersection between state and religion and use court rituals to link the cosmic with the local. This sense of the leadership creating balance and unity can be seen even today in the state-promoted one-Vietnam nationalism (Whitmore 2009).

One innovation that developed between around 1500 and 1800, when no dynasty was able to fully dominate Vietnam, was a political system where power was shared between the court and a village-based intelligentsia. According to the Vietnamese scholar Nguyen Khac Vien (1974), this scholar-gentry consisted of unsuccessful candidates (always male) for the national “mandarin” exams that would have given them access to the central civil service. On their return to their home villages, they were exempted from labour tax and enjoyed great prestige, as well as local political power. No other country in East or Southeast Asia,² including China, had such an “aspirant ruling class, or ruling-class-in-waiting, domiciled in its

² Note that Vietnam is now considered part of Southeast Asia despite its strong East Asian heritage. It joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1995.

villages like this, close to the peasants . . . from such village literati came many of the early Vietnamese communists” (Woodside 1989).

Vietnamese forms of Buddhism and Confucianism existed side by side in the socio-cultural life in the traditional wet-rice farming villages in the lowlands. The communal house (dinh) hosted the village’s guardian spirit and was where the local male leaders had their meetings, representing a more Confucian way of organizing the relationship between the village and the state, while the Buddhist temple (chùa) was also a focal point for the community and over the years developed into a primarily female place of worship. The Chinese tradition of honouring (male) ancestors (cúng tổ tiên) at the family altar was widespread, especially among educated families. To show filial piety, a young couple’s primary obligation was to give birth to a son to continue the line. This preference for sons persists in modern Vietnam.

However, unlike in China, the family in Vietnam was by and large a close unit of three generations, and clans did not develop along traditional Chinese lines. As in parts of Southeast Asia, the role of women was traditionally “conspicuously higher in Vietnam than in China” (Whitmore 1984). For example, women had the right to inheritance and had much greater freedom of movement than women in China.

Village life among the lowland Kinh (the dominant ethnic group in Vietnam, see Box 1) thus forged a sense that the individual is part of a “far greater totality”. Fitting in to the family or societal unit became the key to correct behaviour and self-realization (Slote 1972). This remains encoded linguistically in the ways that the Vietnamese refer to themselves and others in conversation: most commonly by kinship terms – daughter, son, mother, older/younger brother etc. – depending on relative age and gender, rather than actual kinship. These, along with “true” pronouns, reflect the relationship between the interlocutors, and may even change during the same conversation with a change of mood (Hy Van Luong 1990, Brogan 2009).

At the time of French colonization in the 1850s, the Vietnamese had had limited experience of the West. Although the colonizers were preceded by Portuguese and French missionaries, and by maritime traders, their presence was mostly limited to coastal areas and major cities. The Nguyen dynasty, which had ruled Vietnam since 1802, “priz[ed] stability over change and view[ed] the wider non-Confucian world beyond East Asia with suspicion, it was a profoundly conservative political and social order that proved unable to withstand the French colonial challenge . . .” (Bradley 2004).

The French gradually appropriated both land from the peasants – resulting in some popular uprisings – and political power from the village scholar-gentry. French colonial rule also imported Catholicism and replaced the Confucian examination system with an educational system on the French model. A generation of Vietnamese scholar-gentry born around the 1860s, such as Pham Boi Chau and Pham Chu Trinh, started to find new ideas – and rationales for resistance to colonial rule – in the study of liberal Western philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Charles de Montesquieu and Herbert Spencer (Bradley 2004, Marr 1980). Most of the leaders of the communist-led resistance in the 1940s had such scholar-gentry backgrounds and had been educated in the French school system, both in Paris and in Vietnam (Duiker 1976).

2.3 Steps towards a Communist-led one-party state

Ho Chi Minh was born in 1890. The son of a local magistrate, he travelled widely abroad between 1911 and his eventual return to Vietnam in 1941. During this time he encountered French, Chinese and Soviet communists, receiving political education and becoming

politically active in Paris, Moscow and Beijing. He and his peers came to believe that state-led communism offered the best and only guarantee of successful Vietnamese independence (Duiker 2000).

The Communist Party of Vietnam was established in 1930 from several groups, including rival factions of the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League, which Ho Chi Minh had formed while in China. On Ho's return to Vietnam in 1941, he spearheaded the formation of the Viet Minh pro-independence coalition. Having cooperated with US forces in ending a Japanese occupation of Vietnam, the Viet Minh took advantage of a temporary power vacuum to seize control of the north and much of the centre of Vietnam in August 1945, declaring Vietnamese independence in September.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the French government had no intention of withdrawing from Vietnam (Duiker 1995). During the autumn of 1946, Ho Chi Minh spent months in Paris trying to negotiate a peaceful solution to tensions with France. However, clashes between Viet Minh and French forces provoked the latter to remain in the southern part of Vietnam and led to a full-scale war in all of the country (Tønnesson 2010). The war lasted until the Viet Minh's defeat of French forces at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

The Viet Minh victory effectively ended the French colonial project in Indochina. Under the Geneva Peace Agreement, the country was to be temporarily partitioned between North and South, and the country reunified following national elections not later than 1956. While the Viet Minh consolidated their position in the North, the USA supported the establishment of a separate government in the South. At this time there were huge population relocations, as revolutionaries moved north and northerners fearing persecution from the communists, including many Catholics, moved to the South.

The elections never took place, and two separate states emerged: the Communist-governed North and the US-supported South. Vietnam was caught up in the ideological war going on in the world during this time between Communism and the so-called free world. The USA's involvement in the war in Vietnam, which had started with its support for the French in the 1950s, intensified. The US at the time saw Vietnam as another Korea, and US leaders saw it as another vital front in its attempt to halt the spread of communism. The brutality of this war, which at its height saw half a million American soldiers on the ground in South Vietnam and intensive US bombing of the North (as well as of Cambodia and Laos) is well documented. Millions of Vietnamese soldiers and civilians were killed on both sides. The USA lost about 58,000 soldiers in the war, and it is estimated that another 70,000 war veterans committed suicide on their return due to post-traumatic stress (Hyer et al. 1990).

The war also had a long and huge legacy in Vietnam and its neighbours. After the end of direct US involvement in 1975, the new unified Vietnamese regime, named the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, had to deal with a social situation that included millions of war invalids, internal refugees, widows, orphans and unemployed, as well as half a million children suffering from deformities that have been linked to the use of Agent Orange, a dioxin-containing defoliant spread by the US Army to expose the jungle hideouts of their opponents and to poison their fields and water sources (Westing 1984, Le Thi Nham Tuyet and Johansson 2001). In addition, thousands of people have since been killed or wounded by unexploded ordnance, a problem that continues in rural areas.

Neither the Communist Party of Vietnam nor any of the other Vietnamese nationalist movements and political parties that had emerged since the 1920s, particularly among urban intellectuals, was initially able to recruit the support of the vast rural population. According to some scholars this was largely because of the enduring popularity of Vietnamese Buddhism,

with its “powerful message of liberation and salvation” and the Confucian organization of family and community in the villages (McHale 2004, Hy Van Luong 1989). The Communist Party was able to consolidate power with a combined promise of Vietnamese independence and redistribution of land “to the tillers” (Truong Buu Lam 2010).

From the mid-1950s the Communist Party-led regime in the North started to consolidate itself as a socialist republic, with the collectivization of land and other economic assets in cooperatives and state-owned companies. Collectivization entailed taking control of land that had been returned to the peasants during the war for independence. This was ostensibly done primarily to help poor and landless peasants (52% of the rural population in 1957), while landlords and rich peasants were to be eliminated as social groups and frequently were subjected to violent persecution (something that was publicly acknowledged by Ho Chi Minh in 1957 when he admitted to “serious mistakes” (Duiker 2000). By 1965, over 90% of peasant families in northern Vietnam were in the cooperative system.

Western research suggests that the collectivization experiment was relatively unsuccessful in its aim of helping the poor and boosting food security; for example, the rice yield fell from 350 kg per person in 1961 to 335 kg in 1965 (Gordon 1981). Also there is strong evidence that families had to continue their own agricultural in parallel to supplement the revenue from the cooperatives (Brocheux 2009).

According to Elliott (1980), the Communist Party came to rely for its legitimacy on co-opting faith in an administrative response to political problems borrowed from China. Elliott sums up the new political system in northern Vietnam as “a composite of three elements: the centralized state bureaucracy, the local committees bound together by mutual social and economic interest, and the party which links the two”. Furthermore, London (2009) observes: “While the Party continued to mobilize support under the banners of national self-determination and social justice, the political means and institutions the Party employed was authoritarian.”

