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**NEEDLE IN A HAYSTACK: SEARCHING FOR CIVIL SOCIETY
IN THE SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM**

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ABSTRACT

The following attempts to demystify the ongoing intellectual debate on civil society and its related concepts, in the context of development. It will present two fundamental opposing approaches to civil society that are ascribing to it roles and functions: the *neo-liberal* and the *neo-marxist* approach. Both are inspired by Western philosophical ideas of the past centuries, and compete for recognition. In addition to these two competing views, stands the *socially responsible capitalism* approach, inspired by ideas of both neo-liberalism and neo-marxism. The dissertation will also argue that it is the neo-liberal approach that has gained most in popularity in contemporary development discourses. Multi- and bilateral development agencies have pushed civil society up on their policy agendas for two main 'official' reasons: enhancing development-oriented activities, and promoting democracy. But there is yet another agenda served by 'strengthening civil society' projects. This paper will then discuss the usefulness of civil society as a Western concept in a non-Western context. Drawing from the existing theory, practice and evidence from the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the latter part of the paper will argue that civil society as defined by mainstream Western-rooted notions is not easily observable in the case of Vietnam. To assess the nature and extent of civil society, as it is defined in Westernised terms, will lead to the syndrome of searching for a 'needle in a haystack'. However, because the notion of civil society, and the ideas it carries are deemed desirable in the context of development in Vietnam, it will not be entirely dismissed. Thus, it is recommended for donors seeking to support civil society, to adopt an 'adapted' version of civil society, which takes into account the particularities of the socio-political context of Vietnam. Only then will the notion of civil society be exploited to its full potential.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DFID	Department for International Development
FES	Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
INGO	International Non-governmental Organisation
IEA	Institute of Economic Affairs
MO	Mass Organisation
NED	National Endowment for Democracy
NGO	Nongovernmental Organisation
NIC	Newly Industrialised Country
SRV	Socialist Republic of Vietnam
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
VCP	Vietnamese Communist Party
VVF	Vietnam's Fatherland Front
VGCL	Vietnam General Confederation of Labor
VNGO	Vietnamese Non-Governmental Organisation

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List of Vietnamese Terms

doi moi	Process of Renovation
viet kieu	Overseas Vietnamese

NEEDLE IN A HAYSTACK: SEARCHING FOR CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to search for the meaning of a concept known as “civil society” in Vietnam, considering that it may not be as an easily observable phenomenon as it has been alleged. The subject matter itself is somewhat controversial.

Paradoxically, a great deal of resources has already been spent on shaping and strengthening civil society in Vietnam, on the basis of confidence of its existence.

A turning point in Vietnam’s development has been the reforms under *doi moi* (renovation) introduced by the government at the end of the 1980s. Vietnam is one of the last remaining state socialist countries, along with China, which claims to be still engaged in the historical project of “market socialism” (White *et al*, 1996). A related concern of this paper is to investigate the impact of the spread of markets on patterns of social organisation and State-society relations, on the (alleged) development of civil society, and consequently, the practical influence of civil society in development and poverty alleviation issues in Vietnam. If the hypothesis turns out to be true, then it could be argued that the reforms have created an increasing number of social actors, fostered

an increasing differentiation and pluralization of interests in society, and opened up a realm of social space within which individuals and groups can use their resources to establish autonomous, self-regulating organisations to further their aims. Such an associational phenomenon could *or could not* be characterized as civil society.

A final topic dealt with, in the scope of this dissertation, will be the influence of Western donors on civil society in developing countries, such as in the case of Vietnam. Chapter 1 will provide an overview of the debates surrounding civil society, and argue that the term has been most exploited in the terms neo-liberalism, an ideology broadly advocated by official donors. I will explain their objectives in engaging with civil society in recipient countries, the mechanisms they use to do so, and the impact of donor involvement in civil society on development policies of the recipient countries. Chapter 2 will introduce the subject of the case study, setting the ground for the analysis undertaken subsequently in Chapter 3. And finally, the latter will discuss the relevance and meaning of the subject in the context of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

CHAPTER ONE: Civil Society

1. Introduction

For about half a century, since the end of World War II, the intellectual debate about development has been embodied in an ideological choice over either the State or the economic forces of the market, as the underlying aspiration for a country's progress. Modernisation theorists, neo-Marxist and neo-liberal thinkers have since the 1960s contributed to the debate. The 1990s however has witnessed a reorientation of the development discourse in both academic and non-academic circles. The novelty of this intellectual trend has been that it attributed to the human agency a distinctive role, a political one.

The impetus for such a change came from the broad range of experiences of failed post-colonial "development states" of the Third World, the remaining socialist countries, and the desire to identify the social forces which have arisen to challenge and overthrow authoritarian States, such as in the case of Central and Eastern European countries (White *et al*, 1995). The basic premise had been for a long time that the State was a rational instrument of guiding and promoting change. After World War II, the State took on an important role in development and service provision. By the 1960s, the State had become involved in virtually every aspect of the economy from administering prices to regulating labour markets. By the 1980s, however, a disillusion of the State in its role as agent for development and economic redistribution had grown from a recognition of the continuing struggle in the South to foster sustainable development, as well as from the realisation of the costs of maintaining the bloated "white elephants" States in the Western world. The debt crisis hit in the 1980s and oil prices plunged suggesting the failure of this model of state-development. By then, the idea that the state-led development was ill-suited had been articulated and circulated among policy makers. It is with the emergence in the 1980s of the dissident intellectuals in communist Eastern Europe that engaged in an anti-totalitarian struggle and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union that a true sense of government failure set in. The call for the "rolling back" of the state was given, particularly in the Thatcher/Reagan governments. The 1980s marked the beginning of the ascendancy of neo-liberalism. In short the "pendulum had

swung from the state-dominated development model of the 1960s and 1970s to the minimalist state of the 1980s" (World Development Report, 1997).

Civil society has thus been revived in a more recent past to explain and understand the consequences of a new phase of historical transition away from the discredited forms of modern statism. The leftist hopes of an all-providing state had washed away, but more recently, the rightist belief in the free market dogma, in which economic growth would redistribute benefit to all, the so-called "trickle-down" effect, also started to wear out. It is in this context that came the "third" hope, embodied in a strong civil society, as an antidote to the extreme laissez-faire which recognised only atomised actors, and not the society at large.

Yet another point of view situates the re-emergence of the civil society elsewhere. In Latin-America from the 1970s onwards, the concept of civil society has been embraced by activists fighting against fascist dictatorships. According to Glasius (2001) the Gramscian idea of civil society as an element against the authoritarian state, had been captured by dissidents because it was strategically "useful". The dissidents fought against dictatorships, where capitalists were in alliance with the state, and to some extent, with the church. In contrast with the struggle of Eastern Europeans, this was a struggle against totalitarian capitalism, not totalitarian socialism. In other words, civil society would not only be seen as a "weapon" against the State, but now also against the market.

An interesting idea that must be pointed out here is that the so-called re-emergence of the concept in the Western world has been somewhat selective. If we take the example of Vietnam, "civil society" in Hegelian terms, may be useful *today* in understanding community associations working in a rural access to water project; on the other hand, Gramscian ideas of "civil society" have long been relevant in understanding the struggle *in the past* of the Vietnamese people organising resistance against French and Japanese colonialism.

2. Defining Civil Society

Although the variations of definitions are prolific, a fair amount of scholarly consensus exists around a view of civil society as a "space" in between the State and the individuals, in which there is "interaction" in

the shape of organised activities among individuals working towards a common goal (McIlwaine, 1998). Civil society is also commonly referred to as one of the three elements constituting society, alongside the state and the market. Indeed, definitions typically vary according to the degree of importance assigned to the different characteristics of civil society over others i.e. state power, politics and individual freedom, economic functions and notions of social capital and cohesion.

Different Definitions¹

Purely non-normative analytical and conceptual definitions of civil society do not suggest any *a priori* “good” connotation for civil society since they include what could be regarded in today’s society as “uncivil” associations, such as a neo-Nazi group. In this sense, definitions do not distinguish among causes and objectives, nor do they pass judgement on them. This “moral blindness” does not draw a line to mark the inclusion or exclusion of groups. The demarcation line is best done in the context of concrete situations rather than abstractly and *a priori*. In any case, the business of including and excluding involves “grey areas” that requires close investigation.

The concept of civil society has usually been used as a normative understanding of what *ought* to be the relationship among the individual, the society, and the state (Howell *et al*, 2001; Van Rooy, 1998). White’s definition published in the journal *Democratisation* in 1994 is an example of a definition commonly quoted in literature on civil society. It is “an intermediate associational realm between State and family populated by organisations which are separate from the State, enjoy autonomy in relation to the State and are formed voluntarily by members of the society to protect or extend their interests or values” (1994, quoted in Carothers *et al*, 2002; Howell *et al*, 2001; Van Rooy, 1998; Hann *et al*, 1996).

The modern prevailing view sees in civil society a description of the role of both the state and the market relative to that of citizens and the society they constitute, but also as a “buffer zone” between state and market, to keep both in check (Howell *et al*, 2001). Gellner (1994) states that the “simplest, immediate and intuitively obvious definition, which also has a good deal of merit, is that civil society is the set of institutions, which is strong enough to counterbalance the state, and, whilst not

preventing the state from fulfilling its role of keeper of peace and arbitrator between major interests, can, nevertheless, prevent the state from dominating and atomising the rest of society” (Gellner, 1994: 5).

Understandably, broad definitions of civil society have little appeal to donors, given that it points to a sector too encompassing for them to practically assume capacity building, or funding support to civil society. Instead they will look at alternative models of civil society that focus less on the specificity of associations, and more on the role that certain associations play in fostering values and norms, that donors themselves are likely to advance. Lewis (2001) claims that, despite the fact that the concept may be useful for analysis; it has much less value as a prescriptive tool in the hands of policy makers. He states three reasons for this: i) it is difficult to agree on precise policy purposes, when there are so many different understanding of the term; ii) the concept is chiefly a theoretical one, and does not lend itself in a straightforward way to practical applications; and iii) the concept is historically specific in time and space, and is sensitive to historical differences in political and social aspects (Lewis, 2001: p. 3).

In order to fully understand the current claims about civil society, I deemed crucial to first investigate its philosophical origins, the platform upon which have developed the contemporary debates, which we, as academics and practitioners, are now involved in. A clearer understanding of the historical versus contemporary debates will be useful in extrapolating current political underpinnings of civil society as a “normative idea that guides action” (Fowler, 1996).

Historical Debates about Civil Society

Civil society emerged within the cadre of European philosophical tradition as a Western intellectual product of the 18th century Enlightenment. The following discussion about some of the philosophical pioneers is purposefully brief, and will be unable to do justice to the full breadth of the thinking. The aim is identify the major strands that are reflected today in the modern debate on civil society.

