



Vietnam: Continuing the Recovery

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The way in which the government operates, and especially the role that state-directed institutions play in the development process, must be better understood in order to realize the nature of civil involvement in Vietnam.

Working with the “Ascending Dragon”: MCC and the Role of Civil Society in Vietnam Today

by Kenneth Martens Friesen

The ancient name for the city of Hanoi is Thang Long, “ascending dragon.” Today, the whole of Vietnam is commonly known in Southeast Asia as the ascending dragon because of its growing influence in the economic and political affairs of the region. One concern that some Westerners have is that in this ascension process, Vietnam’s civil society may be left withering on the vine unless a significant reshaping of Vietnam’s political and social structures take place.

Civil society is often portrayed these days as a new saving ideology of Third World nations. World Bank President James Wolfensohn stated in 1999 that “in all its forms, civil society is probably the largest single factor in development, if not in its monetary contribution and its experience and history.” Civil society is seen as the champion of human destiny, a force that confronts the transgressions of ineffective or heavy-handed states, and best embodies humanity’s desire for freedom and democracy.

Such platitudes raise many questions about the role civil society should play in the developing world today. Is the Western civil society model transferable across cultures and political systems? Can development occur only if civil society is present and vibrant? And what kind of strategy should nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) take when civil society institutions are severely restricted or co-opted by the state?

Civil society is often understood as “people’s organizations, voluntary associations, clubs, self-help groups, religious bodies, represen-

tative organs, NGOs [nongovernmental development organizations], foundations and social movements which may be formal or informal in nature, and which are not part of government or political parties, and are not established to make profits for their owners” (Alan Fowler, *Striking a Balance* [Sterling, Va.: Earthscan, 1997], p. 8). Thus civil society is sometimes held up over and against the state, seeing civil society and the state as competing and antagonistic actors. Civil society is seen as enhancing and enabling freedom and democracy.

Most dissidents and human rights groups in the West argue that civil society is seriously lacking in Vietnam. I would argue, however, that in the case of Vietnam, making the Vietnamese government and its many state-run institutions out to be the arch enemy of civil society is at best problematic. The way in which the government operates, and especially the role that state-directed institutions play in the development process, must be better understood in order to realize the nature of civil involvement in Vietnam, and the way in which a church-based agency like MCC has responded within that context.

An Alternative Perspective of the State and Civil Society in Vietnam

Vietnamese people have long understood their relationship to the state differently than in the West. Before the French colonized Vietnam in the early nineteenth century, each person was ultimately subject to the emperor, and the village structure was part of this hierarchical system. There was little

Strength and resourcefulness are evident characteristics of the Vietnamese people. Anything that is broken can be fixed with few tools, using everyday items like paper clips. A sense of space and its limitations have been altered many times as the Vietnamese defy physics. Just how many pigs can one fit on the back of a bicycle, or how many motorcycles can be squeezed into a tiny courtyard? Just as I think, "They'll never fit through there," a car is deftly maneuvered through concrete barriers meant to restrict.

—Judith McDowell, English teacher under MCC in Hanoi, 2000–2002

As with local nongovernmental organizations in many other developing countries, the primary purpose of some of these mass organizations in Vietnam today is developmental.

sense that any societal structures could exist outside those established by the ruler. When the Vietnamese Communist Party organized northern rural Vietnamese society in the 1940s, it did so to unify the country and further the goal of independence from the French, not to pursue individual freedoms as defined by the West.

The Vietnam Fatherland Front was established to organize different sectors of society into "mass organizations": the Peasants' Union, Farmers' Associations, General Confederation of Trade Unions, Women's Union, and Youth Union were created to organize significant sectors of society for the war effort. These mass organizations were to mobilize the general population into large bodies in order to support government policies and programs and, secondarily, to provide basic welfare services.

Though such tight government links may be of deep concern to some in the West, they are not necessarily seen by the Vietnamese as a breach of civil society norms. Many in Vietnam today think of organizations like the Women's Union and others under the Vietnam Fatherland Front as institutions of civil society, including defining them as NGOs. They assume a close relationship must exist between the government and these organizations.

The various mass organizations established under the auspices of the Vietnam Fatherland Front became important bridges between national government policies and local support for those policies throughout the Vietnam Communist government era (1954–present in the north, 1975–present in the south). As with local NGOs in many other developing countries, the primary purpose of some of these mass organizations in Vietnam today is developmental. The question of whether church-based international NGOs (INGOs) can relate to a government-directed institution like the Women's Union or should attempt to create alternative, more "independent" structures has been a most important one for MCC in Vietnam.