2.4 Peace and independence with new challenges

Most analysts (for example Duiker 1995) attribute the Communist-led victory in 1975 to well-organized institutions, the willingness to sacrifice among ordinary citizens, and the promises of the National Liberation Front – a political and military organization bringing together various resistance movements in the South – to bring about peace and social justice. In 1975, the Hanoi-based Communist government soon discovered major obstacles on the “road to socialism” in its war-ravaged country. Infrastructure had been virtually obliterated, particularly in the North, and the economic basis for restoring everyday life and not least food production was limited. As an illustration, annual income per capita in 1977 was in the range of US\$40-140. In order to increase food production, the party-state redistributed land, taking the proportion of landless peasants in the population from 20% to 6% by 1978. Attempts to introduce collective farming, however, met with strong resistance and only ever took off in the North.

Another measure was to open up new land for cultivation. The government planned to move 2 million people to “new economic zones” (although only around 500,000 finally settled in them; Duiker 1989). Private property was to be nationalized. Rationing, which had been in force in the North since the 1950s, was expanded nationwide. In line with the communist agenda, the state became the main distributor of goods and services, using subsidies to keep prices low. Even so, hunger and material poverty spread in both rural and urban areas – a fact that is now officially acknowledged (see e.g. Vietnam Museum of Ethnology 2007). At the

same time, the trade embargo imposed on the North by the USA in 1964 was extended to the whole country in 1975, remaining in force until 1994.

The new regime dealt firmly with political opposition, in both the North and the South, including sending opponents to “re-education” camps without trial. As many as 1 million people who had served the US-backed regime in the South prior to 1975 are estimated to have fled the country by 1983, many of them as so-called Boat People. More than 330,000 others left the country under the Orderly Departure Programme under an agreement signed between Vietnam and UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1979. About 110,000 Vietnamese émigrés were repatriated under a reintegration programme in 1992-93, but many Vietnamese refugees settled permanently in China, the USA, and Germany.

The Khmer Rouge regime that took over Cambodia in 1975 had immediately started military attacks against Vietnam. Despite various attempts to negotiate, at the end of 1978 Vietnam invaded Cambodia and replaced the Khmer Rouge with a pro-Vietnam regime which governed the country for the next decade. China responded with attacks on Vietnam’s northern frontier in 1979. The conflict with China and the prolonged Vietnamese military presence in Cambodia led to Vietnam’s increased international isolation. In addition, the continued internal problems in the collectivization process brought the country to a serious crisis: political, economic and humanitarian. By the end of the 1980s Vietnam was one of the poorest countries in Asia.

2.5 Renovation of policies: towards marketization of land, goods and services

The Communist Party of Vietnam decided in late 1986 to introduce economic reforms. These involved gradual steps towards a *de facto* if not actually *de jure* privatization of land, goods and services, albeit under party-state control, and were aimed at stimulating economic development. The process of Đổi Mới (renovation) set in train allowed partial marketization of food, goods and services.

The other cornerstone of the Vietnamese economy, then as now, was state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Reaching a state of near collapse in the 1970s, by the 1980s they operated largely outside the planned economic system (Fforde and de Vylder 1996, McCarty and Burke 2005). In 1994, SOEs were restructured, with the creation of “general corporations”, and finally given legal entity status. In an attempt to make SOEs more efficient and boost their role in economic development, a process of equitization (cổ phần hóa) started aimed at turning them into joint-stock companies. New investors were actually state officials or close associates (Beeson and Pham Hung Hung 2012). By attracting private capital, including foreign direct investment (FDI), the SOEs have arguably allowed the state to reinforce its control (Nga Nguyen 2010, Beeson and Pham Hung Hung 2012).

It has been asserted that the innovations in the rural as well as the state economy were instigated from below, and that policy reforms were merely attempts by the party-state to claim ownership of changes that were already happening beyond its control (Fforde and de Vylder 1996, London 2009). For example, peasants had already started the break-up of the socialist production system by appropriating collectivized land, stealing grain and other produce from collective fields, and devoting more resources and time to their private plots, among others (see Kerkvliet 2005).

The reforms quickly yielded results. Between 1993 and 2008 Vietnam’s annual GDP growth averaged 6%; the poverty rate fell from 58% in 1993 to below 10% in 2010 (World Bank 2012), and the adult literacy rate in 2009 was 97% (UNDP 2013). Life expectancy rose to 75.9 years in 2013, compared to 67.6 in 1980 (UNDP 2014) and access to infrastructure and

local services improved; for example, 98% of all households had access to electricity in 2010 (World Bank 2012). According to the same source, most of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will be met – except those for water and sanitation access (Goal 10) and the environmental goal (Goal 9).

2.6 The impacts of market reforms

Most people in Vietnam are better off today than 20 years ago, but income disparities have also grown markedly, and the quality of basic services is uneven. The state policy of charging user fees for health and education services (referred to in Vietnam as “socialization”, xã hội hóa) has particularly affected access by low-income households (World Bank 2012). According to a recent World Bank poverty mapping exercise, high poverty rates are concentrated in mountainous areas and have become worse than 10 years ago. Also, new forms of vulnerability are developing, in particular among workers in the informal sector and rural migrants in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and other major cities (World Bank 2012).

There are now five distinct classes in Vietnam, according to one observer (Gainsborough 2002): landowners, who are often Party cadres or government officials; rural workers; the urban working class (still quite small in number); a new business elite, emerging from within the system and dependent on the state for licences, contracts, access to capital, land and protection; and a salaried middle class with close ties to the state in the form of Party membership and a generally privileged background (as their education is paid for). Akram-Lodhi (2004) further divides rural society into three new(-old) classes: big landowners; smallholders (the majority); and a rapidly growing class of landless wage labourers.

Gaps between social and economic opportunities have been further widened by rising official corruption, connected to a mentality of “running for official position, for power, for money and for oneself” (chạy chức, chạy quyền, chạy tiền, chạy tôi; Fforde 2009a).

The promotion of large-scale farming, intensive use of machinery, agrochemicals and modern rice varieties have arguably reduced access to safe and nutritious food for some; particularly for subsistence farmers whose food security is based on access to and control of land (see e.g. Tran Thi Thu Trang 2011). The cultural and environmental implications of industrial agriculture in mountainous and highland areas, in the forms of lost ethnic identity and unsustainable land use, have been analysed by a number of both Vietnamese and foreign researchers, including in an SEI study on coffee cash cropping in the Central Highlands (see “Coffee growing in the Central Highlands: local people encounter international markets” in section 4).

Vietnam’s environment faces manifold threats and pressures: deforestation, loss of biodiversity, degradation of land and water, solid waste, industrial pollution, urban air pollution. As economic growth has gathered momentum, social equity and environmental protection have been secondary considerations. As Fortier (2010) observes, a major obstacle to addressing these aspects of sustainability is that important national policy decisions continue to be made by a small and exclusive group of insiders who are insulated from the direct environmental and social consequences.

2.7 Institutional and cultural frames under the age-old authoritarian state

The magnitude and variety of changes wrought by Vietnam’s economic success and its exposure to national and international market forces have been equally disrupting to the party-state, its institutions and the Vietnamese people. For centuries, Vietnamese society had been structured around hierarchical institutions – family, village and state – and this has strongly

affected the way Vietnamese institutions have been organized in modern times (DiGregorio et al. 2003). For example, the party-state has inherited a paternalistic mindset where its legitimacy is derived from ruling the people in the “best of ways”.

There are four administrative levels in the party-state system: central, provincial, district and commune. The main organs centrally are the elected National Assembly (legislative), nominally the highest organ of state power, which selects and appoints the president, prime minister and government. Corresponding units exist at provincial, district and commune levels in the form of People’s Councils (representative and elected) and People’s Committees (executive). The Party itself controls the lists of candidates, who are trusted Party members in most cases, although some independent candidates have been added since the establishment of the economic reforms. Also, the Party ensures its influence through the so-called mass organizations (see below), which in turn are governed by the umbrella organization the Vietnamese Fatherland Front (Mặt Trận Tổ Quốc Việt Nam), a heritage from the 1940s (Viet Minh) and the 1960s (the National Liberation Front).

The party-state officially sanctions several types of “civil society” organization: mass organizations, such as the Women’s Union and the Farmer’s Union, established and directly managed by the Party; professional organizations, composed of intellectuals or highly specialized professionals; issue-oriented organizations, which are social organizations assisting and advocating for disadvantaged people; and associations of business people. Apart from the mass organizations, all fall within the party-state apparatus (Wischermann 2011). However, there are signs that a civil society in the Western sense is emerging.

Despite its supposed revolutionary, Marxist origins, the legitimacy and normative standards of the party-state’s leadership are still based in age-old Confucian concepts of moral authority (Gillespie 2005). Therefore, the party-state still holds the line that “the goodwill and high moral capacity of those in authority – and not the impersonal checks and balances favoured by the liberal tradition – should serve as the key restraints on power” (Gainsborough 2012).

However, this mindset coexists with the lived experience of a political culture of elitism and paternalism. Everyone in a position of authority in Vietnam owes it to someone and this perceived debt strongly influences their choices and interactions. Personnel connections and relationships – in terms of blood, marriage, sharing the same home village, time served together, past obligations and past debts – are more important factors than ever (Gainsborough 2010). Similar patterns can be seen in the academic and scientific worlds: the structure of science is both paternalistic and hierarchical, and strategic social networks and kinship shape the range of opportunities for young researchers in particular.