The contribution of the Enlightenment philosophers to contemporary debates rests in the initiation of the debate on the relationship between the State and society, or the governed and the governors, still a central issue in the civil

society discussions today. Locke and Tocqueville saw civil society in political terms, as they perceived in a democratic associational life, a base for functioning polity and an integral part of life (Howell *et al*, 2001). They believed in a social contract between the rulers and the ruled, that respected the natural rights of individuals but that also allowed the State to protect civil society from destructive conflict. Influenced by his travels to the United States and related enthusiastic observation of volunteerism, community spirit and independent associational life, Tocqueville believed that the ultimate characteristic of society was that it had to defend itself against tyranny of the State. Civil society's role was important and its mandate was to educate citizenry and scrutinize State actions. Tocqueville's account stressed the role of civil society as one in which some equilibrium was created in relation to the State and the market (Lewis, 2001). Friedrich Hegel laid out the ground to argue against the dominant modern idea of civil society and State as a bipolarity (Hann, 1996). Hegel incorporated the idea of the necessity of a State to regulate society, but also revealed that the State and society were organically related. Civil society is separate from, although in symbiosis with, the State (Glasius, 2001). The danger, Hegel reckoned, was that civil society carried with it no guarantee of moral behaviour or service for the common good; these guarantees only found their way through the ethical laws of the State (Van Rooy, 1998). A different strand of ideas has also been quite influential in recent years. Antonio Gramsci was yet another critic of civil society, and set up the context for the "alternative" model to civil society. As a neo-Marxist, he described civil society as a sphere in which battles, for and against capitalism, are fought. In sharp contrast with Hegel's account, for Gramsci, the State is a potential instrument of domination by the forces of capital (Van Rooy, 1998). Gramsci's ideas have been very popular in Latin America, where they have been used to fuel opposition to authoritarian regimes. Glasius (2001) notes however that Gramsci was ambiguous about civil society: "on the one hand, it is through this 'cultural superstructure' that the bourgeois class imposes its hegemony, using it to keep the working class in its place. On the other hand, it is a kind of wedge between the state and the class-structured economy, which has the revolutionary potential of

dislodging the bourgeoisie" (Glasius, 2001: 2).

3. Contemporary Debates about the Role of Civil Society in Development

Hann (1996) identifies the modern literature on Western-rooted ideas about civil society as outgrowths of historical thinking, and classifies it more or less into two central strands. Similarly, McIlwaine (1997) writes that civil society's role and functions, have been generally classified into two broad perspectives, even though there is a risk of overgeneralization. These have been termed differently by different authors, but essentially represent the same ideas. On the one hand, there is the "Mainstream" or "Liberal" approach. On the other hand, is the "Alternative" or the "neo-Marxist" or "Gramscian" strands (respectively, Howell *et al*, 2001; Hann *et al*, 1996; and Foley *et al*, 1996). The next section will give an overview of these two approaches.

A "New" Triadic Model for Development

From the separation of civil society from State in early Western political thinking and also the political and social events of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, has emerged a tendency to view civil society and the State as separate. Along with the element of the market has appeared the so-called "trinity" or triadic model framework (Fowler, 1996). Based on a normative functionalist model of equilibrium, this model posits civil society as the "third sector" alongside with the State, or "first sector", and the market, or "second sector". The common schematisation is in the shape of three overlapping circles, each representing a sector. Advocates of this triadic model generally define civil society in an exclusionary way – it is neither State nor market. The model is neutral, as it neither problematizes the relationship of civil society to the market nor does it allow for civil society to say what kind of State is needed. Nevertheless, it is drawn on by many academics, and non-academics, from both Left and Right ideological perspective, but also the larger influential multilateral agencies.

The Neo-Liberal approach

The neo-liberalist perspective, originating mainly in the 1980s, had pushed forward a culture of "the market", of deregulation, privatisation and supply-side economics. This "culture" carried, along with its economic theory, strong normative views of the role of the State and society. Neo-

liberals believe that a liberal economy creates a condition where a civil society of associations autonomous from the State can flourish. More controversial, however, is the belief that economic freedoms, under a market economy, would be of no value unless supported by political ones. With the advent of the freedom of the market also came the idea of liberal democracy, vindicated now as the only desirable and practical form of political organisations. The combination of capitalism and liberal democracy seems to have been acknowledged as the “destiny of humankind” (Howell *et al*, 2001). The idea that economic liberalism went hand in hand with expanding political liberalism, was not entirely new, however. The innovation came as it was assumed that civil society and its democratising effect were necessary *prior prerequisite* for economic development.

In addition, the neo-liberal perspective sees in the emerging global civil society an extension of the Western notion of national civil society (MacLean, 1996). Thus, for liberal scholars, establishing a global democracy, via a global civil society, comes through the spread of the liberal democratic forms, pushed forward mainly by the West. The proponents see an expansive civil society as the unleashing of an entrepreneurial initiative – that will work towards the stated ideal market order (ibid, 1996). The less radically market-oriented proponents will argue rather that an expansive civil society furthers liberal pluralist democracy on a global scale, critical to humanity. They see civil society as an instrument by which liberal democracy can be consolidated in the South. In that sense, civil society can be seen as composed of groups of uncoerced human groups and relational networks of consensual association and empowerment that enables society to live independently of the state (NSI, 1996). It is argued that the liberal approach is an uncritical adulation of civil society, and the emphasis on the latter’s role in engendering the democratisation process is manifestly an outgrowth of the argument for economic liberalisation.

The next two sets of ideas, which will be described in the following section, about the relationship between civil society and the market began to crystallize in the 1990s. They have in common a dissatisfaction with the socioeconomic consequences of unrestrained capitalism advocated by neo-liberals and a disillusion

with state-led development processes, whether of the Keynesian or State socialist variety.

Socially Responsible Capitalism

The ideas of socially responsible capitalism have influenced mainstream donor thinking since the 1990s, and have been disseminated in current thinking in development research and practice. Civil society here still represents a plurality of interest groups, symbolising the freedoms of association and expression as well as the social energies of autonomous, rational individuals. It also assumes that civil societies and market economies are positively related. Socially responsible capitalism sees civil society as an emerging way of resolving the contradictions and tensions of capitalism and in particular its “atomizing, unequalizing, and exclusionary effects” (Howell *et al*, 2001). Just like the liberal approach, socially responsible capitalism places civil society in an intermediary sphere serving to complement rather than replace the State. Its associational life not only fosters social cohesion and democratic values, but also is a site for expressing and discussing differences and diversity, consensus and conflict. The *New Economics Foundation*, for instance is a recently established British institution that militates for social corporate responsibility in the global capitalist system (NEF, 2002).

The socially responsible capitalism approach argues that civil society offers more than State services. Its fondness for neo-liberalism is best illustrated in the additional function it gives civil society. Indeed, civil society absolves the market of responsibility, and *maintains* the stability and reproduction of a market economy, by alleviating the socioeconomic inequalities created and aggravated by the market. It therefore functions as an alternative and supplementary regulatory means to the State and market. Fair trade organizations, consumer bodies and environmental groups monitor the actions of companies to ensure that they abide by national and international policies, and that they do not reap profits through exploitative, abusive and socially irresponsible practices.

Although socially responsible capitalism upholds the advocacy role of such organizations, it nevertheless seeks to avoid the confrontational tactics of the Left, substituting for these a strategy of “consensus politics” realized in the form of

partnerships and alliances. "Civil society can serve as a watchdog on the market, but only as long as it respects the market principle of economic organization" (Howell, 2001: 67).

In practice, this new discourse has prompted partnerships and alliances based on the notions of trust and social capital. In line with this approach the World Bank, UNDP, the Ford foundation and numerous other multilateral and bilateral donor agencies have promoted "partnerships" among civil society, government and business. In sum, by bringing together business and civil society, the socially responsible approach to capitalism tries to make capital "ethical", "to adjust to the creative but socially and environmentally destructive effects of capitalism, without however undermining the market principle" (Howell, 2001: 68).

The Neo-Marxist Approach (or Alternatives to Capitalism)

This school of thought shares with socially responsible capitalism the recognition of the inequalities brought in by the market, but it differs in its fundamental challenge to the desirability of capitalism and even of development. Unlike socially responsible capitalism, the conceptual umbrella of alternatives to capitalism remains broad, diffuse, and less coherently articulated. Although it is unified in what it opposes, it is far less united in what it proposes as alternatives. Proponents share a concern with social justice, equality and environmental sustainability and are critical of state and market oppression, but there is no common vision. Civil society is posited in the same triadic model stated earlier; the State however is equated more or less with coercion and domination, and the market, with profit-making and competition (Thrived *et al*, 1996).

Neo-Marxists have also accepted the significance of civil society. This school of thought, recognises the importance of social structures under a dominant economy. The neo-Marxist approach, drawing on Gramsci, Marx and Hegel, views civil society as a site of oppression and power inequalities. In contrast to the previous school, it is suggested that the ability for individuals to organise and participate in governance issues is related to socioeconomic status, so that policy-making is usually the preserve of a select minority with resources (Hoyden, 1997). Advocates analyse civil society in terms of

the power and domination exercised by specific social classes. They are also sceptical of ongoing economic and political reform processes. In general, these same authors will maintain that only the emergence of strong social movements capable of challenging the existing power structures can provide hope for a more fundamental change. In addition, Gramscian, or neo-Marxists, see non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and partnerships between the North and the South as having a counter-hegemonic currency or potential, in response to the insecurities resulting in large measure from the globalisation of capitalism (MacLean, 1996). Civil society becomes a space for (possible) revolution.

Key values and notions of re-visioning of the State are "the local", "the grassroots", "empowerment", "social justice", and "solidarity". They seek an alternative to market- and state-led growth. Instead they advocate strategies of development founded on values of solidarity, mutuality and collectivity. This conceptualisation of civil society and market relations is more conscious of the voices of the poor over the rich, of the needs of labour over capital, and of the threat and power of global corporations. It looks for and strategises around the emancipator potential within civil society, which it uses to challenge the dominance of the market system. Gellner (1994) also shared the idea of "class domination" as he asserted that "the idea of a plurality of institutions – both opposing and balancing the state, and in turn controlled and protected by the state – is, in the Marxist view, merely the provision of a façade for a hidden and maleficent domination" (Gellner, 1994:1). Neo-Marxism finds expressions in campaign groups such as Amnesty International and in social movements such as labour, gender and indigenous rights, or in radical action initiatives such as high way protests, destruction of genetically modified crops, and anti-capitalism demonstrations (Howell *et al*, 2001). The most popularised advantage of civil society reaching the poorest is only one part of the development equation, will argue advocates of this approach. In the more radical quarters, an equity strategy should address the larger problem of the failure of the State and market to provide equitable development. Many of the so-called "New Social Movements" are not concerned only with delivering assistance to the poorest, instead

Box 1.1 Summary of the different approaches to civil society

A. Neo-Liberal or Mainstream approach

A vibrant civil society is an indispensable element in fostering a similarly vibrant market economy; civil society promotes democracy and protects against the predatory reach of the State; civil society can be a soil for seeding new ideas and cultivating new forms of economic organisation such as microfinance projects aimed at the empowerment of the poor throughout the South

B. Socially Responsible Capitalism

Civil society is primarily an arena, a space to use to challenge hegemony, whether from the state or the market; "Civil society can serve as a watchdog on the market, but only as long as it respects the market principle of economic organization" (Howell, 2001: 67).