MCC and Civil Society in Vietnam

MCC's work in Vietnam started in 1954 when it began assisting refugees who had fled from the north during the French withdrawal from Vietnam. As the American military presence in Vietnam increased during the 1960s, MCC contributed financial assistance and personnel to help those who were suffering as a result of the conflict. It also became increasingly vocal in its opposition to the war. In 1975, following the unifica-

tion of the country by the North Vietnamese army, MCC's program in the south and central part of the country closed and all MCC volunteers eventually left Vietnam. MCC's efforts in Southeast Asia then turned toward externally displaced refugees. MCC's Thailand program worked with Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese refugees who had fled extremely difficult political and economic situations in 1975 and later.

MCC was committed to being programmatically connected with Vietnam and its people. As a result, in 1981 MCC set up its Vietnam program office in Bangkok, Thailand, and began a new chapter and a new style of working in Vietnam. The Vietnam country representative, Louise Buhler, made regular trips to Vietnam, but protocol required that she meet mostly with Vietnamese officials rather than ordinary citizens. Buhler developed significant relationships with these officials, relationships that were valuable in helping Vietnamese officials understand the world around them.

Buhler discovered there was little conception by most Vietnamese government officials that in other countries organizations existed independent of the state. Being a Canadian, she was repeatedly questioned about her connections with the Canadian government. These officials could hardly believe her when she stated that the Canadian government did not know (or even care) that she was working in Vietnam under an international development agency. For these Vietnamese officials who escorted her on visits to Vietnam, the concept of foreign NGOs working in Vietnam outside of their country's state control seemed especially foreign. It was through these visits that some officials began to understand how the outside world worked and how foreign NGOs operated.

The U.S.-led embargo against Vietnam through the 1980s was instrumental in making Vietnam a virtual pariah state to many Western nations. Buhler reported that officials she met with were starved for information from the outside world. She viewed her role in part as interpreting that Western world to Vietnamese officials. The trust-building presence of Buhler as a representative of a North American NGO, and those of a handful of other like-minded faith-based organizations including the American Friends Service Committee and Church World Service, was the source of much of Vietnam's news of the outside world, including ways of alternative social organizing.

Largely because of MCC's small but consistent efforts at trust-building with government officials through the 1980s, MCC was

granted permission to establish a representative's office in Hanoi in 1990, the first North American NGO to be given that status. The Hanoi office enabled MCC country representatives somewhat greater access to ordinary Vietnamese society, though there was, at least initially, a great deal of control over their lives. But things changed quickly and soon there were many foreign development organizations working in Vietnam.

A Two-Pronged Approach

The most significant reason for this rapid increase in INGOs was the new economic direction the Vietnamese government was taking. In 1986 and again in 1989 the Vietnamese Communist Party Congress declared the need for dramatic economic changes. As a result of a growing openness and lessening of restrictions in Vietnam during the late 1980s and early 1990s, MCC was able to begin working with lower levels of Vietnam's government. In the 1980s virtually all the financial assistance MCC gave in Vietnam was directed to a provincial level authority or to a central ministry institution. Throughout the 1990s, however, the focus of MCC's work increasingly shifted toward lower levels.

MCC has maintained a two-pronged focus to its development work in Vietnam. On the one hand, MCC workers have long recognized the validity, integrity, and importance of district or commune (county) government-related institutions for carrying out development work in Vietnam. On the other hand, MCC has encouraged and nurtured indigenous institutions that resemble what in the West are called nongovernmental organizations.

MCC's work with government-related institutions has grown and matured since the early 1990s. In part because of the total lack of local independent NGOs in northern Vietnam in 1992, MCC worked with district or commune government officials to help implement credit and savings programs and other development work. Over the years the MCC Vietnam program has expanded, shifting districts and project partners. Yet through all the changes, the ties with mass organizations remained strong.

A major drawback of the government-related institutions has been their highly bureaucratic, ineffectual approach to carrying out development programs. For many years the heavy "top-down" approach to development meant that Women's Unions and other local agencies directed by the national government simply administered decrees given to them from above. The pro-

grams implemented were not necessarily ones local communities requested or needed.