Traditional family and village institutions are experiencing a kind of revival. Ancestor worship has gained renewed importance, perhaps linked to the importance of family in access to power and wealth in modern Vietnam. Age-old traditions such as celebration of tutelary spirits, “soul-calling” rituals, communication with spirits through mediums (lên đồng), and belief in ghosts are also enjoying a resurgence. A major factor in the renewed belief in ghosts (and actions to appease them) could well be the number of war dead whose bodies were never recovered and whose ghosts are therefore considered not at peace.

Rituals and cults that were forbidden during the early years of Communist rule, as the new regime sought to eliminate superstition, have been legalized and revived, for example Mother Goddess worship (Đạo Mẫu), which celebrates the magic and spiritual essence of women, was re-legalized in 1987. At national level, the revival of ritual ceremonies at the Huế royal temples is another example (Huynh Van Anh 2007).

Box 2: Grassroots Democracy

The Party issued the first Grassroots Democracy Decree in 1998. It came as part of a package of measures (also including measures penalizing corrupt officials) in response to large-scale unrest about shortcomings in the party-state's governance, particularly at the commune level. The decree, and a later one in 2003, called for greater decentralization of decision-making and for popular consultation and participation in local government decision-making.

The aim of the reform was to open up for improved democracy at the "base" (a more accurate translation of the Vietnamese name, *co so*, than the official "grassroots"). This "base" is the commune level, the lowest level of the party-state apparatus in rural areas, comprising Party, state and mass organizations. There are also Party and mass organization structures at village level, and their leadership has some reporting and implementation responsibilities (Fforde 2009b). Village leaders are appointed by the Fatherland Front and are sometimes elected by the local population, although this is exceptional (Fforde, 2009a).

The two decrees spoke of people's rights to be informed, to decide, to be consulted, and to investigate and supervise on certain matters. An ordinance from 2007 enjoined local government officers to explain and assist in the implementation of this Grassroots Democracy. However, according to many commentators, Grassroots Democracy is not understood or practised by many officials, and is often at best tokenistic. See Klocker Larsen (2011) and Nguyen Hong Hai and Hoang Mai Huong (2012).

2.8 Vietnam in the 21st century

Today's Vietnam is a vibrant mix of modernity and tradition. At different scales, the party-state is struggling to maintain its authority; as one unnamed commentator puts it in Fforde (2009a), "higher levels give instructions but lower levels do not listen" (*trên bảo dưới không nghe*). The party-state has made some concessions – and as already noted, even its major reform programmes seem to have been responses to change that was already happening in practice. Nevertheless, it seems far from ready to give up its monopoly on power, and it ensures that any popular consultation or participation is limited and on its own terms. One prime example is "Grassroots Democracy" (see Box 2).

On a final note, it is worth remembering that in the face of a long history of adversity and hierarchy the Vietnamese have developed a survival strategy expressed in the saying: "If you are too clever, you will perish; if you are too stupid, you will also perish; but if you know how to live, you will survive" (*Khôn cũng chết, dại cũng chết, biết thì sống*). Thus, pragmatic responses to lived experience govern action, much more than imported ideologies such as Marxism or Leninism.

3. AID AND DEVELOPMENT AGENDAS

Aid from the then Soviet Union and China to Vietnam was important, first during the period of war in the 1960s and 1970s and later during the building up of a socialist economic system. This aid constituted a large share of the Vietnamese state budget, while Vietnam was often expected to provide labour in return. Japan and some other Western countries also offered official development assistance (ODA) to Vietnam in the late 1970s. Much of the foreign aid (including from China) was withdrawn after the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1979. Only two Western countries maintained assistance to Vietnam into the 1980s: Finland and Sweden (see Box 3).

In the early 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the stream of aid and loans from the West and Japan to Vietnam started to build again, particularly after the lifting of the

Box 3: Sweden and Vietnam

Sweden was the first Western country to establish diplomatic relations and to conclude a bilateral aid agreement with Communist-led Vietnam. Discussions between Sweden and North Vietnam had started in the late 1960s and in 1969, with the Vietnam War in full swing, Sweden promised a three-year assistance programme that primarily included support to paper production (the Bai Bang project) and health facilities in form of two hospitals in Hanoi and Uong Bi. In both cases, construction started in 1975. In addition, a research cooperation programme started in 1977, mainly on issues related to agriculture and health (Office of the Vietnam-Sweden Research Cooperation Programme 2008).

Given that the agreements were made during wartime, the assistance offered was humanitarian and non-conditional. One important factor underlying the cooperation was Swedish popular support and a sense of solidarity with a war-torn country, setting the frame for the “special relationship” between Sweden and Vietnam that would develop over the ensuing years. It is widely agreed that Sweden has had a special entrée to Vietnamese decision-makers when it comes to sensitive issues like corruption and human rights (Forsberg 2010; McGillivray et al. 2012).

In 2013 Sweden decided to terminate its aid cooperation with Vietnam, replacing it with a partnership relationship deemed more suitable to Vietnam’s current status (since 2009) as a middle-income country (Vu Quoc Huy et al. 2013). This followed the lead of the World Bank, which in 2012 launched its first Country Partnership Strategy with Vietnam (World Bank 2011). Examples of this new aid agenda can be seen in programmes like Aid for Trade (Vu Quoc Huy et al. 2013) and Business for Development (Sida 2010).

US embargo in 1994 and re-establishment of US-Vietnamese diplomatic relations a year later. This new wave of investment tended to be tied to an agenda of shrinking government and free-market reforms as a motor of economic development and social progress based on the so-called Washington Consensus. This agenda, albeit with expanded emphasis on local community participation and poverty reduction, continues to shape Western and international aid cooperation. It seems unlikely to change in the near future, even if there is increasing recognition even in the World Bank that income inequality can harm growth, and that regulation and redistributive policies can have a place (IMF 2014).

It is estimated that Western aid flows to Vietnam stood at some US\$1 million in 1990 (Kokko 2011). Today, Japan, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank are by far the biggest foreign investors in Vietnam, accounting for 70-75% of total aid and loans, most of the remainder coming from the EU (Kokko 2011). According to the Ministry of Planning and Investment (Tien Phong 2013), 51 international donors – 23 multilateral and 28 bilateral – provided ODA to Vietnam in 2013, amounting to US\$8 billion. Still, Vietnam is not regarded as aid-dependant, given that this figure corresponds to only about 5% of gross national income (GNI). A much bigger share of GNI comes in the form of remittances from Vietnamese expatriates, amounting to US\$11 billion in 2013, the ninth largest total of any country in the world in that year (World Bank 2014).

Analysts agree that Vietnam has taken strong ownership of the new ODA cooperation (see e.g. Forsberg 2010, Kokko 2011). This is in part down to a wish to avoid the sort of dependency that characterized the period of Soviet aid, and also to the Vietnamese party-state’s continued control of budgetary processes and economic development. Interestingly, this centralized leadership has been much appreciated by donors, even as they promote a democratizing, small-government agenda, as it is regarded as the main reason for the good management and efficient utilization of aid funds (Forsberg and Kokko 2007).

Thus, it might appear that Western donors and the Vietnamese leadership are on the same track regarding development. However, while there is a convergence of interests such as economic growth and poverty reduction, and recently also environmental issues such as protection of biodiversity, green production and climate change adaptation, the relationship between the two is more complex. For example, the donor community is still arguing for a reduced role for the state and greater role for markets through privatization. A recent joint donor report to the Vietnam Consultative Group Meeting (2011), *Market Economy for a Middle-Income Vietnam*, is a good illustration.

In Vietnam, however, economic reform is not associated with the retreat of the state; rather the party-state remains a key direct economic player, responsible for a more or less constant share of the economic output, at around 40% of GDP. In addition, new forms of state regulation and gatekeeping have been introduced. The party-state's ideas and practices have been little changed by more than 20 years of Washington Consensus-inspired development cooperation. In order to secure stability, the Vietnamese party-state has rather drawn on the external financial and technical support to sustain its own policy and capacities.

3.1 One concept, two understandings

The international development community, headed by the World Bank, has applauded Vietnam's economic growth and social gains, while at the same time arguing that further progress will depend on changes in institutional structures to improve performance on a number of "soft" issues such as transparency, accountability and governance. On paper, the party-state appears to accept this. As an example, the World Bank's Country Partnership Strategy for 2012-2016 for Vietnam (World Bank 2011) contains no less than 38 references to "transparency", 45 to "accountability", 160 to "governance" and 161 to general "policy". This gives the impression that the Vietnamese state and the donor community are working towards the same ends.

However, these concepts are understood and used in subtly different ways in the Vietnamese context, with the result that the two sides seem, rather, to be working in parallel, their agendas occasionally overlapping. Notably, the World Bank strategy for Vietnam does not define "governance", despite how much it features the term. A study on co-governance in Vietnam for SEI (Powell et al. 2011) uses a model from Boulding (1970) in which governance ideally consists of equal shares of economic, civic and polity interests. The governance system in Vietnam, in contrast, consists of a different triad of interests: party (leading), state (managing) and people ("mastering"), although new institutional elements are evolving such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private-sector actors (as explained in a chapter by Tran Ngoc Ca in the report).