C. Neo-Gramscian or Alternative approach

Civil society in this context is an arena of diversity, plurality, and difference, but it is also an arena of inequality and differential power relations, which are rooted in capitalist economies; civil society is a sphere in which battles, for and against capitalism, are fought (Gramsci); global civil society is a contradictory and potentially counter-hegemonic result

they will protest against Western cultural imperialism, like the anti-Miss Universe immolators in India (Lewis, 2001).

4. Civil Society in Development policy

The term "civil society" has enjoyed in recent years something of a "vogue" in the field of development. Like any dominant paradigm, civil society has been used as a framework to generate questions and answers, direct funds, and to advance certain programme priorities over others. Civil society in foreign aid, in contrast with the earlier 18th century political theoretical concept, has gained an additional instrumental value, because it serves an agenda. In fact, the version that has dominated policy agendas has been one which draws on Hegelian and Tocquevillian ideas, and minimises the more conflictual Gramscian view.

The following section attempts to outline the normative assumptions donors make about the relationship among civil society and development, and the way they then unfold into "strengthening civil society" in practice. Although official donors have voiced their support to civil society for the

sake of generally "better" development, and in the name of democracy, there is yet a third objective, what Van Rooy *et al* (1998) terms, "the other agenda", which can offer some surprises.

Improving Development

Civil societies can foster equitable development: development for the poorest first (Van Rooy *et al*, 1998). Thus, one key motive behind supporting civil society is to reach the poorest through the organisation that represent them best – not only for delivering services more equitably and effectively, but also for levelling the political field. Civil society organisations were described by many as important actors in a country's overall development. They are seen as more effective, less costly, and more innovative than official donors or even home governments in reaching the poorest. Moreover with pressures to reform and decrease the size of government bodies in the South, mainly through structural adjustment policies, and loan conditionality, domestic groups have been increasingly expected to take over the provision of key services: "(a)s government budgets, staff

and foreign aid resources have shrunk or, in many cases, failed to materialise, NGOs have sprung up to fill the gap in supply of services, materials, technology, training, credit and communication with rural villagers and urban slum dwellers" (Schearer, 1995; quoted in Van Rooy *et al*, 1998: p. 41).

It has been argued however that this character of civil society ought to be moderated, to avoid overshadowing the bigger-picture problem: the failure of the State and the market to provide development on equal terms for all (ibid, 1998). The question is: has support to civil society weakened an already weak State body? Has it undercut key functions left with the State? The Eastern European countries, for instance, have criticised the dumping of services onto the voluntary sector. The issue at stake here is that the State has been delegating service provision to the voluntary agencies, but without a corresponding transfer of funding or the development of a mutual relationship with the State. Governments in the CEE countries, nevertheless, still demonstrate a persistent need to assert control (Tran-Thanh, 2001). Moreover, experience has proven, and has been well documented, that non-State provisioning of State services, can too often be inadequate: incomplete coverage, amateurism, high turnover, unsustainability (Van Rooy *et al*, 1998; Howell *et al*, 2001; Tvedt, 1998).

One other aspect of the debate draws on the growing acceptance of the idea of rights. In the "rights language", argue Van Rooy *et al* (1998), there is a meeting of both the liberal argument and the alternative one. On the one hand, claims are made to the State to guarantee a set of political and civil rights; on the other, a call for much wider economic and social rights are directed to a larger set of actors, such as multinationals, the elites and international institutions. The "equity" argument thus refers again to the question of what should be the role of the State and other players in the triadic model of development. Equity doesn't necessarily mean the same to all stakeholders.

Promoting Democracy

As a wave of democratisation has grown in recent years, more actors of the international donor community have been pushing up democracy development to the centre piece of their foreign aid strategy (Edwards *et al*, 1996). In fact, the most explicit goal of many Northern aid programs

has been the strengthening of civil society to foster democracy². The role civil society plays in building democracy is by altering the balance between state and society, improving the accountability of both politicians and administrators, acting as an intermediary between state and society, and legitimating the political system by promoting the values of liberal democracy (Van Rooy *et al*, 1998). This view predicates that civil society is best understood as a sphere of life that emerges in reaction to, and needs to strengthen its oppositional role to, the "predatory and monolithic" State.

Donors' goal in strengthening the position of civil society in opposition to the State is an attempt to question the idea that policy formation is the sole preserve of the government. To do so, donors have for instance brought "representatives of civil society" together with government officials in national forums. USAID in 1997 has worked towards a National Economic Forum in Ghana, bringing together around 150 organisations and institutions (Nhema, 1996). Donor support to national development NGO forums is another way in which external assistance strengthens the position of non-state actors in the public sphere. Because civil society not only delineates the boundaries of the State by resisting its "predatory reach", it also has the potential to challenge the most repressive aspects of the state and force it to comply with the public will. In this sense, civil society often becomes both the foundation and the driving force for political reform.

It is also believed that a proliferation of associations and groups in a society is indicative of a flowering democracy, whereby a web of pluralism makes the consolidation of authoritarian domination increasingly difficult. It has been pointed out however that the proliferation of groups in civil society may be symptomatic of a problem, not of a solution. The problem being: "a crisis within global capitalism whereby 'free' markets are unable to deliver goods and provide sustainable livelihoods to the vast majority of the earth's peoples; where the capital is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands and state makers have proved unwilling or unable to fashion a co-ordinated response to the increasing un(der)employment and immiseration of their citizens and impoverishment of their natural environment" (quoted in Swatuk *et al*, 1996; p. 5).

The causative links between civil society and democracy are not necessarily clear-cut, however. This very optimistic view that bundles these two concepts, does little to analyse the process of democratisation in all countries. Vietnam, as it will be discussed later, is a case in point. Civil society may be *good* for democracy, and may stabilise the State, but it may also need to be tightly intertwined with the State – contradicting the “autonomous and independent” nature of civil society.

The “Other” Agenda: Promoting a Liberal Economy

According to Hearn (1999) the main objective, hidden or not, of donors in strengthening civil society is embedded in the neo-liberalism ideology, not only in the political variant, as but also in the economic variant. It has been argued that one of the first objectives for donors in encouraging associational life in general has been the need to export Western models of liberalised economies to further their own economic interests – and that, at the cost of “manufacturing” the social prerequisites for a functioning free market economy (Van Rooy *et al*, 1998). Thus by “strengthening civil society” donors can expect to create “economic individuals”, train citizens to be entrepreneurs, and educate people about the need for open markets and “rolled-back” states. “Civil society thrives in a dynamic and competitive economy and in an open, democratic political environment” (USAID, 1995; quoted in Van Rooy *et al*, 1998; p. 37).

Hearn (1999) has found through research in South Africa, Ghana, and Uganda, that the most prominent donor-funded CSOs, fall in a number of overlapping categories: those furthering the rights and political participation of particular socially excluded groups, such as rural women or the urban poor, but also those concerned with supporting political liberalisation, and those concerned with promoting economic liberalisation. USAID has numerous funding projects which strengthen the capacity of individual organisations. It proposed to spend \$6 million over five years to build capacity of local civil society organisations through training in organisational management and lobbying skills (Hearn, 1999). Among the most important civil society actors that are

targeted for capacity building and strengthening are policy institutes, focused on promoting economic liberalisation. In South Africa, the Free Market Foundation has received since 1995 over \$150,000 from the US-government-funded National Endowment for Democracy (NED) for promoting market-oriented economic policies in the South African parliament and administration. Similarly, in Ghana, the most donor-funded civil society organisation, the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), is also one of the two leading neo-liberal policy institutes. The NED has provided it between 1992 and 1997 with over \$500,000 for promoting the role of the private sector within parliament and among the public (Hearn, 1999). The World Bank has also promoted its neo-liberalism agenda through consortium like the African Capacity Building Foundation in Harare. The Centre of Economic Policy Analysis in Ghana and the Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC) in Uganda are just two among the fifteen think tanks set up and funded by the World Bank in its attempt to create and nurture an African cadre of neo-liberal economists (Hearn, 1999).

In sum, it is clear that civil society organisations are *selectively* funded to bring changes which are perceived to be conducive for the neo-liberal goal, both politically and economically. The issue here is not so much about whether or not those local associations should or should not participate in such processes, instead, the concern is more about how representative they are of civil society in their specific social contexts. Moreover, it is also a question of how much the project of civil society really reflects an interest in people's opinion about prescribed neo-liberal institutional “shaping” of their societies. Seckinelgin (2002) analysed the usage of the concept by the World Bank in its *World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty* and USAID's *Constituencies for Reform: Strategic Approaches for Donor-supported Civic Advocacy Program*, and draws this conclusion. Although the interest in people's will for their own future does not attract much attention, it is being made clear, he argues, that the reports support an “altogether new restructuring of relations on neo-liberal sectoral lines whereby strong demand from a civil society on government would improve the public administration” (Seckinelgin, 2002; p. 17).

5. Civil Society a Western Concept in a Non-Western Context

The idea of “civil society” is derived from Western historical experience, as outlined earlier. It may thus prove problematic as a way to grasp social change in societies with very different historical trajectories and social characteristics. Moreover, the State-civil society relationship tends to be taken as predetermined, when in fact the nature of their interdependence is determined by the historical, economic and political circumstances of particular countries or regions (McIlwaine, 1997).

Some are very critical of the extent to which civil society, as a concept born in a specific context, can be applied to a context with a fundamentally different historical course. Because civil society is a “fundamentally normative concept, to operationalize it empirically would be either (1) to make the mistake of optimistically misreading into events and structures characteristics that are not there, or (2) to impose our own ideas of what should be occurring in the Third World instead of acknowledging and encouraging events to unfold according to the logic of a given country's own historical development.” (Bickford, 1995; quoted in Van Rooy, 1998: 207). Hann (1996) also cautions that there is something inherently unsatisfactory about the international propagation by western scholars of an ideal of social organisation; an ideal that was developed in historical conditions that cannot be replicated in any other part of the world today.

According to Blaney *et al* (1993), a ripe environment for civil society to perform has as a starting point the “stabilization of a system of rights, constituting human beings as individuals, both as citizens in relation to the state and as legal persons in the economy and the sphere of free association” (1992, quoted in NSI, 1996, p. 4). Other factors that also need to be put in place are (1) rights needed to participate in organized groups; (2) a democratic political system of some sort; and (3) a culture of association that allows the organization of groups for moral ends. It is also argued that a middle class with disposable income and time to support organizations may also be a pre-condition to the existence of a strong civil society (quoted in NSI, 1996 and in Lewis, 2001). But these elements - government structure, class, culture - are highly context-specific, evolving elements, undergoing rapid change in many countries. These preconditions are set in a specific

time and space, and may not be replicated elsewhere.

Furthermore, Gellner (1994) asserts that the historical and social prerequisites for a civil society, notably the creation of “atomized” liberal individuals, are rare outside of Western states.