In response to the heavy bureaucracy traditionally involved in the Women's Union, capacity building has become a focus of much of MCC's work in recent years. MCC's Vietnamese rural development staff work closely with a program management committee (often made up of local officials and mass organization representatives) to build up the district or commune development program and enable the local committee to "own" the projects that it chooses to design and implement. In addition, funding is made available for development trainings in capacity building, conducted either in the field or in Hanoi, to ensure that development concepts are well understood.

A key goal of development trainings is for local officials to gain awareness of the development process, including how to successfully appraise, design, implement, monitor, and evaluate development work. These community leaders, often government officials, return to the village having been made aware of a vision of development that stresses principles of community participation, transparency, accountability, and cooperation.

These goals are precisely the ones that form the basis of an active civil society. The principles stressed in capacity-building trainings provide an alternative to the hierarchical and authoritative historic Vietnamese state. As local officials begin to inculcate the values taught in these trainings, it is likely that a new way of doing things will trickle up the system.

Encouraging Alternative Structures

But it is not only through government-directed institutions like the Women's Union that MCC has focused its energies. MCC volunteers and national staff have also worked at encouraging alternative institutions within Vietnam. This has not been to promote the loaded notion of "civil society," but rather to carry out the priority for MCC throughout its worldwide programs for "people-to-people" contact.

MCC has seen the field of handicraft design and marketing as an appropriate area to encourage alternative institutions. MCC Vietnam, both on its own and through its sister organization Ten Thousand Villages, has supported the creation and development of local handicraft organizations in northern and southern Vietnam.

In the south, MCC has had a supporting connection with Mai Handicrafts in Ho Chi Minh City since 1991. MCC workers in the

Vietnam continues to be a dynamic and ever-changing place, especially in urban areas. New business complexes, four-lane divided highways, and ever-greater throngs of motorbike and automobile traffic greet visitors in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Some things, however, remain very much the same. With an almost predictable regularity southern and central Vietnam suffered through more flooding during the late summer months. Particularly severe was flooding in several provinces in southern Vietnam, where over 170 people died, the majority of them children who were at home while their parents tended fields.

—Ken and Fran Martens Friesen

As a “foreigner” in Hanoi there are two sides to the coin. On the one hand, most people seem genuinely happy and curious to have someone living close to them who is learning their language and adapting to their lifestyle. On the other hand there is another, sometimes not-so-subtle feeling that foreigners in general are welcome here but not for too long. Similar to the anti-immigration movement in the United States, there are those who do not want too much settling in by foreigners. The Vietnamese remember their long and hard-fought wars against the Chinese, the French, and the Americans. They are understandably protective of their independence and want outsiders to know that theirs is an independently strong and capable country.

—Judith McDowell

early 1990s encouraged Mai Handicrafts by connecting them with fair trade organizations that help market handicraft goods from around the world in North America. MCC North American volunteers placed in Vietnam have regularly consulted with Mai Handicrafts staff on issues of design and marketing and have aided their entry into the international market.

In northern Vietnam MCC has had a long-standing relationship with Craftlink, another craft development and marketing organization. Craftlink is a small local NGO that works to develop the skills of handicraft producers while also providing entrance into a place to market handicraft items to local tourists, a growing Vietnamese middle class, and wholesale export markets in Europe and North America. An MCC volunteer has served on the steering committee since its inception and MCC volunteers have worked at enhancing skills of the Craftlink staff and handicraft producer groups in financial management, marketing, and design.

Fostering Civil Society in Vietnam

MCC has learned that fostering civil society in Vietnam (though MCC has rarely consciously conceived of its work in this way) may occur best in a very roundabout way, and with unexpected partners. Working within the government-controlled system, MCC has provided resources and training that build the creative capacity of local government and mass organization officials. Though it may not be obvious to all at first, these local officials may well turn out to form the basis of a new way of thinking about the development process and, in so doing, about the relationship of their local organizations to the state.

MCC has also learned that these changes take place slowly, and only through a great deal of commitment to establishing a pres-

ence. Effective development work for MCC in Vietnam took years to nurture and came at the expense of traditional operational modes. MCC was willing to give up some of its traditional ways, however, for the sake of another important principle: establishing and maintaining long-term relationships that were ignored or rejected by other INGOs, including church-based INGOs, because of U.S. political priorities.