"Policy" also deserves dissection. In the Western world, the Habermas model of policy is generally accepted, in which the rationales underlying policies are understood as instrumental, procedural and process-oriented (Powell et al. 2011). This is very different from the Vietnamese understanding, where "policy" equates with concretization of the Party's thinking (Fforde 2009b) in directives that cannot be questioned.

"Transparency" and "accountability" are relatively new concepts in Vietnam and their understanding is still in flux. There are currently four leading policy documents in Vietnam: the Socio-Economic Development Plan 2011-2015, the Socio-Economic Development Strategy 2011-2020, the National Strategy on Gender 2011-2020, and the Strategy on Environment Protection to 2020. Transparency and accountability are directly related to business in the first of these, but are closer to the Western understanding in the others. For

example, in the Socio-economic Development Strategy, “transparency” is used with reference to the “ethics of public service employees” who “should implement democracy, disclosure and transparency”; governmental bodies should inform and be accountable to the people. The Strategy on Environmental Protection says that accountability should be enhanced when it comes to ministries and agencies, producers and importers, and that “strong changes in accountability should take place in all echelons, industry, business and people”. Thus, the Vietnamese party-state has integrated some new Western-based concepts in its own development agenda, albeit only in strategies which usually do not include any implementation mechanisms.

3.2 Cooperation under the party-state’s conditions

If the two sides seem to be happy with that *modus operandi*, it is probably because the Vietnamese side is comfortable with the fact that most projects are of a pilot character, operating alongside rather than in the “system”, and can therefore be used to experiment without any obligation to mainstream the models. The donors, on the other hand, are able to implement the projects and trust that they will at least contribute towards the aim of helping Vietnam to become more democratic and market-oriented. For a discussion of how the seemingly converging interests between the Vietnamese party-state and the donors are affecting people at the so-called grassroots level, see Klocker Larsen (2011).

The Vietnamese party-state’s somewhat low profile on the “soft” issues of governance, policy, transparency and accountability is also reflected in its cooperation with Western development actors. Vietnamese government reports on aid cooperation rather emphasize the importance of the “hard” contributions within agriculture and rural development (irrigation systems, rural power, schools, health stations, transport, water supply), power energy (power distribution), transportation, post and telecommunication (technical infrastructure and service quality), education and training (improvement of quality at all levels), health (improvement of treatment and quality of services), and environment (afforestation, water supply, waste treatment; see e.g. MPI 2008).

While these advance progress towards the agreed goal of economic growth, Western donors have introduced a number of approaches sometimes pioneered by the 140 or so international NGOs operating in Vietnam, including increased participation and empowerment of people affected by development schemes. Also, issues such as gender equity and environmental protection have been elaborated and included in aid agendas, so as to provide benefits in a more equitable and socially and environmentally sustainable way. Given that the Vietnamese party-state’s claim to legitimacy rests on a Confucian notion that it knows best what is in the people’s interests, it has arguably been relatively open to such approaches – but as the case studies in the next section illustrate, this has tended to be within limited pilot projects when the party-state deems the approaches suitable to local conditions.

Encounters with Western and historically European philosophy and practice have been frequent and left enduring marks in modern Vietnamese policy and institutional structures (Marx, Lenin), literature (French and British novels in particular) and art (the strong influence from the French art school established in 1924). These encounters planted seeds in an East Asian and Vietnamese soil where, as we have seen, strong traditions of Confucian societal structures and philosophy as well as of local perceptions of good behaviour such as respect for authority and filial piety prevailed. It is probably this unique admixture of East and West, tradition and modernity in Vietnam – being situated at the crossroads between East and Southeast Asia – that has provoked so many scholars as well as development actors to try to understand and even influence Vietnamese decision-making, as well as the situation of people

Box 4: Vietnam's sustainable development policy framework

The UN Department for Sustainable Development has categorized the many competing views on how to achieve sustainable development into three: a mainstream economic model, in which current modes of economic development continue, with the assumption that environmental and social problems will be fixed along the way; "green growth", born of environmental economics, in which the aim is to continue economic growth but with lower environmental impacts; and "sustainable well-being", in which the focus is on a broader human-centred development, rather than simply growth (United Nations 2012). Of these, Vietnam has chosen green growth as its guiding principle (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2012).

Currently, government key strategies and plans on environment and climate change include: the Socio-economic Development Plan (SEDP) for 2011-2015; Vietnam Agenda 21; the National Strategy for Environmental Protection until 2010 and Vision to 2020 and Five-year Action Plans; the National Biodiversity Action Plan to 2010 and Vision to 2020; the National Strategy on Climate Change for 2050 and Vision to 2100; and a target programme to respond to climate change (Asian Development Bank 2013). These strategies and plans are incorporated into one comprehensive document: the Vietnam Sustainable Development Strategy 2011-2020, adopted in 2012.

In Vietnam, the first legally adopted document on sustainable development was the 1991 National Plan on Environment and Sustainable Development, 1991-2000. The Vietnamese national version of Agenda 21 was adopted in 2004, albeit 12 years after Agenda 21's global launch (Office of the Prime Minister 2004). The Vietnamese Agenda 21 reformulated the 27 principles of the international Agenda into eight principles, emphasizing economic development as the central task to "appropriately and harmoniously combine with social development, reasonably exploit, thriftily and effectively utilize natural resources" (Ministry of Planning and Investment and UNDP 2008).

The institutional arrangements for Vietnam Agenda 21 included the establishment of a National Council for Sustainable Development, with 40 members representing line ministries, sectors, local governments and public associations and a coordination office based at the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MONRE 2006). Each ministry in the government has its own sectoral Agenda 21 and by 2012, 27 out of 63 provinces and municipalities had established a local Agenda 21 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2012).

In 2005, UNDP, Sida and the Danish development cooperation agency Danida set up a project at the request of the Vietnamese government on formulating and implementing the social and environmental aspects of Agenda 21. SEI was involved in various elements of this project, including analysis of "social sustainability" in socio-economic strategies and plans, and in sectoral plans and policies. SEI developed guidelines on social impact assessment (SIA) for government officials and relevant provincial stakeholders to use in pilot provinces and sectors. One of the greatest challenges turned out to be convincing key government officials of the usefulness of looking at the social and economic aspects of development separately. Working with the three pillars conception of sustainability – economic, social and environmental – proved to be quite useful, as it provided a basis for giving them equal weight and demonstrating the trade-offs between them.

at the grassroots. Vietnam has become an intriguing place for ideas and initiatives, because the party-state has shown that it is open to experiment and to well-meaning comments and proposals from the outside world, including donors. However, at the end of the day, the party-state sets the boundaries.



The pressure for economic development: work begins on a new industrial zone on the edge of a national park in Ninh Binh, one of the first Vietnamese provinces to develop a local Agenda 21.

4. SEI IN VIETNAM – LEARNING FROM COOPERATION

This section highlights some important learning from some development and research projects in Vietnam in which SEI has been a partner during the past decade and a half. The selection of projects is intended both to illuminate some key aspects of the sustainable development challenges in Vietnam and to capture the various interactions between Vietnamese and Western actors.

SEI's contribution has often focused on the social and environmental pillars of sustainable development – which many in the Vietnamese party-state still see as lower priorities than economic development, or even as potential obstacles to it. In particular, SEI carried out several social impact assessments linked to larger development projects with funding from Sida. SEI has often used participatory approaches intended to give local people, including poor and marginalized groups, a stronger voice in development decision-making.

The fact that many of the activities were within geographically and temporally bounded pilot projects probably helped to limit the perceived “threat” to the status quo and make the party-state more willing to allow experimentation. At the same time, the small size of the projects also sometimes limited access to senior decision-makers, so it is not always clear how much influence the activities had in the political sphere. However, many of the interactions were positive and, in some cases, made a tangible difference on the ground. Furthermore, working in partnership with Vietnamese researchers and NGOs helped to build relationships and capacity that can be expected to make a growing contribution to sustainable development efforts in Vietnam. Box 4 summarizes key elements of Vietnam's sustainable development policy framework, and SEI's role in a project helping Vietnam with social and environmental aspects of Agenda 21.

4.1 Poverty reduction or empowerment? Switching ends and means

The last Sida-supported rural development programme in Vietnam, Chia Sẻ (meaning “sharing”), ended during its second phase in 2012. Launched in 2003, Chia Sẻ was to combine poverty reduction with empowerment of villagers deriving their livelihoods mainly from agriculture, forestry, and aquaculture in three provinces: Ha Giang and Yen Bai in the mountainous north and the central coastal province of Quang Tri. The aim of Chia Sẻ was to generate a model and insights for future national Socio-Economic Development Plans (SEDPs). It was designed with “a rights-based approach to poverty alleviation by aiming to promote participation, grassroots democracy and transparency” (Barnett et al. 2010).