Given the excitement about, and the “make-up” of civil society, as an ideal tool for development and democracy, a risk of being “blinded by love” may occur. Fostering civil society is not always adequate in all cases. In the context of disintegration of old political forms in the former Soviet Union, and China especially, the idea of civil society becomes very appealing. “(T)he terms of civil society, its attractive combination of democratic pluralism with a continuing role for State regulation and guidance, make it appear hopeful to societies seeking to recover from the excesses of State socialism” (Kumar, 1993, quoted in Van Rooy, 1998: 14). The danger is that espousing the idea of civil society in a too optimistic manner, will incur the risk of assuming that civic virtue is self-evident and universal. Indeed, what is found in the civic realm can mistakenly be understood as being automatically in the public interest. In his account of the case of China, Chamberlain observed that “*whatever* political arrangement - *whatever* configuration of state and society - encourages its [civil society] development is deemed good and worthy of support, and so whatever arrangement stands in its way is to be condemned and altered” (Chamberlain, 1993: 200).

6. Summary of findings: is Civil Society mere Rhetoric?

Firstly, the State has an irreplaceable role. Non-state provisioning of state services has too often proved inefficient. Tdvet (1998) warns that NGOs, although representative of civil society, may in a sense be perpetuating a status quo, whereby there exists a social problem under the government's responsibility. In sum, the State, market and civil society can increase their effectiveness by contributing jointly to the provision of welfare and economic development. The success of this synergy is based on complementary rather than substitution. More often than less, the concept of civil society is romanticised and attributed with virtues of freedom, equality, and liberty independently from the state. This is clearly true for international development donors that offer practical

advice to those who wish to foster these virtues of civil society. But these become empty slogans if there are not equated with the mediating functions of the State. In other words, the term of “vibrant civil society” promoted by much of the contemporary development policy, will depend ultimately on a capable and articulate administrative apparatus potentially available only in the State. Stressing the dichotomy between State and society will obscure the network of social practices that binds them together, and lead to ill-conceived interventions that can undermine the established relations, and be detrimental to the interests expressed in civil society.

Second, where the degree of influencing policy-decision was most successful through civil society were mainly related to economic liberalisation. This doesn't come as a surprise since most major donors, predominantly from the North, conduct aid programmes in accordance to the double ideology of liberal democracy and market liberalisation. Albeit civil society assistance represents a small proportion of aid programmes, the CSOs that funders support in Ghana, Uganda and South Africa are among the key actors in each society, has found Hearn (1999). These groups are at the centre of shaping the most important question facing each of the countries: the type of economic policy to be pursued, the meaning and content of democracy and the form and power of local government (Hearn, 1999:21).

Third, building democracy is viewed as the main reason why donors support civil society. However this has been challenged. There is an argument that says that it may be “a way to disguise free-marketeering” (Van Rooy *et al*, 1998: p. 53; Hearn, 1997: p. 19). This implies that the common discourse includes private sector development programmes in the category of “strengthening civil society”. This goes against the purist definitions of civil society – where it is non-State and non-market. In a report on Mozambique, Hall and Young (1997) write that “Aid is being deliberately directed to assist in the construction of new

social groups committed to the market economy” (quoted in Hearn: p. 19).

Fourth, the major discourse about civil society in many Southern countries, has not been built on the actual history of civil society in the country, but on a “social engineering” of a new type, according to specific donor objectives. Support to civil society is not about enhancing the existing, largely rural-based civil society, but the funding of popular sectors of society and the strengthening of a new elite committed to the promotion of a limited form of procedural democracy and structural-adjustment-type economic policies. McIlwaine (1997) has argued rightfully that the “hasty way” in which civil society was incorporated into development policy point to the fact that there has been an uncritical treatment of the concept.

Fifth, because of their balance of power, in terms of rewards, policy, and sanctions, international institutions, are able to transfer Western liberal codes of conduct and behaviour in the development context. By using civil society organisations, attempts at bringing long term socio-political change on the basis of Western experience. Indeed, we could, as Seckinelgin (2002) did, conclude that in this sense civil society is a metaphor for Western liberalism. However, in its purist definition, I believe it to have potential in fostering equitable and sustainable development. It is clear to me that issues with which we are (fortunately) more and more concerned today, the environment, exploitation of children, women's rights, involve actors that go beyond the government, or the State. There are many kinds of mechanisms that people do not think about where civil society organisations play a role in developing solutions, and, importantly, will ensure an adequate and sustainable implementation. In any case, for civil society to have any credibility, it definitely must emerge from below, and involve negotiations among conflicting groups, within themselves, and with the state and elites. It must not, no matter what, be imposed, or manufactured by foreign, so-called, “benefactors”.

CHAPTER TWO: The Socialist Republic of Vietnam

1. Introduction: Relevance of the case of Vietnam

"In Vietnam, the private is never entirely private, and the public is never entirely public" (Fforde and Porter, 1995)

By examining the case of Vietnam, I intend to reflect on the concept of civil society, its applicability to the context of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam³, and subsequently, on its potential contribution to the country's developmental goals. In addition, I wish to bring forth issues that must be dealt with by official donors that intend to pursue a "civil society" strategy in Vietnam. It will be demonstrated that because of the specificity of its socio-political context, the understanding of "civil society", as vulgarised by Westerners, is not straightforward. Vietnam is a case in point, whereby civil society, as an *ideal* model of social organisation, throws little light on current social realities. In taking on this task, I will provide a review of the literature, and draw on experience from development practice.

As discussed earlier, century-old debates over the role of the State versus the role of civil society in the context of Western societies, have contributed to contemporary civil society arguments. State-society relationships in Vietnam, however, and this will be a key issue, are possibly too elaborate to rely on any of these Western concepts. It is likely that "civil society" in the Vietnamese context does not fit with any of the existing interpretation. The case of Vietnam is interesting because it has been undergoing dramatic changes since the launch of the *doi moi* reforms in the mid-1980s: a country at the crossroads between central planning, and a move towards a more market oriented economy. This has urged debates over the "natural emergence" of, and the desirability of civil society. The intricacy revealed relates to the youth of institutions, but also to the "social and political legitimacy of 'new' civil society, the cultural relevance and acceptability of new institutions and the applicability of new institutional forms to the emerging problems of transitional change" (Harper, 1996: 125). An underlying theme of the case study will be the significant involvement of a political

dimension in "supporting" civil society, as it relates to poverty alleviation in Vietnam.

An uncritical implementation of the concept of civil society in the Vietnam involves risks. Merely implementing a civil society support program - based on a somewhat elusive Western theoretical concept - in the concrete political framework of Vietnam, can, among other things, jeopardize relations with the Vietnamese authority structure. With all of that being said, does it mean that the concept itself should be discarded? But firstly, is the concept of "civil society" relevant to Vietnam?

2. Brief Review of the Socio-Political Context in Vietnam

Vietnam's Political Context

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is a one-party State. Its political system is dominated by a single mono-organizational structure, the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP), and embraces inter alia the State bureaucracy, government administration, mass organisations and special interest groups. The VCP dominance over society is an acknowledged fact, which has been well documented in the reviewed the literature⁴. This dominance is key to understanding contemporary Vietnam. In a presentation to a 1993 conference titled *Vietnam: Which way now*, organised by the Asia-Pacific Research Institute (Mcquarie University), Thayer⁵ made clear that the party's stronghold over the country was successfully maintained by the party's horizontal and vertical penetration of nearly all organisations and structures in society, although it varied from province to province and from region to region⁶. The concentration of State and administrative power to set national policy resting in the hands of party members has been, unsurprisingly, recognized as one of Vietnam's main structural-political problems. This latter point is further exacerbated by what Thayer (1993) calls "big men in little provinces": Vietnam's 40 province-level administrative units operate as "independent kingdoms" in their relation to Central government. According to Porter (1993), the model of bureaucratic polity, whereby major decisions are made entirely within the bureaucracy and are influenced by it, rather than by extrabureaucratic forces found in society describes well how the Vietnamese political system functions.

How Are People's Interests Represented in Vietnam

The VCP maintains its link with the people through a number of mass organisations (MOs), which are controlled by the VCP's Fatherland Front (VFF), the umbrella organization overseeing all socio-political groups. The VFF reports directly to the VCP and central government. Socio-political groups include the MOs, religious and cultural bodies, and professional societies, and only the MOs and professional societies are permitted to form their own smaller, self-financed organizations. Research institutes from universities and hospitals are numerous, and they are required to register under a relevant ministry (Gray, 1999). In short the formal structure dictates that every organisation falls under an "umbrella" of some sort. In 1990, there were some 124 centre-level organisations, and over 300 provincial- and municipal- level organisations (Abuza, 2001: 20).

The four largest MOs are the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour, the Vietnam Peasants Association, the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, and the Vietnam's Women's Union. Their status is defined by law. They are tied to the State although they have been encouraged to become financially self-sufficient. Foreign funds channelled through development programs have given them some opportunity in that direction. This has not pleased all, especially those leaders of the newly formed NGOs. "Foreigners only give to the big mass associations controlled by the government". The rationale is that MOs have a good network in the villages and the new groups do not. They have stronger ties with the State but they are also often better informed and better prepared to get the job done (Unicef employee, Beaulieu, 1994: 5).

One cannot easily say that Vietnam's political system is "open" or "liberal". Citizens cannot relatively easily express their views and concerns on a wide range of issues in an organized, public, and direct manner. The news media consists mainly of organs of State institutions, or those closely connected to it. Little information is made public about what is said during National Assembly meetings twice a year to debate about proposed legislation. Officials have argued that people in Vietnam have considerable freedom to say and do what they like, and have shown aversion to critiques formulated by Western observers. They question the relevance of achieving the degree of

political liberty as in the West, contending that the State has a right and a duty to guard the nation against "hostile" domestic and international forces that hide behind a pretence of "human rights" and "democracy" to threaten peace and order on the country's hard-won independence, and its social and economic improvements (Kerkvliet, 2001).

Porter (1993) contends that in practice popular pressures in the form of economic resistance to existing policy and an active pursuit of an alternative model at local levels have influenced the policy-making process. Similarly, Kerkvliet (1995) has warned about portraying of Vietnamese politics as a totalitarian system or mono-organizational bureaucratic polity. This is a fallacy, he contends, because it leaves out too much that is important. Assuming that policy making and implementation is tightly controlled by and largely in the domain of the State's institutions, would wrongfully imply that societal influences and interactions are non-existent. We will come back to this point in a latter section. For now, needless to say, exclusive power inevitably leads to abuse of power, and extends to regional and local levels. Most of Vietnam's citizens are generally indifferent to Communism; nonetheless, 2.5 million Communist party members rule more than 80 million Vietnamese. Ideology and politics cannot evidently rival the people's primary and often sole concern: having sufficient food and making ends meet. These economic concerns help account for the ideological apathy, but fear and intimidation also play a role. In a society with no legal opposition, no right of assembly, and any autonomy for the national press, arbitrary arrest and detention, political expression does not constitute a viable option.