MCC’s work with building the capacity of local Vietnamese NGOs suggests that the time may not be now to push for the creation of local institutions that resemble Western notions of civil society. The extreme difficulty these local NGOs have had in finding a niche in Vietnamese society makes it questionable whether this is the most effective way to promote social and economic development in Vietnam today. MCC acknowledges that in the case of Vietnam it has been more effective to enhance civil society values within the established structures than to promote the creation of alternative structures. Though this conclusion runs counter to the philosophies of some foreign donors and aid programs in Vietnam, it is nevertheless an understanding that should be taken seriously.

Building civil society in postwar Vietnam has proven to be neither quick, easy, nor unambiguous. MCC’s commitment to building relationships, rather than simply promoting the latest Western development concept, has made it first take seriously

Vietnam’s own history and traditions, then try to work in a manner appropriate for the Vietnamese context. MCC continues to wrestle with what it means to be faithful while working for positive change in the land of the “ascending dragon.”

Dr. Kenneth Martens Friesen was MCC co-representative for Vietnam for four years before joining the faculty at Fresno (California) Pacific University.

Peacebuilding and Traditional Culture in Vietnam

by Fran Martens Friesen

As Ken and I completed our third year as MCC country representatives, we became increasingly convinced that peacebuilding and reconciliation should be an integral part of our work in Vietnam. There seemed to be two components. We should encourage continued education of our constituents and Americans in general as to what postwar

Vietnam is like. We should also present models of peacebuilding and provide training in dispute negotiation and mediation for our Vietnamese partners. It also seemed appropriate to us to focus initially on the group of people who had direct contact with rural communities, the Vietnamese program officers of international nongovernment organizations (INGOs).

We knew that any peacebuilding work MCC would do in Vietnam needed to consider questions such as the following: How do Vietnamese communities handle disputes? How can we build upon skills and methods for resolving disputes that already exist? How can we put our training in context—that is, do it in a way that makes sense to the Vietnamese?

Documenting Vietnamese Peace Practices

The idea of researching traditional and current Vietnamese ways of dealing with disputes had been on our back burner for some time. We made a few futile attempts to secure a reliable Vietnamese researcher to deal with this topic, but when Dinh Thi Vinh, our Vietnamese rural development staff member, came to us one morning with her usual brilliant smile and the suggestion to cooperate with a certain Dr. Bui Quang Dzung from the Institute of Sociology, part of the National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities in Hanoi, we felt maybe we could finally move that pot to a front burner.

Dr. Dzung had been cooperating with MCC on projects and needs-assessment surveys. What was new to us was that Dr. Dzung, a professor and sociologist, had a keen interest in community-level dispute resolution and had already done some of his own research on rural Vietnam with this in mind. It was a mutually agreeable solution for MCC and Dr. Dzung to work together; thus we arranged that Dr. Dzung conduct a pilot study of community development in northern rural Vietnam, including questions on disputes and dispute resolution efforts.

We chose one of the communes where MCC had been at work for several years, since a good relationship of trust existed there. When Dr. Dzung had completed his research and report, we were fascinated with his findings, which he presented in qualitative form with many direct quotes and anecdotes. Over fifty people attended his presentation of the findings, most from INGOs.

Following the presentation of findings from the pilot study, there was interest and financial support from the INGO community to run a second, more extended research project that would span all of Vietnam, from north to south, from urban to rural communities. MCC, along with two other INGOs, Quaker Service (American Friends Service Committee) and Catholic Relief Services, sponsored this second research project, to be carried out by the Institute of Sociology.

Dr. Dzung and twelve researchers and assistants undertook the research in the fall of 2001. In April 2002, Dr. Dzung and his team presented their findings to an audience, mostly Vietnamese, from INGOs and the Institute of Sociology. The Power Point presentation included both Vietnamese and English and was crisp and focused.

The research focused on two main areas: (a) types of disputes and (b) means of settling disputes. Dr. Dzung's team researched disputes in families: between generations, husbands and wives, and brothers and sisters. The team also researched disputes among people, particularly between rich and poor and between "marginal" groups and the majority. ("Marginal" here refers to people who "do not obey common principles and challenge local authorities and the community.") Finally, the team researched disputes between local authorities and the people, particularly from the poor and middle classes.