A key element of Chia Sẻ was the disbursement of Local Development Funds. As the project was originally conceived, some of these funds were to be managed by villages themselves – thus at a level lower than the commune, the lowest decision-making level of the official “grassroots democracy”. The project provided tools for participatory planning as well as capacity building to assist local management.

The approach was welcomed by the villagers and indeed real incomes increased in project villages by 8.3% (compared to 6.3% in non-project villages) during Chia Sẻ’s first phase (Barnett et al. 2010, p. 52). Also, working at village level made women more visible and influential, as they felt more comfortable speaking out in smaller assemblies, although language barriers hindered ethnic minority women from raising their voices, as many do not speak Vietnamese. (For more on barriers to gender equality in Vietnam see Box 5.)

While Chia Sẻ was originally designed as a 10-year programme, in 2007 Sida decided to phase it out along with other traditional bilateral cooperation with Vietnam. At the Vietnamese Government’s request, a second, more focussed, second phase was started in 2008, with the aim of drawing out lessons for the next SEDP (2011-2015). The development funds were all put under commune-level control at the behest of the central authorities in Hanoi. The reasoning offered was that instead of being directed to the poorest individuals, as they had in phase 1, the funds were better spent on infrastructure that could help the whole community (roads, school buildings, health clinics). Thus Chia Sẻ lost its most important aspect, from the donors’ point of view – its decentralizing, democratizing element.

As part of the second phase, SEI analysed the implications for poorer people and women of moving control of the funds back to commune level. One finding was that there was a risk that poor people’s and women’s influences on the decision-making process would decline because the established two-way channels down to village and household levels were no longer a priority.

The evolution of the Chia Sẻ project clearly illustrates the different priorities of external development actors and the Vietnamese government. While for the former the project was primarily about empowerment, to be achieved through local management of the development funds, poverty alleviation was the priority for the Vietnamese authorities; when they saw a “better” way to spend the funds, they were quite ready to abandon the decentralizing model. Quite probably, the change in procedures (quy chẻ) it implied was deemed too sensitive to be left to an actor other than the party-state.

However, it was the shared element of poverty alleviation that allowed Chia Sẻ to go ahead, despite these differing priorities. Being a small-scale pilot project allowed Chia Sẻ to try out a fairly radical, politically sensitive decentralizing model, but the authorities remained able to control its influence on wider decision-making. The ultimate aim of phase 2, to bring lessons learned from the project into national policy-making, was not achieved given the short

Box 5: Barriers to gender equality in Vietnam

Equal rights for women and men have been on the political agenda of the Vietnamese Communist Party ever since its foundation in the early 1930s.

A number of policies and frameworks, including the Constitution, follow the line that “gender equality work is one of the basic elements to improve the quality of life of every person, every family and the whole society” (National Strategy on Gender Equality for the 2011-2020 period). And indeed, the UNDP ranks Vietnam 58 out of 151 countries (and 4th out of 32 medium-human development countries given a ranking) on the Gender Inequality Index (GII), which looks at three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment and economic activity (UNDP 2014). Vietnam also has a relatively large proportion of women in the National Assembly, at about 24.4 %, compared to an average for East Asia and the Pacific region of 18.7% and a world average of 21.1% (UNDP 2014). Also, Vietnam ranks relatively well on indicators such as women’s education, labour force participation and maternal mortality (UNDP 2014).

The Vietnam Women’s Union (VWU), founded in 1930, has been assigned the task of mobilizing women to implement party-state policies on gender equality. With its 13 million members the VWU is by far the largest of the 30 mass organizations that are overseen by the party (Waibel and Glück 2013). Membership is generally free, although compulsory for women working in state administration and members of the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour trade union.

The VWU is involved in drafting of policy and laws related to women and children. However, its role is consultative and “therefore limited in terms of decision-making” (Waibel and Glück 2013).

While efforts for gender equality represent a step away from the Confucian moral code of “three obediences” for women – to the father before marriage, to the husband when married, and to the eldest son when widowed (Schuler et al. 2006) – as recently as 2012 the VWU assigned women the main responsibility for “building-up happy and sustainable families”, and for implementing the campaign “5 Without-s and 3 Clean-s” (VWU 2012). The five withouts are poverty; law-breaking and “social evils”; domestic violence; giving birth to three or more children; and child malnourishment or drop-out from education; and the three cleans are a clean house, a clean kitchen and clean surrounding lanes.

This emphasis on women’s role as the main family caretaker, in combination with the impacts of the “socialization” policy, which turned the household into the prime economic unit for bringing in income and covering costs for education and health care, has increased burden on women and limited their possibilities to influence society on equal terms with men (Kelly 2011; Jones and Tran Thi Van Anh 2012). In addition, husbands are still widely regarded as the heads of households, and as family or household’s representative in important decision-making. Although efforts have been made to enter both husbands’ and wives’ names on land-use certificates, men are still the signatories, and thus the main party to have access to bank loans (Jones and Tran Thi Van Anh 2012.)

In summary, there are evidently structural as well as traditional barriers limiting women’s ability to make full use of their equal rights in Vietnam.

timeframe. However, the Chia Sẻ approach did inspire other foreign development projects such as those of Oxfam, the German Technical Cooperation Agency GTZ (now GIZ) and the Belgian Development Agency (BTC) to increase their use of participatory planning.

4.2 Incorporating the social dimension into strategic environmental assessment

While the Vietnamese party-state increasingly recognizes the need to assess the sustainability implications of development, both policy and practice have some way to go. On environmental impact assessment (EIA), regulations are relatively strong. For example, EIA



Using participatory methods to investigate local land use

is covered under Vietnam's 2005 Law on Environmental Protection (LEP).³ However, a recent evaluation of the EIA system in Vietnam suggests that practice is weak and social concerns are still not treated systematically (Clausen et al. 2011). Further, a 2008 government circular (05/2008/TT-BTNMT) required public consultation in EIAs; however, it has been argued that the lack of guidance on scope and timing of this consultation made it an "administrative formality" (JDM Environmental Consulting et al. 2010).

While EIAs and social impact assessments (SIAs) are generally done at project level, strategic environmental assessments (SEAs) are linked to more strategic decisions and have broader scope, integrating biophysical, social, institutional and economic issues. They are meant to assess environmental and sustainability opportunities and risks, and ensure stakeholders' active engagement (Partidário 2012). The International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA) summarizes a good quality SEA process as one that informs "planners, decision-makers and affected public on the sustainability of strategic decisions, facilitates the search for the best alternative and ensures a democratic decision making process" (IAIA 2002).

A recent Vietnamese government decree (No. 29/2011) on EIA and SEA stipulates that SEAs should be "conducted concurrently with the formulation of a strategy, master plan, or plan", and include consultation of "involved parties". However, it gives no further indications of how to identify these "involved parties". The section of the decree that deals with EIAs states that consultations should take place with the People's Committee of the commune, ward or township and with "representatives of communities and organizations directly affected by the project". While this is clearly in alignment with international practice, and seemingly reflects strong donor influence over the handling of environmental issues in Vietnam, it still does not meet the basic demands of an SEA (i.e. including SIA as a stand-alone exercise and combining SIA with EIA at the strategic level; see Vanclay 1999. In this regard, Vietnam is far from unique in the developing or developed world.)

³ A revised LEP approved in 2014 incorporates, among other things, climate change issues (UNDP 2014). It will come into force in 2015.

In 2009, SEI supported the Vietnamese Ministry of Industry and Trade (MoIT) in carrying out a pilot SEA of hydropower in Vietnam. This was linked to Power Development Plan (PDP) VI (covering the period 2006-2015, and looking ahead to 2025). It was supported by the ADB's Greater Mekong Subregion Core Environmental Programme (Soussan et al. 2008). The main purpose was to build capacities for the integration of SEA into the strategic planning of hydropower in Vietnam, including in preparation of the next PDP (which became Power Master Plan VII; Office of the Prime Minister 2011). A supervisory working group for the SEA included representatives of the MoIT, the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (MONRE), Vietnam Electricity (EVN, Vietnam's biggest power enterprise), and the Institute of Energy (based at the MoIT).

Overall, the study showed how SEA could be a powerful tool for analysis of social and environmental impacts of hydropower development, including mechanisms to assess and understand potential risks for people and environment. The SEA indicated that present approaches to address social and environmental issues in hydropower development were inadequate and must be improved in the interests of sustainable hydropower development. These costs of better mitigation measures could be covered within hydropower schemes without compromising their financial or economic viability.

It also identified opportunities to link mitigation measures with local development efforts and existing government programmes in other sectors, such as the Socio-economic Development Programme for Extremely Difficult Communes in Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas (known as Programme 135), the Community Forestry Programme, and Protected Areas Development and River Basin Planning, cutting costs and boosting their effectiveness. Furthermore, it found that hydropower schemes could have benefits for local people and ecosystems in the areas of water management, agricultural development, service provision and poverty reduction, although these were not yet fully recognized or realized.