3. Development Initiatives 1954-present Development Strategy and Performance

The Democratic Republic of Vietnam established in 1954 began its economic development planning as "one-half of a technologically backward agricultural country" (Porter, 1993: 47). In the first five-year development plan (1961-1965), the development strategy followed the Soviet Model: investment priorities went to heavy industry while light industry and agriculture were given less emphasis. A major feature of the Vietnamese development strategy was the decision to collectivize agriculture in order to reach a level of industrialisation necessary for mechanisation of agriculture⁷. This development strategy did achieve

relatively rapid increases in industrial production.⁸ But this five-year plan left agriculture in worse straits than when it began. The failure of agricultural production to increase between 1960 and 1965 reflected the absence of significant technological improvement as well as the lack of incentives for the peasant to put intensive labor into the collective economy. The war against the United States put hopes for industrialization on the shelf as Vietnam abandoned some industries and dispersed the rest throughout the country side. With the reunification of the country, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam embarked in its second and third five-year plans for the 1976-1980 and 1981-1985 periods. The basic development strategy of the VCP remained unchanged.

The 6th Party Congress: the Process of Renovation or doi moi

Since 1986, Vietnam has made radical changes to move towards a market-oriented economy⁹. The economic development strategy underlying the 1986-1990 five-year plan, reflected the harsh economic realities at the time of the Party Congress in December 1986. The attempts for Soviet-type economic model had led the country to a "dead-end" (Andreff, 1993). A stabilisation policy was greatly needed to cure the main "economic diseases" inherited from ten years of centrally planned and directive economic development, and was materialised in a comprehensive program of renovation, known as *doi moi*. The economics of *doi moi* have opened the way to new forms of ownership and management, including a resurgent private sector and market, decentralisation of management, and expansion of economic ties with the non-socialist world (Turley, 1993). Vietnam also looked to the model of export-oriented development that had been successful for Asia's newly industrialising countries (NICs).¹⁰ As a result, Vietnam suddenly emerged as the third largest supplier of rice on the world market.

***The Dilemmas of Transition: "Vietnam's Contradiction"*¹¹**

While the main emphasis of the 1986 Party Congress was on economic reform and reform of management mechanisms, it also proposed various reforms concerning government and administrative bodies. Political reform in Vietnam, however, did not equate with pluralism or multi-party democracy. "Leaders talk about

'democracy', but one-party rule continues" (Turley, 1993: p. 2). The politics of *doi moi* encouraged rather initiatives at all levels of society and State in an effort to mobilise support for continued reform and improve the legitimacy of the existing regime, through greater openness and participation (Turley, 1993). The price of a centralized political structure under the stronghold of the VCP as an "overburdened leadership group" had been recognised¹².

But, policy makers in Vietnam, already at the onset of the *doi moi* reforms, had realised that transition to a liberal economy *must* and *could* take place ahead of significant further changes in political institutions (Porter, 1993; Fforde *et al*, 1996; Thayer, 1990; Andreff, 1993). Political leaders fearing loss of control and social unrest, and the erosion of the authority of the State and party, which are still based on Marxist-Leninist principles, have been against the idea of putting political renovation in front of an economic one. It has been argued that this determination not to liberalize politically *before* economically by the State bureaucracy in Vietnam has been prompted by the experience of the former Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries¹³. Indeed, in other socialist countries, this so-called "communist dialectic" has led to economic dislocation and political instability, causing regimes to collapse in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, or to take some coercive measures, as in 1980s China¹⁴ (Turley, 1993).¹⁵ The hesitation to liberalise politically can further be explained by fear among political leaders of a "peaceful evolution", or the discrediting of Communism, by advocating Western values of capitalism, democracy, and human rights (Pierre, 2000). Turley (1993) believes that in the long run, reform should increase pressure on the political system, by stimulating the growth of autonomous classes, the building of influential middle class, increasing contact with international business, and spreading knowledge and culture through better communication technology. Turley (1993) predicts that these effects will likely produce demands for change in the political system.

In any case, political liberalisation reforms in Vietnam will not come rushing in. The turnover is still low and slow in the all-powerful Politburo, the domain of conservative Communists, who fear that opening Vietnam would invite capitalism, and perhaps even democracy. The legacy

carried by the elderly party leaders is one of residual fear of foreign interference, which influences in turn the Vietnamese government's foreign policy: many senior party members *instinctively* question too much interaction with the outside world - a reflection on their formative political years successfully fighting for the independence of their country (Pierre, 2000).

The Impact of doi moi on Rural and Urban Poor

The gains of *doi moi* were impressive, but fragile according to a 2000 report by the Department for International Development (DFID). Vietnam had the outstanding record in poverty reduction among developing countries during the 1990s, but there are many millions of Vietnamese, clustered just above the poverty line, that are still vulnerable to economic shocks or a downturn in the economy¹⁶. Growth has delivered improvements to poor people but recent growth, and the overall transition to a market economy, or marketisation, has increased inequality – there is yet a urban-rural discrepancy¹⁷.

Poverty in Vietnam is a predominantly rural phenomenon. Nearly 80 percent of Vietnam's population and 90 percent of the poor live in rural areas (De Walle, 1998). Poor regions are usually disadvantaged in terms of infrastructure, remoteness from market and information centres, lack of water and water management, and deficits of food staples. There, and especially in the mountainous regions, the markets are the least developed. In addition, the majority of Vietnam's ethnic minorities, who are said to experience to most severe poverty, inhabit those remote regions (UNDP, 1999; DFID, 2000). The challenge of alleviating poverty in Vietnam lies in a system of procedures to help and protect those *outside* the formal employment sectors of the major cities, and notably, De Walle (1998) stresses, those in the rural economy and urban informal sector.

Under the former command economy, the lack of mobility ensured close community and family solidarity and households belonged to local cooperatives that provided for the welfare of their members. Clearly, the emerging market economy has threatened the very principles on which the community-based assistance and safety net system is built. Nevertheless, community and other private arrangements have persisted and provide many households some degree of security. Various informal and quasi-market community-level arrangements are used to help families: to help a family whose breadwinner is ill, the State-led mass organisations may arrange to have someone else work the land for it. People's action has also contributed. In the light of their situation, they create new ways to make a living. Floods of villagers have streamed from the countryside into cities to work. The number of groups and organizations trying to offer help to drug addicts, the homeless, the unemployed, street children, and others struggling has grown significantly. Definitions of "civil society" did not typically include "family solidarity", as seen earlier, but I would argue that these informal building of ties between the Vietnamese people within the community, to provide for each other, do offer in fact a fair illustration of the existence of civil society, or at least a sign of associational culture. These informal arrangements are indeed central to the investigation of civil society in the context of Vietnam, in that they do not easily fit with existing categories used by Western interpretations of the concept.

The next chapter is my account of the applicability of civil society – as a concept fixed in time, and "born" in the Western world – to Vietnam, a developing country with a markedly different historical path, in the midst of innumerable changes, economically, politically and socially a like.

CHAPTER THREE: Civil Society in Vietnam

1. Is the concept of civil society relevant to Vietnam?

To provide a comprehensive answer to this question, I will draw on Lewis' (2000) framework of analysis, which was

elaborated by the author while attempting to answer the same question in the case of Africa. He identified three different possible answers (Box 3.1). This next section will analyse the arguments put forward by various authors and donors, in the context of these three *possible* answers.

Box 3.1 Is the concept of civil society relevant to a non-Western context?

Possible answer no.1

Prescriptive Universalism, or a clear “yes”, based on the idea of a positive, universalist view of the desirability of civil society as part of the political project of building and strengthening democracy around the world;

Possible answer no.2

Western Exceptionalism, or a clear “no”, based on the argument that a concept which emerged at a distinctive moment in European history has little meaning within such different cultural and political settings;

Possible answer no.3

The *Adaptive View* suggests that the concept is *potentially* relevant to a non-Western concept, and therefore it should not be applied too rigidly, and take on the local contextual differences.

Prescriptive Universalism

In the literature reviewed, the idea of civil society in Vietnam as a “good” thing was mainly formulated by advocates of the neo-liberal ideology, i.e. international financial institutions and official multi- and bilateral donors, but has also been examined by various authors. Proponents here argue that civil society is indeed crucial to Vietnam's development. Litvack *et al* (1999), for instance, assert that

(t)he government of Vietnam is still struggling to apply one of the most important lessons to be learned from the worldwide experience with economic transition.

Macroeconomic reforms are a necessary and critical first step in transition, but are neither sufficient to create a market economy nor adequate to sustain its development” (p. 4). “(T)o implement economic policies and solve social problems, these governments must reform their political and administrative institutions, create more effective institutions of *civil society*, and strengthen the private sector” (p. 7).

Here, civil society is assumed to fill in a gap in social science theory around economic and social development. Another, but related perspective is the one of Porter (1993). He sees in the first unofficial meetings in Saigon by Vietnamese students

in 1989, evidence of an emerging form of student unauthorised political participation. Along with demonstrations by farmers, he argues that these meetings constitute the first signs in Vietnam's political system of interest groups organising to advance specific grievances. “The vast majority of unauthorised political protests appear to have been carried out by southern farmers, student, and merchants” and “(f)undamental socio-political trends are likely to give further impetus to unauthorised political activities” (p. 163-4). This is what Porter (1993) has termed “creeping pluralism” – an emerging pluralism, which will build up civil society, and by extension, lead to the democratisation of the political system.

It is in the literature emanating from major donors, that the “prescriptive universalism” of civil society can best be identified. A common thread emerges: grassroots organisations and local NGOs must be supported, to strengthen civil society and thus to keep the State accountable (World Bank, 2001; DFID, 2000; UNDP, 1999). This excerpt from the government of Netherlands is striking: “(i)n authoritarian regimes (such as in the case of Vietnam), assistance should be channelled through local NGOs, not government institutions. Reporting requirements need to be kept very flexible, recognizing the need for NGOs to *camouflage* their actual strategies with vague objectives”

(Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1996; quoted in Gray, 1999, p. 695-6).

At the policy prescription level, the development discourses have pushed civil society up on the agenda in Vietnam on behalf of issues of democracy and “good governance”. “Grassroots democratisation” has become the language, by which donors and international NGOs alike emphasise the importance of “downward accountability” – a focal point for discussions on good governance in the late 1990s (Fritzen, 2001). The World Bank (2001) greets civil society, as an important move towards “good governance” as testifies the following. In partnership with the United Nations Development Programme, the Asian Development Bank, and other bilateral donors (the Netherlands among others), a Working Group on Civil Society and Community Participation (the “Group”) was established, to support “enhanced peoples” participation in the development process (p. 23). The Group has according to the report engaged in support activities for implementation of the Decree 29/CP on the Regulation of the Exercise of Democracy in Communes¹⁸ (the Decree). It has created, among other things, an Intranet on the Decree, and an inventory of all donor activities within the sphere of civil society development and community participation. It also plans to develop a Vietnamese language lexicon relating to common civil society/participation terminology by the end of 2002. The Group maintains that a precondition for “procedural democracy control” is embodied in an active civil society capable of facilitating the collective expression of grievances against powerful local cadre.

The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES)¹⁹ is an example of a northern NGO that strongly promotes civil society in its “support of all efforts aimed at meeting the challenges of transformation through democracy and social justice”. FES activities in the field of civil society have aimed at assisting Vietnam in developing its own national strategy of reform on its way to a modern and democratic society and has contributed to this process by arranging forums for discussion. With its related international activities the FES has familiarized Vietnamese partners with the experiences made by other countries - industrialized as well as developing - in their process of managing the challenge of social change by developing civil society. FES has been active in the gender related

activities, but one significant contribution of FES to social development Vietnam, has been the constructive integration of Vietnamese trade unions into the international trade union movement (FES, 2002).