The second part of the research, the means of settling disputes, was perhaps the most intriguing, not only to foreigners not intimately acquainted with Vietnamese society, but even to educated urban Vietnamese. The report described extended family meetings as well as mediation teams made up of older, trusted villagers as well as a member from the Women's Union and possibly other government-run mass organizations, such as the Farmers' Association, the Youth Union, or the Association of the Elderly, which are formed at every level of governance. The team would meet separately with each disputing party and then with all parties together. The researchers found that cases that fell outside the realm of legal solutions and were perhaps more emotional in nature were best solved by these mediation teams, who used tactics of "convincing, mobilizing, and explaining."

Peace Training Needed

Among the intriguing conclusions of the research was the finding that cultural differences between northern, central, and southern Vietnam were actually more significant than urban-rural differences in the ways that disputes are settled. Also, research conclusions underlined the importance of including peacebuilding skills in community capacity-building training programs.

That all of us involved in peacebuilding efforts in Vietnam need to be clear about purposes and desired results is evident from the Vietnamese government's continuing

In December 2002 the Pew Foundation released the results of the Pew Global Attitudes Project, a public-opinion survey that involved citizens of a number of countries. The results of two of the questions may be of interest to our readers.

Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in your country today?

	Canada	U.S.	Vietnam
Satisfied	56%	41%	69%
Dissatisfied	42%	55%	25%
Don't know/ refused	2%	4%	5%

When children today in (survey country) grow up, do you think they will be better off or worse off than people are now?

	Canada	U.S.	Vietnam
Better	34%	41%	98%
Worse	54%	50%	2%
Same	3%	7%	—
Don't know/ refused	6%	6%	—

Source: <http://people-press.org/reports/files/report165topline.pdf>

Cultural differences between northern, central, and southern Vietnam were actually more significant than urban-rural differences in the ways that disputes are settled.

interest in MCC's intentions around this sensitive subject. However, it is certain from local interest, both Vietnamese and expatriate, that continued research and culture-appropriate training around issues of dispute resolution and peacebuilding will be of value to this society.

And the interest is not confined to Vietnam alone; there is regional interest in the subject. Dr. Dzung has received invitations to

speak about his research not only in Vietnam but at international conferences in Thailand and Malaysia as well. We wish him well, along with his research team and the capable MCC Vietnam staff, as they continue to cooperate to build a viable peacebuilding program in Vietnam.

Fran Martens Friesen teaches part-time in the English department at Fresno Pacific University. She was MCC co-representative in Vietnam for four years.

Disputes and Dispute Resolution in Vietnam

by Bui Quang Dzung

Disputes and dispute resolution in the context of Vietnam is an important topic. However, there has not been systematic socioscientific research on this topic.

This report summarizes the results of a qualitative research study on disputes and dispute resolution in Vietnam implemented by the Institute of Sociology of the National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities, with funding by MCC, Catholic Relief Services, and Quaker Service (American Friends Service Committee).

The site survey was carried out by Dr. Bui Quang Dzung and 12 researchers and assistants in October–November 2001 in Soc Trang, Quang Ngai, and Hai Duong provinces.

Disputes in Families

In issues between generations, demands have increased in many areas including food, children's education and its cost, and health service for the elderly, leading to disputes between parents and their children. Traditional patterns of respecting the old have begun to be destroyed in poor families because of changes in the way families earn their livelihood.

Between husbands and wives, there are quite a few disputes, which mainly relate to livelihood issues in poor families (sometimes related to women going to the city for work), patterns of gender inequity in southern middle-class families, and husbands who go to karaoke bars and may violate family commitments.

Disputes between brothers and sisters commonly originate in inheritance decisions, unfair division of property by parents, and the fact that many generations may live together in one house.

Disputes among Unrelated People

Land disputes tend to arise from increased land value, especially since the granting of "red books" (certificates for right of land use); from assertions of private ownership of formerly common land; and, in southern rural areas, from assertions of land ownership by former owners whose land was reallocated to villagers during the war.

Disputes between the rich and the poor in rural areas, both north and south, originate in poor people's questioning of the legitimacy of the status of rich farmers and the fact that the rich continue to accumulate property, causing a breakdown in the former warm feelings among all villagers.

"Marginal" Group Conflicts

The research found that there exists a small rural group who cultivate State land but refuse to pay land tax or irrigation fees. Disputes tend to arise around people with this type of "marginal" lifestyle, who do not obey common principles and challenge local authorities and the community.