The SEA process included developing a range of scenarios to explore the implications of different power development choices. The study was mostly based on existing data, partly in order to make the piloted methodology easier to replicate. However, it also included participatory exercises, showing how SEAs could provide a framework for establishing a consensus among stakeholders on, for example, the most appropriate forms of social and environmental mitigation measures. As in the case of Song Hinh described below, displacement of local people – very often poor and marginalized ethnic minority communities, given the location of most hydropower potential in Vietnam – is the single largest short- and long-term social risk associated with hydropower development (see also Hirsch 1992; Center for Natural Resources and Environmental Studies 2001; Bui Thi Minh Hang et al. 2013). Environmental risks identified included degradation of water resources, forests and ecosystems, irreversible biodiversity loss, and alterations of fish and aquatic life.

As in the Chia Sẻ case, this SEA being a pilot exercise was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it offered an opportunity to introduce new ideas and methods, as well as to experiment, something Vietnamese officials normally do not have either time or resources for. However, this also meant that the members of the SEA working group could not come from the highest ranks of decision-makers. Given the hierarchal traditions in Vietnam, relevant insights at lower levels (or from outside the hierarchy) do not necessarily flow upwards within the party-state system.

Even so, the very process of formulating and applying a workable and well-adapted SEA method to the Vietnamese context, with a strong emphasis on the social and environmental impacts of hydropower development, was appreciated by the Vietnamese counterparts. Also,



Work first, drink later . . . Communal wine drinking is an important part of social interaction in Ede communities. Photo: Dr Vu Ngoc Long

the participation of Vietnamese experts was perhaps the most valuable, as they were well placed in Vietnamese academia and will be able to continue the process within the system.

4.3 Working with ethnic minorities: beyond the *mission civilisatrice*

While most of the Vietnamese population has benefited from better living standards in recent decades, ethnic minorities have been largely left behind. This is clearly illustrated by their over-representation among the poor: although they account for only 15% of the total population, according to the World Bank (2012) they made up 47% of the poor in 2010, up from 29% in 1998. This poverty persists despite the fact that since the early 1990s, several poverty reduction programs have targeted so-called “extremely difficult communes”, where most of the 53 officially recognized ethnic minorities in Vietnam live.

One of the more ambitious government-led programmes was Programme 135. A number of donors, including the World Bank and Sida, showed interest in supporting a second five-year phase of the programme, covering 2006-2010. In 2006, Sida asked SEI to assist in coordinating the preparations for this second phase, which involved a large number of both Vietnamese and foreign actors, and to formulate implementation guidelines.

In this process, SEI had many encounters and discussions with government representatives, in particular from the National Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs (CEMA) the lead authority in this exercise, as well as with the interested donors.

SEI’s contribution also included an analysis of the social and cultural settings of areas with high concentrations of ethnic minorities. To do this we introduced an approach that tried to nuance the understanding of ethnic minority communities, highlighting their agency and their own valuation of assets rather than focusing on what they lacked in relation to the prevailing modernization agenda, which is defined based on lowland Kinh standards and aspirations.

The latter approach, very common in Vietnam, tends to characterize ethnic minorities (with the exception of the ethnic Chinese Hoa) as “backward” and “underdeveloped”. This was clearly expressed in the early days of independence, when the majority Kinh thought of themselves as having a civilizing mission (*mission civilisatrice*) among their “less-developed” compatriots – a concept that had in turn been used to legitimize French colonialism in Indochina (Pholsena 2008; World Bank 2009). In the interim, military forces, extractive industries, cash-cropping farmers, and Kinh migrants (especially in government-created “new economic zones”) entering traditional ethnic minority areas had tended to have little regard for who and what was already there (Taylor 2008).⁴

Another factor behind the conception of ethnic minorities as being poor, and behind the choice of poverty alleviation measures used, is the preference for easily measurable and comparable indicators of poverty. Tending to reflect lowland Kinh concepts of wealth and development, these indicators include, for example, per capita income and expenditure, returns from land, extent of bank loans, cash cropping, labour employment, and migration. Such limited (but still important) indicators do not consider assets and knowledge traditionally developed by each ethnic minority group, who might measure wealth in terms of non-monetary income and assets such as stored wine jars or gongs for traditional festivals). They also do not reflect the value of subsistence; reluctance to take on bank loans; resistance to household-based land certificates, because land, in particular forest, is used collectively in many minority communities; and reluctance to migrate for work.

A case in point is the indicator “housing quality”. This is measured according to the typical lowland Kinh perception that a good quality house must be built of bricks and tiles (grade 4 house; nhà cấp bốn) and stand on the ground, preferably having several floors. By contrast, many ethnic groups in northern and central Vietnam value wooden houses on stilts, which have functional advantages (Lindskog and Vu Ngoc Long 2004). However, such houses – aspirational and practical for many – would be classed as being of poor quality according to national poverty indicators.

The World Bank (2009), in an analysis of ethnicity and development in Vietnam, argues that poverty alleviation policies based on stereotypes of backwardness and underdevelopment, and the use of these labels by government officials and others, means minority peoples tend to be “disempowered and voiceless in a society that devalues them and their contributions”.

This attitude has also led to some policy decisions, supposedly in the interests of sustainability, that have been detrimental to ethnic minorities’ situation. For example, minority groups such as the Co Tu people in central Vietnam and the Dao people in the north of the country have tended to treat forests as common property and to derive various resources from the forests. The introduction of national parks and forest reserves to protect Vietnam’s remaining forests often disadvantaged these groups by restricting forest use and allocating rights to forest lands by household. One forest conservation measure has been to outlaw shifting cultivation and to sedentarize (định canh định cư) groups who use forest land for cultivation. This is based on a misconception that these groups’ traditional practices harm the forest (Nguyen Van Chinh 2008; Århem 2009).

More recent policies on payment for environmental services (PES) have further restricted the local people’s use of forest (Bartholdson et al. 2012). And the interests of local people,

⁴ The new economic zones policy originated in the time of the Viet Minh in the 1940s, when newly liberated areas in the highlands and mountains were to be populated by Kinh groups in order to bring development (Hardy 2003). The policy has subsequently, and particularly since 1975, had additional aims: to secure national borders, and to alleviate overpopulation in the delta areas (Lindskog et al. 2005; World Bank 2009).

including ethnic minorities, have been insufficiently taken into account in Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) programmes, as there are no proper mechanisms to ensure their participation in public affairs (CERDA and CSDM 2011).

Two more factors perpetuating or even exacerbating poverty among ethnic minorities are related to education and health. School attendance is lower and morbidity and mortality more widespread among the non-Hoa minorities. Reasons for these persistent problems include that ethnic minorities, particularly in the highlands, often do not speak good Vietnamese, and that health clinics in their areas are poorly equipped. The current policy of “socialization” (imposing user fees for health and education services; see section 2) is threatening to aggravate these problems, as with fewer monetary assets, ethnic minorities often struggle to pay the fees – despite the fact that the socialization policy officially grants them exemptions and subsidies (World Bank 2012; Kokko 2011).

There is still limited research, Vietnamese or international, into how ethnic minorities react to and cope with such policy changes. However, recent studies point at a kind of “everyday resistance in form of small acts of disagreement and quiet defiance” (Messier and Michaud 2012) and a “pretend-compliance” and “surface assimilation” (Friederichsen 2012).

Through its work on Programme 135 phase 2, SEI was able to introduce to Vietnamese policy-makers, officials and community members a different way of looking at ethnic minority poverty. SEI’s contribution stressed that relying on local people’s understanding and priorities in organizing their production, living conditions and related cultural behaviour is an indispensable part of any scheme aiming for a participatory approach to change. This is all the more important when it comes to people whose livelihoods, values and traditions are different from those reflected in mainstream policy. Therefore, development schemes should be elaborated in cooperation with local people in order to answer to their specific needs and priorities.

However, numerous more recent studies of the situation of ethnic minorities in Vietnam, including in the light of new policies, suggest that it will be some time before Vietnamese decision-makers change their understanding of ethnic minority poverty.

4.4 Understanding the lingering impacts of the US war

Between 1962 and 1971, South Vietnamese and US aircraft sprayed millions litres of herbicide and defoliant on Vietnam (along with parts of neighbouring Laos and Cambodia). The herbicide Agent Orange contained 2,4,5-T contaminated by varying levels of highly toxic TCDD (dioxin compounds). An estimated 10% of the area of South Vietnam was sprayed during this period (Stellman and Stellman 2004).

According to Vietnamese sources (e.g. Vo Quy 2009) 3.3 million hectares of land and waters, including 2 million hectares of inland forest, were destroyed. In addition, between 2.2 million and 4.8 million people are believed to have been directly exposed to Agent Orange, often at high concentrations. Today, Vietnamese advocacy groups claim that over 3 million Vietnamese are suffering from health problems due to exposure to the dioxin in Agent Orange (Martin 2012). In the absence of scientific research definitively establishing a link between this exposure and the high levels of illness and disability among former Vietnamese soldiers, local people, their children and grandchildren, the USA continues to deny any legal liability or compensation claims (although about 20,000 US war veterans have received compensation from the chemical’s producers for a number of illnesses with scientifically proven association to dioxin exposure; Lindskog et al. 2006). Since 2007, however, the USA and Vietnam have had a cooperative programme to clean up former US bases where Agent Orange was stored.