Fritzen (2001) remains sceptical about these types of aspirations, however. Writing about Vietnam, “(t)he best that might be expected is for the Decree to reinforce progressive leadership in some localities” (p. 4). It is obvious that the Decree has acted as a “policy window”, an entry point for donors, eager to advance procedures and methodologies, but, by no means, argues the author, is there a truly facilitative framework for civil society to prosper in Vietnam. We will come back to Fritzen in *Answer 1.3 the Adaptive Prescription*.

In sum, typical development policies oriented towards the support of civil society – in the name of (global) democracy or improved project implementation – by advocates of the “prescriptive universalism” – essentially the international financial institutions, the multilateral and bilateral donors, and Northern NGOs – have mainly taken form of “capacity building”, organisational support and training in Vietnam. It would be a mistake not to recognise, that upholding civil society programmes on the basis of values such as prescriptive universalism and “democracy for all human beings”, could well be strategically intertwined with the furthering of the neo-liberal agenda. As discussed previously, Vietnam is undergoing dramatic changes, which advocates of a liberal economy observe with great enthusiasm.

Western Exceptionalism

Here it is suggested that the concept of civil society has simply no meaning outside the contexts of Western Europe or North America. Civil society, in this more pessimistic view, has limited explanatory power for the complexities of the Vietnamese associational life, mainly, because it fails to understand the domination of Vietnamese society by the VCP, the informal character, and unrecognised status, of many organisations, and the lack of associational rights in Vietnamese society. These ideas have been explored by several “Vietnam watchers”. There is, in addition to this, another argument against the relevance of civil society in Vietnam incarnated in the “Asian values” position, mainly articulated by the regime leadership itself.

We have identified in the earlier chapter the definition of a “ripe environment” by Blaney *et al* (1993) for civil society, which included among other things, rights needed to participate in organized groups and a democratic political system of some sort. In Vietnam, the argument that these preconditions are set in a specific time and space, and may not be replicated elsewhere, unfolds. Moreover, the belief that civil society can be strengthened in opposition of the State, to dispute the latter’s stronghold over policy decisions, is not believed confidently applicable here either. The freedoms required for the individual Vietnamese citizen to organise and carry out independent political activities have been given no protection by the legal system in the past. The Vietnam 1992 Constitution provides for basic freedoms of thought, press, assembly, association, and even demonstration, but these freedoms are qualified in a very restrictive way: their exercise must be “consistent with the interests of socialism and of the people,” and “no one can exploit democratic freedoms to violate the interests of the State and of the people” (Article 67) (Porter, 1993: 164). As discussed in Chapter 1, it has been identified that a vibrant civil society, and by extension a web of pluralism, can further democracy and curtail the consolidation of authoritarian domination. According to Abuza (2001), however, the VCP has the capacity and, especially the will, to maintain its monopoly of power through coercive force and, has little reason to back down. Under the same 1992 constitution, the military is now obligated not only to defend the Vietnamese nation, but the socialist regime as well. “It is a regime that continues to imprison thousands of political and religious prisoners and deny its population press freedom and the right to organize” (2001: 14). The leadership has warned that “(it has) to take measures to prevent those who take advantage of ‘human rights and democracy’ to interfere in Vietnam’s internal affairs and sovereignty” (quoted in Abuza, 2001: 15). Abuza (2001) is categorical; he concludes that civil society, as an agent of change, does not exist at this point in Vietnam. There exist committed and articulate critics, but they remain isolated and unable to broaden their base of support. In addition, Vietnam’s transition – politically or economically – is identified mainly with the dating from the 6th Party Congress in 1986. Following from this has risen the view that political reform and

the formation of a “civil society” have “emerged” concomitantly from policy decisions taken from above, thus contradicting the general agreed view of civil society as initiated from below, organising itself independently from and against the State.

The “Asian Values” argument (or the Asian Alternative to Western Liberalism)

In the context of misfortunes of authoritarian regimes in the region, remaining authoritarian leaderships can feel insecure about the patterns of change around them. They are anxious to dissuade their own populations from following any of the “prescribed” Western values to militate for democratic development or for social change. Implicitly here is the need to understand that the claim for “Asian values” by authoritarian leaders is a response to historical circumstances: the simultaneous achievement of economic growth and the demise of radical political opposition. In essence, the “Asian values” argument identifies the challenges to authoritarian rule originating from civil society as *culturally alien* to Asia (Rodan, 1997).

Marketisation in Vietnam inevitably sets in train social transformations that necessitate political change. While some have argued that this implies expanded civil societies that support and complement competitive party systems, like proponents of Answer 1.1 *Prescriptive Universalism* for instance, a number of leaders in the region have argued that “Asian values” militate against the establishment of liberal democracy in the region. Advocates argue that social and political organization is hierarchical or controlled from above, and this is presented as a natural state of affairs, rooted in the Asian culture. This top-down model of social and political organization infers a limited place for a civil society, housing social groups or individuals that make demands on the political and social elite. The essentials of “Asian values”, mainly underpinned by Confucianism, have been identified principally in opposition to what is commonly referred to as “Western liberalism” i.e. excessive individualism and a propensity for protestation and open political conflict (Rodan, 1997). Those that advocate the “Asian Values” view argue that there are other means through which the aspirations for political change can be accommodated. Abuza (2001) has strongly opposed the “Asian Values” argument. The cases of

Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia²⁰ demonstrates clearly that throughout the region, democracy is taking hold, and that there is little validity to the notion that democracy is anathema to Asia and at odds with “Asian Values”. On a lighter note, the term *non-governmental organisation* translates in Vietnamese as “organisations without government”. Moreover, it is really close to the Vietnamese word for anarchy. Needless to say that old Communist officials do not understand why some Vietnamese want to associate with anarchists.

In sum, the *Western Exceptionalism* view rejects the idea of civil society, as vindicated by Western donors. It is thus very suspicious of “strengthening civil society programs” on account that “civil society” (in the purist Western definition) does simply not exist in Vietnam, and therefore, to claim that there is such an “associational realm” is to confirm that it has been indeed, engineered or manufactured by outsiders.

Adaptive Prescription

The drawback with the *Answer 1.1 Prescriptive Universalism* is that it understands the concept of civil society through thick Western lenses, ignores important historical and political aspects in Vietnam, and runs the risk of dismissing organisations that do not qualify with its prescriptions. In practice, international donors that stress the “autonomous in relation to the State” nature of a civil society organisation (CSO), will discard the idea of funding Mass Organisations (MOs), which, as it will be discussed here, play a distinctive role in representing the population in Vietnam. The *Adaptive Prescription* view, in contrast, attempts to achieve a middle ground between simply imposing a “blue-print” version of civil society, and abandoning the idea all together. This view points to the fact that although flaws inevitably appear when civil society is instrumentalised, the concept is recognised as being good. The *Adaptive Prescription* approach believes in an “adapted” version of civil society that takes into consideration the distinctive socio-political context in Vietnam.

We had reached the conclusion earlier that definitions of civil society have been found in most cases on a bipolarity attribute between State and society. State and civil society in Vietnam *cannot* be seen entirely in oppositional stance. The fact is the boundaries between “State” and

“society” can not always be clearly defined: where the State “ends” and society “begins” is quite murky. Both Fforde *et al* (1995) and Kerkvliet (2001) argue that this murkiness is a clue towards understanding the nature of civil society in Vietnam. In fact, the authors favour a focus on “zones of contest” which develop internally *within* the network of institutional mechanisms through which social and economic order is maintained (Fforde *et al*, 1995: p. 5). These “zones of contest”, or where to “situate” civil society extend from the marginal political or economic space, to those *within* the realm of the Vietnamese Communist Party. In practice, an ideological division of the State and civil society can be futile in poverty alleviation projects in Vietnam, because the activities they individually carry out work best in collaboration. Moreover, the author asserts that, if taken too literally, the Western standard civil society approach “can blind or deflect analysis away from important places and events in Vietnam Educational institutions like universities, for example, are frequently neither exclusively State nor exclusively societal but both, and often places of conflict and negotiation about State-society relations” (Kerkvliet, 1994b: p. 27). In practice, Harper (1996) argues, MOs are perhaps the best example of the murkiness of separating civil society and state activities in developmental terms.

In addition to the issue of the State-society dichotomy, is the point of view of Thayer (1994), who contests the idea in which there are no extrabureaucratic influences to the regime. In fact, he argues that the regime’s “grip” is slipping, not because the VCP is being directly challenged, but because of an array of developments. These are embodied in the MOs who are beginning to question policy; in other registered bodies that help the disabled, restore temples, assist the poor (such pressure groups that did not exist before), but they are also embodied in those that have clearly defined interests, but are yet to be politically organised: writers and journalists, demobilised military, returned *viet kieu* (overseas Vietnamese), urban entrepreneurs, etc. Beaulieu’s (1994) description, for instance, provides a good illustration of an adapted vision of civil society: “(s)een from Hanoi, the emergence of a new civil society had seemed obvious enough. Merchants were setting up spontaneous associations to present their demands to the authorities and were being heard; academic research centres were

growing more outspoken as they were gaining access to foreign funds; workers in foreign-owned manufacturing plants were launching wild cat strikes and forcing the country's only official labour union to come to their assistance; non-profit associations were sporting all over the place, caring for the disabled or the aged, restoring temples, teaching foreign languages. Was that not a civil society, albeit a fledging one?" (p. 4).

Many of the policy and development-oriented groups are the creation of an individual, and now face difficult problems of generational transfer of leadership. Many such groups also suffer from persistent core funding difficulties, leading to significant dependence on foreign funding for specific projects, often to the exclusion or delay of core organizational, institution building, training, and research activities (Sidel, 1995). The reliance on foreign funds, coupled with the limited availability of the latter, implies competition to have access to funding, thereby possibly undermining the genuine value of these associations, as they compete against each other, and as they become merely "implementers" for Western donors' agenda. It is questionable also whether these initiatives can survive and sustain themselves, without obtaining resources from the State. Moreover, given that they are not, in actual fact, equated with civil society within the framework of major donors, they will tend to be neglected by the latter, as funding channels.

Fritzten (2001) also proposes an "adapted" version of the concept. He contends that there is space for development-oriented local groups that operate increasingly energetically in defence of the underprivileged, building complex connections with the local governments. Fritzten (ibid) assures that in a context in which a vibrant, genuinely independent civil society does (can) not exist, these local development groups can genuinely be an important source of institutional change in the Vietnamese rural landscape. Yamamoto *et al* (1997) also concede that "nongovernmental organization" is not yet the most accurate term to apply to the range of Vietnamese research, social action, religious, community, and other groups, but argue that it is still valuable to investigate those groups, which are attempting to find, maintain and work with some space from the Vietnamese State. Since mid to late 1980s, a range of newer policy- and

development-oriented initiatives and groups has emerged in Vietnam. In total, such groups now number at least in the hundreds, more are forming, and new regulatory efforts are underway at the central level.²¹ In sum, the third approach, the *Adapted version*, attempts to critically examine the historical development of Vietnam, and adjust the focal point of civil society organisations in opposition to the State, towards one more centred on the role and function of certain "new" groups, working in partnership with local government in poverty alleviation projects. In Vietnam, academics, and Vietnam watchers have recognised this aspect of Vietnamese intricate social relations, but it has yet to be more widely accepted by the funders of the international aid community.