Agent Orange has been an extremely sensitive political issue in Vietnam, particularly given the country's evolving relationship with the USA and the implications for exports of Vietnamese agricultural and aquacultural products. The first official response to it did not come until 1998, with the decision to survey the victims. Since then, a number of regimes for financial supports and medical care have been established, the most recent being the 2012 National Action Plan to 2015 with a Vision to 2020. The plan includes a number of related activities, such as treating contaminated areas, planting 300,000 hectares of forest, enhancing research capacities, assessing the long-term consequences on human health, setting up programmes for health checks, and providing allowances and health insurance.

However, the sensitivity surrounding Agent Orange is not limited to the political sphere. In 2003–2004, SEI was part of a mixed Swedish-Vietnamese team collaborating on a research study that revealed the complex ways in which social factors and deep-rooted cultural beliefs have compounded the vulnerability of Agent Orange victims and their families. The research supported official efforts to better understand the implications for the victims of Agent Orange, generating evidence that they could present to outside donors, in particular the USA.

The study collected narratives from some 80 families classified by the local authorities as “Agent Orange families”, spread across the northern, central and southern part of the country. It explored the agency of these families in dealing with their situation and possible stigma attached to being seen as affected by Agent Orange, their health care needs and supportive interventions.

Experienced stigma and lack of agency evident in some families was strongly related to fatalism. Rather than directly blame the USA or Agent Orange, parents interpreted their children's disability as punishment for misdeeds by past generations. A related gender aspect turned out to be decisive for many women: a long held belief in Vietnam is that a woman must be in good health in order to give birth to healthy children (Johansson et al. 2006). If she does not, then her children's ill health is considered a result of her own ill health and thus her fault. Also linked to this belief is the fact that a somewhat ill or disabled man can always find a woman to marry, while the opposite is unthinkable.

It also became clear that stigmatization can complicate research on this topic. Some families with young adults who were about to marry were reluctant to receive the researchers, as this would confirm that they were indeed an “Agent Orange family”, and might lead the bride or groom's family to call off the wedding. The research team also met parents who happened to be on the losing side in the war. This was despite the local authorities seeking to direct the team towards the “right” victims (i.e. so-called war heroes). These meetings turned out to be quite sensitive, even without the presence of officials, not least because the families were still distrustful of “people from Hanoi” – including the foreign researchers. For further discussion of the constraints and opportunities for Western researchers working in Vietnam see Michaud 2010; Turner 2010; Bonnin 2010; and Scott et al. 2006.

While memories of the US war, and the social divisions it still creates, will fade, it is likely that future generations will continue to suffer congenital disabilities and ill health due to the wartime spraying. The findings of our study form part of a growing body of documents and research material drawing attention to the plight of the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese fearing these long-term consequences. This issue will continue to be a significant challenge for sustainable development, and one where, with sensitivity and awareness of the many facets of affected families' vulnerability, an international research-to-policy institute like SEI could have important roles to play.

4.5 Local participation – a tool for land distribution and environmental protection

All land in Vietnam is commonly owned by “the People” (and managed by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, MONRE) under the Constitution. During the 1980s, rural land was decollectivized and certain legal protections for land users, and legal rules governing land use, were gradually established (Markussen and Tarp 2011). The 1993 Land Law gave individual households the right to exchange, transfer, lease, inherit and mortgage land for which they held a land-use certificate (LUC) from the state. LUCs for agricultural land were valid for 20 years for annual crops and 50 years for perennial crops. Arguably, this move came in response to changes that were already taking place on the ground and gave the state a means to control an expanding illegal and informal land market (Akram-Lodhi 2006). The 2003 Land Law updated the legislation to better reflect the needs of industrialization and to facilitate the development of a commercial property market (Lemmens 2008).

The issuance of LUCs in Vietnam constituted one of the largest titling campaigns in history, affecting tens of millions of households. By 2004, over 75% of rural households had received LUCs with the highest rates of titling, over 90%, in the Mekong delta region (Gorman 2010).

Initially, the decollectivization was a fairly equitable exercise, with land allocations calculated based on the number of household members as a way to ensure subsistence (Akram-Lodhi 2006; Gorman 2010). Generally, it boosted incomes and reduced poverty. However, as both Akram-Lodhi (2004; 2005) and Gorman (2010) have shown, the marketization of land also led to the stratification of the rural population into three groups: commercial farmers, subsistence farmers and the landless.

The decentralization of land management under the 2003 Land Law down to the commune and district levels, combined with the increasing value of land assets, also opened the system to rent-seeking by local officials (Akram-Lodhi 2004). Households with family ties to local officials were able to significantly increase their levels of land-related investment, through improved access to property rights and to credit (Markussen and Tarp 2011).

Management rights (or protection obligations) for forest land, including degraded former forest, were also distributed to households, based on the idea that localized control would improve the quantity and productivity of forest land. Indeed, once the forest land allocation mechanism was established, forest cover in Vietnam expanded by 10% between 1990 and 2009, as local people revived degraded forests. Individual households become the second largest group with forest land tenure rights, after the two Management Boards for Protection and Special Use Forest (Sikor and Nguyen Quang Tan 2011).

However, there is evidence that a number of factors have limited the effectiveness of the policy in the uplands, where many ethnic minorities live (Sikor and Nguyen Quang Tan 2011). As noted above, shifting cultivation and other traditional practices of many ethnic minority groups are now forbidden, based on the misconception that they are harmful to the forest. Such restrictions have had detrimental impacts on local livelihoods and lives, which have traditionally been based upon a wider use of forest than wood production (for example, the forest has symbolic meaning). Also, upland people lack access to productive resources and markets; they manage the forest in traditional ways, implying various forms of collective use, while the law only grants management rights to individual households and companies; and the commune and district People’s Committees in the uplands have limited capacity to support local people in forest management.

As part of the Sida-supported programme the Strengthening of Environmental Management and Land Administration (SEMLA; 2004-2009), SEI assisted in establishing a mechanism for



Drying coffee in Dak Lak

social impact assessment of land and environment-related policies. This mechanism was to be used by officials at MONRE and local authorities. Work was both at national level and in Nghe An, an upland province in north-central Vietnam.

The SEMLA programme had ambitious goals in areas such as poverty alleviation through improved land security and pollution control related to land; increased participation by local levels in the decision-making process through direct involvement of local people in development activities; enhanced cooperation between and within (state) institutions responsible for environment and land administration; decentralization of natural resource management and land-use planning to local governments; and, finally, integration of environmental issues into land management and land use, ultimately to attain sustainable livelihoods. SEI introduced mechanisms and approaches for integration of social issues

into planning and decision-making at province, district and commune levels, and also provided training in participatory rural appraisal (PRA) methodologies at national and local levels, preparing baseline surveys. SEI was also able to illustrate how the management of land and environment could be improved by engaging local institutions such as the Women's Union and the Farmers' Union in preparing and managing improvements in land and environment.

4.6 When local farmers meet international markets

In 2002-2003, SEI conducted a study in Dak Lak province, central Vietnam, in partnership with the Institute of Tropical Biology in Ho Chi Minh City and Tay Nguyen University, Ban Ma Thout (Lindskog et al. 2005). The focus was on communities' vulnerability to multiple environmental, social and economic stressors in a region that was at the heart of a coffee production boom, with large-scale and smallholder farmers often competing for land resources. The coffee boom had followed the package of market-oriented economic reforms introduced in the mid-1980s. By the late 1990s, Vietnam had become the world's second largest coffee exporter.

The study was looking for ways of building sustainability and resilience into development strategies and support mechanisms for local sustainable natural resource use. The research included several case studies in three districts or communes, and was guided by a conceptual framework developed by SEI and Clark University that considers how stresses on natural/social systems influence the level of social resilience (coping, adjustments and adaptation). It thus provided a good illustration of the social and environmental ramifications of the Đổi Mới economic reforms.

Dak Lak lies within the Se San river basin, one of the environmental hotspots identified by SEI in the Strategic Environmental Framework for the Greater Mekong Sub-region (SEI and

ADB 2002). It is a culturally diverse province, comprising people of about 40 different ethnic origins. Land use and livelihood sources in Dak Lak range from mixed land uses with shifting cultivation to rain-fed and irrigated paddy and animal husbandry, to coffee and other plantations for cash cropping.

The study found that the social and ecological systems in Dak Lak were being affected by a number of changes and stressors, including in-migration (both planned and spontaneous) from other parts of Vietnam; deforestation for coffee production and other land-use changes; changed forest and land-management policies; a drop in the world market price for coffee; and climatic variability, including drought and floods. We also found considerable local differences in the degree of exposure experienced by different groups, their sensitivity to the stresses, and the resilience of livelihoods involved.

The area where the case studies were carried out was in the middle of the traditional lands of the Ede ethnic minority group, which were now being claimed by coffee growers, most of them ethnic Kinh living in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. There had been social unrest over the land issue among the Ede only a year before the start of the research. This made the presence of a foreign researcher particularly sensitive for the authorities, as foreigners are often suspected of spreading “unsuitable” ideologies to the Ede – including evangelical Christianity, which some Ede have joined (illegally) as a protest against land-grabbing by outside investors in coffee cultivation. The fact that the researcher was Swedish, and thus more trusted by the party-state (see section 3), and a strategy of openness and information-sharing, went some way to counter this sensitivity and allow the research to proceed.

The study found that key changes accompanying Đổi Mới had contributed to new patterns of vulnerability. The main change had been the evolving role of local institutions and the increasingly interconnected economies within which households were embedded. The pace of change had meant that traditional coping mechanisms were now no longer as effective, yet new mechanisms had not yet evolved. Coffee farmers with small private land holdings (as opposed to urban-based investors with large land holdings) in particular found themselves at the mercy of international commodity markets and resource management decision-making operating at scales beyond their scope of influence.

The findings suggested that while Đổi Mới had increased opportunities for households to improve their livelihoods, it had also exposed communities to new risks associated with the market and, particularly, international commodity price fluctuations. Concurrently, serious environmental impacts, from floods and droughts in particular, were perceived to be increasing in frequency. The role of households, local institutions and the market in regulating access to and use of natural resources had also been rapidly redefined. This meant that communities faced increasingly uncertain environmental and economic futures. The study concluded that economic development in Vietnam could lose momentum if environmental and social stresses were not addressed in a sustainable way.

4.7 Looking back on Song Ninh – small steps forward in local participation

As noted earlier, most hydropower potential in Vietnam is found in highland and mountainous areas. Hydropower development has often resulted in population displacement in remote areas, often of already poor and marginalized ethnic minority communities. In Vietnam (involuntary) resettlement has become increasingly common with accelerating infrastructure and industrial development needing “new space”. There is still no national policy framework for resettlement, yet regulations on compensation and high population



When resettled people have a say: this Ede family chose to divide their allocated housing budget between a modern (Kinh-style) brick house for living and a traditional (Ede) building for religious worship and feasts.

densities mean that there is a growing shortage of good quality cultivable land for resettlement that does not require new investment in irrigation and other services.

In 1998, construction of a dam as part of the Song Hinh Multipurpose Project in central Vietnam, displaced around 500 households, mostly of the Ede and Bana ethnic minorities and typically practising shifting agriculture and foraging. The present author and a Vietnamese colleague were engaged by Sida to carry out a project to make the state-sponsored resettlement programme more participatory. The first phase lasted from 1996 to 1998, and Sida also funded a follow-up phase from 1998 to 2003, allowing a fruitful longer-term engagement between researchers, local authorities, the Song Hinh Project Management Board (PMB), and the affected communities.

The project gave local people a voice and a chance to influence the terms of the resettlement – even if they had no say in whether the resettlement took place at all. The affected people could influence decisions on where to move, who would be their future neighbours, and what type of house they would have in the new settlement area. The participatory process started with a training workshop in PRA for all stakeholders involved. Using PRA tools, each group analysed the local livelihoods system, social strata, the drivers of local poverty and hunger, and risks and difficulties in the resettlement. The resettlement needs were ranked and the roles and responsibilities of the different stakeholders in the resettlement process were discussed.

One value of the inclusive participatory approach used in the workshop was that higher-level government officials (in this case from the district authorities and Song Hinh project management board) had to listen to villagers' perspectives on, and demands in, the resettlement. Translation was provided for the many participants of the Ede and Bana communities who had difficulty speaking Vietnamese, and the visual nature of many PRA tools also aided communication and understanding.

Following agreement in the workshop, local working groups (LWGs) were established representing the affected peoples in each of the three affected communes. Each LWG was

composed of traditional and government village leaders and respected individuals; one person represented the host population in the resettlement area. These LWGs increased the influence of the Ede and Bana communities on issues such as compensation, scheduling, selection of house style and plots within their new home villages, location of the villages and agricultural land, etc. They also acted as important conduits for exchange of information between the affected communities and the district authorities and Song Hinh project management board.

Representatives of the affected peoples and the district affirmed that the degree of affected peoples' influence, the openness in reporting and the information flow increased considerably thanks to the LWGs. District officials have several times expressed regret that the LWGs had to be disbanded in 1998, once the initial Sida funding ceased.

SEI was asked to carry out a risk analysis some years later (Lindskog and Vu Ngoc Long 2004), which revealed limitations of the resettlement in practice. Despite the participation, the reconstruction of sustainable livelihoods after resettlement largely failed. The resettled communities became more vulnerable and poorer, both materially and spiritually, due to factors such as denied compensation for land; limited benefits from the project itself; increased population by migration leading to lack of good land for cultivation; demands on the affected communities to adopt unfamiliar modes of agricultural production without adequate support; and inadequate and poorly made and maintained infrastructure (roads, schools, health centres, wells) provided as part of the compensation.

There was also an impact on gender balance, with women losing out. For example, land allocations were made to men as "heads of households". Also, due to their limited access to education, Ede and Bana women have low levels of literacy in Vietnamese and lack other "modern" knowledge taught in schools, making it harder for them to integrate into and benefit from mainstream contemporary Vietnamese society. Arguably, if the participatory approach had been extended beyond the relocation itself, there would have at least been opportunities to mitigate these impacts.

Valuable lessons were learned in Song Hinh. First, it demonstrated that for all the strong hierarchical traditions in Vietnam, participatory approaches can work, and even be appreciated by officials. Also, the participatory process not only helped local people influence issues that strongly affected them, but it also showed higher-level officials that local people have something to contribute and that local knowledge can make for better decisions. The long-term follow-up – all too rare in the development sphere – revealed the need for sustained participation. Personal feedback from well-placed sources in the Vietnamese system confirm (10 years later) that lessons learned in Song Hinh have been considered in other hydropower development projects in Vietnam.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Vietnamese independence and self-governance are relatively new phenomena. The party-state, regardless of its stated ideological platform, is born out of a long history of foreign cultural, historical, economic and social influences. Its legitimacy, which was earlier based on its wartime achievements against the French colonialists and the USA, is nowadays also underpinned by its success in delivering improvements to the situations of most Vietnamese people, through market reforms.

Economic growth remains a priority for the party-state. However, issues of social and environmental sustainability are starting to receive more attention and Vietnam is subscribing to green growth principles.

Encounters between the Vietnamese party-state and Western development actors have created platforms for cooperation, albeit mostly of pilot or experimental character. Within these frames, new approaches and methodologies, sometimes radical departures from the Vietnamese norm, have been welcomed and tested – as long as the party-state sees them as potentially useful, and not a challenge to the existing system.

By and large, encounters have been fruitful when projects and programmes have been able to embody Western-based development agendas but with an understanding and recognition of the Vietnamese setting, within the frames offered by the party-state. The party-state's approach in this regard has allowed it to deal with both international market forces and development financing institutions like the ADB and the World Bank to support its own policies on development. Also, even if many projects have had limited direct influence outside a pilot area, Vietnamese officials, academics and communities have learned from the processes of cooperation, and this can be expected to shape Vietnam's rapid future development.

Obstacles have been encountered mainly when projects have called into question longstanding party-state views and attitudes regarding the capacity of upland ethnic minorities to take charge of their own interests, as in the case of Programme 135. This is closely related to issues of "rights", because the party-state sees itself as already offering sufficient rights, being the leader of its people. The same kinds of obstacle have been met when Western notions of participation have been perceived as going beyond the existing "grassroots democracy".

Institutes like SEI, carrying out scientific research and offering evidence-based policy advice, are likely to remain privileged and valued partners in Vietnam. As our experience in Vietnam has clearly shown, the party-state is open to learning that helps it meet difficult developmental challenges, albeit on its own terms. Furthermore, external policy advice is often particularly appreciated and taken into consideration because of its neutrality, given the complex dynamics of political and personal interests within the Vietnamese system. At the same time, research provides opportunities to interact and share ideas not only with policy-makers and other decision-makers, but also with local people and with Vietnamese academics and the emerging civil society, who could be decisive in shaping the country's future sustainable development.

My own engagement in Vietnam has been immensely enriching and rewarding, both personally and professionally. Working in the same country for so long provides unique opportunities for an individual or an organization to learn about the local historical, cultural and social context in which political, economic and environmental changes are taking place. Such insights can help contribute to more positive impacts from development interventions, whether they are led by the party-state or by external actors, as exemplified by the work SEI has done with disadvantaged groups. For one thing, they allow more realistic expectations of what change is possible. For another, they can add credibility to critiques of current policies and realities, when talking to local stakeholders. And long-term engagement makes it possible to develop deeper relationships with key players, particularly in academia.

Of course, there is always a risk of becoming too "embedded" in an attempt to gain acceptance from government or local stakeholders, of failing to question and criticize when it is needed. The art is to bring the independent perspectives and insights of an outsider to bear within the existing space for manoeuvre – and if possible, in cooperation with local expertise, help to expand that space.

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