2. Widening the Scope of Civil Society: the Case of Mass Organisations

This leads us to a subject matter which is currently much debated among major donors in development policy circles and also among Vietnam watchers: the issue surrounding the relative advantage of NGOs and MOs channels for international donor funding. Various authors, acknowledging the uselessness and fallacy of funding only organisations that have the status of "civil society organisations", in Western standards, have attempted to provide empirical evidence as to *which* organisations was in reality better to support (in particular Harper, 1996; Gray, 1999; and Pedersen, 2001). It is already well documented that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have won there place in the field of development as promoter of welfare services to those not covered by the markets, emergency relief and programmes. They have traditionally been targeted for funding support on the basis of their closeness to people and the communities, their grass-roots legitimacy and thus their ability to work "with the poor for the poor" (Tvdet, 1998; Chege, 1999; Edwards *et al*, 1996). Much of the emphasis on Vietnamese NGOs has perhaps eclipsed the potential of the MOs in development related activities. The purpose of discussing their respective strengths and weaknesses here is a swift attempt to demonstrate that MOs should not be overlooked by donors on the basis that they are State-led and State-funded²².

Vietnamese non-governmental organisations (VNGOs) are a relatively new phenomenon, and there are still only a

handful of independent Vietnamese bodies which are engaged in social and development work (DFID, 2000). Gray's (1999) account is important to review here. He has argued that many VNGOs²³ should be seen as a "by-product" of the *doi moi* reforms. As the 1980s progressed, the scope and pace of reform increased, and the Party came to see that continued legitimacy rested with stable and successful economic growth. One aspect of renovation has an "administrative decentralization and consolidation" which reduced the size of the State apparatus by 50,000 cadres. The appearance of local NGOs is closely linked with this "administrative consolidation". Many of the VNGOs today are former MOs who were previously under the umbrella of the State. These include a range of scientific and technical institutes, and professional interest groups for architects, doctors, and so forth, who saw their funding vanished during the reforms. "Re-packaged" as NGOs, these groups make up great part of non-State organisations. Gray (1999) argues that the switch to "NGO status" was maybe an *entirely practical decision* in many cases. Hence it would be fallacious to argue for the funding of VNGOs on the basis of their indigenous formation, or of their autonomy to the State.

We have identified MOs as government organisations. A DFID report (2000) identified the local government (city/district/commune level) and the MOs – all tied closely in with the VCP – as the most important vehicles for the majority of Vietnamese to express their daily concerns. This close integration ensures that the relation between State and citizen is interwoven from the top to bottom of the chain, and in any case, debate on policy options outside the confines of the VCP and government are unusual. MOs serve as both a "parallel delivery mechanism for welfare and credit programmes, and an important source of information on the impact of government programmes" (DFID, 2000: 11). In addition, Gray (1999) suggests that, albeit the common judgment of MOs as merely "extensions" of the State – thus non-civil society in the narrow Western definitions – they are capable of reform and have already begun to adapt to the environment caused by political and economical reform. Harper (1996) has identified mass organisations' key strengths. Because of their status as State organisations, they are known and seen as

legitimate, especially at the local level. Moreover, they have considerable outreach potential at a local level, extending down to the village level, and lastly, they can speak better on behalf of excluded groups, such as women, the elderly and the young. These comparative advantages make MOs suitable for poverty alleviation, especially at the local level, but donors sometimes fail to realise this (Pedersen, 2001; Harper, 1996; Gray, 1999). Harper (1996) argues that it is the networking between organisations and local government that renders effective and sustainable the support to local poverty alleviation projects²⁴. The mutual activities that are undertaken at the local level by both civil society and government actors also support the prior argument that the bipolarity of the concepts of state and society is ill-suited in Vietnam. The fact is, ward government, in connection with MOs and religious bodies, is actively contributing to local development, and according to Harper (1996) the resulting outreach potential is tremendous.

In comparison, the high interest given by donors to VNGOs is fuelled by a "lack of access" to other organisations, political agendas aimed at the supporting civil society, and assumptions concerning the capacity of NGOs to reach communities effectively. Just like Yamamoto *et al* (1997), Gray (1999), Beaulieu (1994), Harper assigns the following characteristics to donor funded VNGOs: they are generally founded by people with strong links with the State, or that have worked for it; they often attract government staff to join the NGO; they move away from a service-oriented organisation to one of consultancy given the opportunity for self-financing and arguably, they may detract from their own work, and are perhaps over-involved in conferences and meetings, and over-used by the international donor community, because of their popularity. We have reported earlier that VNGOs are a nascent phenomenon. We have also stated that MOs may be considered a better option for channelling people's concerns. Ironically, VNGOs, although they are less informed, and are still underdeveloped, they still have the capability of selling themselves to donors because they present an independent status, speak English, are motivated, and they *know* what donors are out for. This leads us to the conclusion, that the setting of rules of development policies, are not within the hands of those who ultimately will

be affected by the policy decisions, but in the hands of the “developers”.

The argument against over-emphasising the role of VNGOs is that they have not proven their capacity to achieve sound community contact. They have limited capacity to reach the poorest communities, and lack a measure of agreed legitimacy from the population at large. Of importance, I believe, is that VNGOs are probably still unrecognized by the rural poor, who fail to understand their purpose. In addition, they remain a controversial constituent of a thriving civil society because of their “dissident” status to the government’s point of view (Harper, 1996). The role of VNGOs is yet to be understood, especially their alleged ability to facilitate, release their own resources and potential, and empower others. VNGOs may have donors’ support, but are short of the long-term support from within the local society, while the current legal system still prevents them from having any local legal identity. Donors should be aware that although support to small and new VNGOs is worthwhile, it may not be necessarily promote short-term stability, nor support effective development projects, or even, long-term democratic change, compared, for instance with MOs, who have a history of engaging with both Vietnamese people and with the State.

3. Summary of Findings

From the three positions outlined in the previous section, it is perhaps the third one which is most persuasive. Essentially, the idea of civil society cannot easily be dismissed as having little meaning outside its Western origins (*Western Exceptionalism*), but nor can it easily be exported by Western donors and used to “build” good governance in a transitional country such as Vietnam (*Prescriptive Universalism*). We have also argued that mass organisations are an evidence that civil society in Vietnam does not neatly fit in definitions formulated and prescribed through policies and partnerships, by Western development agencies.

The case study has presented some of the changes occurred in Vietnam since the 1950s, and especially since the 6th Party Congress of 1986. Economic reforms have set in train process of social change in the Vietnamese society, and has opened up the space for an increased number of social actors undertaking various development- and policy-oriented initiatives. These

organisations however still have an odd legal status, and there is no national framework to rely on to guarantee their existence. The lack of law, regulation and definition, and the complex maze of organisations, make it difficult for us, as Western observers, to critically assess the nature and extent of civil society organising in Vietnam, especially if the framework for analysis is embodied in a mainstream Western definition. Nevertheless, civil society *is* an observable phenomenon in Vietnam, although it needs to be accommodated to the Vietnamese context. Nevertheless, a point that should be clear by now is that the *Prescriptive Universalism* approach to civil society is still very much present in the way civil society strengthening programmes are conducted in Vietnam. This comes to us clearly given the prevalent neo-liberalist emphasis on democracy and “good governance” that still predominates development discourses in Vietnam, and to the rest of the Third World.

In Vietnam, civil society is embodied in individuals and groups speaking, writing, teaching, acting, and organizing around various interests and issues and doing so in public places. But of greater significance, the Vietnamese socio-political context suggests that civil society must be willing to work and interact *with* the State. On the other hand, the State, itself, must be an accommodating one, and must be willing to tolerate differences and criticisms, maintain institutions, laws, and practices that allow for public debate without repercussions. This points to an obvious difficulty in establishing a civil society in the contemporary political system in Vietnam, still rooted in the ideological ideal of Socialism. Thayer (1994) is optimistic however. He contends that the reforms have led to a definite loosening of the VCP mono-organisational trip, as the State found difficult to control the “explosion” of private initiatives. Civil society in Vietnam has reached a nascent state, awaiting the erosion of mono-organisational socialism before developing further. Still, the task at hand is great for Vietnamese people. The fact is legal status matters are unresolved as yet. Actors in civil society need the protection of an institutionalized legal order to guard their autonomy and freedom of action. The minister of Justice himself was quoted in the local press that “rule of law will take at least ten years to implement”²⁵.

Finally, one more concluding point is that the call for greater democratisation,

as pushed forward by donors, may still be too colossal for Vietnam. Despite calls for democracy, dissidents are not calling for a Western-style multiparty democracy or even a call for the disbanding or the overthrow of the VCP. The emphasis has rather been on establishing a greater role for the National Assembly in national decision-making, and also the complete independence of the National Assembly from the VCP control (Abuza, 2001).

The need to adapt our vision of civil society to the context of Vietnam points broadly to the conventional top-down method donors tend to use when engaging with recipients. Evidently, Western donors, but most importantly, Vietnamese people have much to gain from sound civil society programmes, whereby needs and interests central in policies, are articulated by the civil society in the recipient country, and not by Western policy institutions.

CONCLUSION

Although it has been decried by critics for its ambiguity and empirical weakness, since its reinvention in the contemporary globalised phase of capitalist development, civil society has proved enduring in development discourse. From an embryonic definition encompassing mainly the governed and the governing, the concept of “civil society” has drifted through the academic circle as ideas have been added and removed, and social meanings attached. It has been argued that there are divergent views about civil society, although no single one provides an *ideal* model for social organisation, which can be applied universally. Although the contemporary discussion about civil society is no longer the preserver of the “white, male, property-owning elite” as was the case in the 18th century, the power behind the voices arguing for civil society remains very unequal however. The loudest, and most influential, voice remains the one of Western international institutions.

A point central to this paper and the case study, is the inapplicability of the concept of civil society, as it is defined in Western norms, in the non-Western context of developing countries. To undertake the investigation of the nature and extent of civil

society, as it is defined in Western terms, in non-Western context, will lead to the syndrome of searching for a “needle in a haystack”. Normative lenses encourages “an inadequate, one-sided or a romanticized understanding of the concept, which leads to flawed political practices” (Chandhoke, 1995; quoted in Van Rooy *et al*: p. 29). Civil society has a potential explanatory value and practical utility, but Western prescriptive agendas can limit both these features. Thus there is a need to analyse actually existing civil society so as to understand it in its actual formation, rather than as a “promised agenda”. A clear understanding of the distinct forms taken by civil society actors and actions in developing countries requires research which will link local realities with emerging global issues. The potential of civil society nonetheless is great. Above all the idea of civil society should legitimize this simple aspect of civil society: the importance of an intellectual space, where people from different backgrounds, can freely debate and discuss on how *they* want to build the immediate world they live in. Donors looking to support civil society, with such an idea in mind, will avoid the “needle in the haystack” syndrome.

APPENDIX 1

Classification of the policy- and development-oriented initiatives

1. The newer, more independent policy research and teaching groups

Examples of this first category are the well-established groups such as the Center for Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences at Hanoi University (CRES), led by Professor Vo Quy, or the newer initiatives such as the Center for Gender, Family and Environment in Development in Hanoi (CGFED), led by Professor Le Thi Nham Tuyet.

2. Ho Chi Minh City and other southern social activism and social service networks

These have been influenced by French and particularly American training and assistance in the 1950s and 1960s. These groups include the Social Work Research and Training Center and the Center for Pediatrics, Development and Health, both in Ho Chi Minh City. Such organizations range from local, service-oriented charitable organizations, to groups concerned with sustainable development, to organizations somewhat more directly critical of Party and government policies, and of corruption.

3. Quasi-public/quasi-private and private universities and other educational institutions

Most of these are established in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City or other southern cities. The Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City Open Universities are still within the state system but largely self-financed through higher tuition rates, and are gradually opening the tertiary education sector. Private universities, business and vocational schools, and other post-secondary institutions have been quite successful since about 1990, first in Ho Chi Minh City, then later in Hanoi.

4. Senior leader-supported patronage groups supporting training and research projects:

At one level, these are social service groups, which merely happen to have elite support. At another level, these groupings are intended to contribute to elite power retention through patronage and social service, while substituting voluntary for now scarce state funds for specific projects. Groups in this sector include scholarship-granting, academic research and social service groups headlined by such patrons as Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet (Fund for Young Talents of Vietnam), General Vo Nguyen Giap (Vietnam Fund for supporting Technical Creations) and former Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach (Programme Volontaire de Vulgarisation des Progres Scientifiques-Techniques pour les Familles Rurales).

5. Professional and business associations

Examples of organisations are the national and local science and technology associations, social science professional associations, consultancy services, small business development groups, and other.

6. Peasant associations and collectives and ethnic and clan groups

Here it is possible to identify two types: the "traditional" state-founded peasant associations, and the voluntary community groups formed in the years since 1986, to help peasants cope with aspects of rapid economic reform. Closely related but present as well in urban areas, are the *ethnic and clan groups*. Discouraged or dissolved throughout much of the 1954-86 period, such groups seemed nonetheless never to have died out. Examples of both these subcategories can be found in the ethnic Chinese (*hoa*) community of Ho Chi Minh City.

7. Religious groups, temples and churches - Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, Cao Dai, and others

These groups are state-recognized and unrecognized: a key feature of the "politics of society" in the *doi Moi* era has been the measured greater freedom accorded to such groups, combined with continuing state attempts to exercise broad control over religion and, in the Buddhist and other contexts, at times more specific or direct control.

8. The traditional Party-led mass organizations and trade unions

Here are included organisations such as the Women's Union, the Youth Union, and the Peasants' Union. The mass organizations had primarily a mobilizational and control function for much of the 1954-1986 period. They are now struggling to find a new and more representational role under *Doi Moi*, and, in many cases, they are beginning to take some

more direct responsibility for social service and development activities, particularly in the countryside. The trade unions are also now under significant representational pressure from workers dislocated as a result of economic reforms or engaged in disputes with state, private, joint venture, or wholly foreign-owned firms.

9. Political activism groups

This last category of organisations directly challenge the Party and state. These opposition groups are neither permitted nor tolerated and have generally been suppressed or coopted. Two examples are General Tran Van Tra's Veterans group, founded in the late 1980s and later coopted by the authorities, and Doan Viet Hoat's Freedom Forum, which put out several issues of a journal seeking more rapid political reform, but was closed in the early 1990s. Hoat and several colleagues were sentenced to long prison terms.

Source: Yamamoto, Tadashi (ed.), 1995, *Emerging Civil Society in the Asia Pacific Community*, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.

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ENDNOTES

¹ This is not an attempt to uncover the 'definition dilemma' behind the concept of civil society. The idea is rather to demonstrate that no definition can be seen as ideal. Moreover, although the political and development objectives of official donors are clear, few have produced rigorous definitions of what *exactly* they understand by civil society. Van Rooy (1998) argues that this omission has implication for funding strategies. Nevertheless, for a good survey of existing definitions of academic and non-academic nature, I will refer the reader to Van Rooy *et al* (1998), pp. 55-58.

² Larry Diamond has listed in the *America Journal of Democracy*, at least six ways in which civil society can promote democracy: 1) civil society is a reservoir of political, economic, cultural and moral resources to check the power of the State; 2) the diversity of civil society will ensure that the State is not held captive by a few groups; 3) the growth of associational life will supplement the work of political parties in stimulating political participation, à la Tocqueville; 4) civil society will eventually stabilise the State because citizens will have a deeper stake in social order. Furthermore, although civil society may multiply the demands of the State, it may also multiply the capacity of groups to improve their own welfare; 5) civil society is a locus for recruiting new political leadership; 6) civil society resists authoritarianism (Diamond, 1991; quoted in Van Rooy *et al*, 1998: p. 44).

³ From now on, referred to as 'Vietnam'.

⁴ See for example Thayer (1990, 1993), Porter (1993), Harper (1996) and Kerkvliet (1995).

⁵ Carlyle Thayer is a professor from the Department of Political and Social Change at the Australian National University, and specialises in issues concerning Vietnam. He is an acknowledged scholar in the field, and has found to be regularly cited in the reviewed literature on socio-political context in Vietnam.

⁶ The membership figures are striking: today, the VCP still totals only 1.8 million or approximately 3% of the total population, with provinces in northern Vietnam accounting for 76% of all members. With the exception of two provinces, Vung Tau-Con Dao and Quang Nam-Da Nang, party membership is below 2% in all other southern provinces (Abuza, 2001; p. 4).

⁷ It was assumed that cooperatives would create a more efficient division of labor and increase the scale of production even without mechanization and other major technological advances. It was assumed that cooperatives would create a more efficient division of labor and increase the scale of production even without mechanization and other major technological advances. But collectivisation and the substitution of administrative means for economic incentives were also aimed at extracting the maximum surplus from the peasantry, which could then be used to support heavy industry (Porter, 1993: 48).

⁸ Vietnam experienced increase in industrial production of an average of 18 percent annually between 1960 and 1964 (Porter, 1993: 48)

⁹ Interestingly, Andreff (1993), professor of Economics at the University of Paris, finds that the proper word for a transition to a full-fledged market economy sponsored by Communist political leaders is 'Market Communism'.

¹⁰ The NICs were South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. For more about the NICs, I will refer to reader to Bello, Walden and Stephanie Rosenfeld's *Dragons in Distress – Asia's Miracle Economies in Crisis*, 1990.

¹¹ Expression coined and title of an article by Pierre (2000).

¹² "Organisationally speaking, the State apparatus and those of the party and mass organisations were left to grow too big, overlapping and dispersed. [...] Our State apparatus is still bulky and ineffective. The management mechanism based on centralised bureaucratism and State subsidies is directly responsible for making the apparatus heavy and lade with numerous tiers and levels. In some central and local branches there exists a tendency of subdivision into various bodies and self-contained specialised units; this results in many redundant or overlapping organisations. Regarding work sytle, there are many manifestations of formalism and red tape; too many meetings, too many delays, and lack of a scientific basis in decision-making; moreover, organisation for executing decisions is also deficient..." (Introduction to the *Political Report*, by the Hanoi Domestic Service; quoted in Thayer, 1990; p 2).

¹³ Andreff (1993) argues that to some extent, Vietnam has been ahead of Central Eastern European countries, and concludes that the transition *out* of socialist structure may be quite

efficient if handled by a strong Communist Party convinced of the benefits of a market economy.

¹⁴ Referring here to the tragedy of Tiananmen Square in June 1989.

¹⁵ Also contributing to this argument are the cases of South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia and China where putting economic improvement ahead of political liberalization have been favorable for political stability and maintenance of the regime. These neighbors showed the apparent advantages, not of *laissez-faire* capitalism and pluralist democracy, but of a heavy handed economic interventionism and single party rule.

¹⁶ Some 28 million people still lack the minimum income necessary to lead a decent life (UNDP and MPI, 1999)

¹⁷ Vietnam faces other challenges in the course of its development. Kerkvliet (1995) has identified the following 'dilemmas' of transition: environmental degradation, labour relations, corruption, the sustained 'socialist' ideology and Vietnam's legal system, social problems (rise in narcotic trafficking, drug abuse and prostitution) in addition to the situation of rural poor and ethnic minorities. But given the constraint of space in this dissertation, I will limit my discussion to poverty alleviation, especially in the case of the rural poor.

¹⁸ The government promulgated the Regulations on May 15th, 1998, on the exercise of democracy in communes, to wards, and townships (See Appendix 1). But the reality is that although this initiative encourages people's 'participation' in local decision making, the authorities maintain the right to control and sanction any activity considered counterproductive to political stability and the authority of the Party.

¹⁹ The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is a German foundation, established in 1925, committed to the basic goals and values of social democracy. The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung has worked in Vietnam since 1989 to provide advice and information to assist Vietnamese partners in their efforts in the fields of 'social security', 'trade union and civil society' and 'regional and international integration'.

²⁰ Popular pressure in Thailand resulted in the resignation of the government of Premier Chaovalit; student protests in Indonesia ended President Suharto's 23-year authoritarian reign; in Malaysia, students and protestors took to the street daily to protest the capricious and authoritarian rule of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed; and in Korea, for the first time, an opposition figure, Kim Dae Jung, was elected president (Abuza, 2002: 10).

²¹ See Appendix 2 for the classification of these development oriented initiatives. I find this classification quite innovative since it allows the inclusion of state-owned organisations, or groups that are somehow related to the State. Moreover, it does not categorize development oriented groups according solely to black and white definitions of what is or is not considered as civil society, thus increasing the scope and potential for sound partnerships and support.

²² To review the MOs-NGOs debate is an massive task, which would need to be supported by several case studies. In fact, the discussion itself, could be a subject matter for a dissertation. In light of this dissertation, however, we will only conclude that MOs have advantageous characteristics, and in this point in time in Vietnam, may be more suitable for funding. For more details, and concluding examples, I will refer the reader to Harper (1996).

²³ Gray (1999) typifies the VNGOs on the nature of their origins. They are 1) former government mass organisations or other State bodies; 2) university- or hospital-based groups; or 3) individuals not associated with earlier groups, forming their own organisations, including local staff or international NGOs.

²⁴ The Youth Association, the Women's Union and the VCP Fatherland Front (VFF) work closely on development projects at ward level (or local government). All operate from central bodies with local membership. For example, the social work centre of the Youth Association and the VFF work in collaboration on several projects with local government. They have established a social restaurant for homeless adults and children, and a railway club for street children. The funds for these project are mainly derived from local government and MOs themselves (Harper, 1996).

²⁵ Vietnam News, 2002 "Politburo member calls for law on grassroots rights", February 26th, 2002; and BBC Monitoring, 2002, "Headline: Vietnamese Premier Calls for Improved Democracy at Local Level", text report by Voice of Vietnam, March 5th 2002, Hanoi.