Disputes between Local Authorities and People

While people recognize local authorities as their leaders, conflicts arise at times between poor and middle-class people and the authorities when the people feel that local authori-

Finally a special connecting people's event was the District Women's Union Conference in Tam Nong and Thanh Thuy at which our key partners in the Women's Union retired after working several years with MCC. Fran felt warmly welcomed at this event and expressed her heartfelt appreciation for the good relationship and cooperation MCC has had with these key women. She says, "Just seeing a row of women seated confidently at the front of auditorium in their flowing *ao dais* (traditional dress) gave me a surge of pride for the capability and diligent work of these women and their strong commitment to improving the lives of their own people."

—Ken and Fran Martens Friesen

ties do not pay enough attention to implementing government policies or that local authorities do not accept responsibility for the people in good times and bad times. Lack of transparency of the local authorities in buying or selling public land is also a root of criticism.

Disputes also arise when retired people and war veterans closely observe the activities of the local officials, who are usually younger people, and become concerned about the officials' personalities or about the fact that many of them become rich very fast or fail to respect traditions.

Settlement of Disputes among Family Members

Conflicts in the nuclear family are settled by the husband (in the south and some central regions) or (in the north) by the husband in discussion with the wife or with a male cousin. When a dispute in northern and central regions requires a lineage meeting, the family lineage head chairs the "judgment council" including the male heads of households. At these meetings, minutes are taken and decisions must be voted on. In large family lineage meetings, there are regulations on punishment of parties to the disputes.

Family disputes are also addressed by mediation teams, usually comprised of elderly, experienced people, the heads of local mass organizations, and a member from the Women's Union who is prestigious and has influence on others. The mediation team is headed by the village head (in rural areas) or the head of a population group (in urban areas), a representative from the Fatherland Front Committee, or the head of the local Communist Party.

Disputants must apply to the mediation team to initiate a mediation. Together with "public opinion" in the village, a member from the Women's Union comes to give advice to the wife, a member from the Farmers' Association (or from the Elderly Association) gives advice to the husband, and the Youth Union talks with the children to work toward resolving the dispute.

Settlement of Disputes among Unrelated People

Disputes among unrelated people are often addressed by mass organizations. The organizations provide short-term credit or agricultural knowledge. Mass organizations tend to be successful in settling disputes because the people trust them and consider them reli-

able. The Associations for the Elderly and Women's Unions have been doing well in mediation.

When a member of a mass organization has a problem, he or she informs the organization first. A member of the organization will meet with the parties to understand the problem. If it is not a big problem, the organization will inform the local authority that they will deal with the problem.

Second, a mediation team often responds to emotional disputes, which can easily lead to violence but also can easily turn to mutual forgiveness. When disputes are highly emotional, they need to be carefully investigated and solved in an emotional way—convincing, mobilizing, and explaining.

A third method of dealing with conflicts between unrelated parties is the intervention of the village head, who can serve as a mediator because he is elected by the villagers from an exemplary family and is known and respected by all the villagers. The village head will usually consult with the heads of the village's Communist Party, Fatherland Front, Women's Union, Veterans' Association, Farmers' Union, and other mass organizations. A settlement of the dispute is approved by these representatives, and then the parties are informed. In cases where mediation does not work, a commune meeting will be announced over the village loudspeaker with full details of the disputants and the issue, bringing public opinion as pressure on the disputants to settle the matter.

Fourth, people often bring disputes to the local Communist Party because the local Party and its head are trusted by the people mainly based on their fine examples. While the poor rarely bring their disputes to the central government, two groups tend to pursue disputes to the central government if they are not satisfied by the local authorities: (1) well-off people who fulfill all obligations to the State and the community, believe in legal effectiveness, and are often persistent in bringing disputes to a higher administrative level; and (2) the group of retired people and veterans with sharp political and cultural knowledge, who have a strict attitude and solution and would like local officials to "make it clear wrong or right."

Finally, local people can respond to disputes through "grassroots democracy" under the motto: "People know, people discuss, people do, and people monitor." The promulgation of the Regulations on Grassroots Democracy

Vietnam continues to gain popularity as an attractive destination for foreign tourists. Almost two million visitors arrived in Vietnam in the first nine months of [2002], an increase of 11 percent as compared with the same period last year. In addition, the tourist industry hosted almost 10 million domestic travelers. An increased standard of living as well as more leisure time have given a small group of Vietnamese the opportunity to travel more. The government would like to make Vietnam a tourist hub of Southeast Asia, and catch up with other countries in the area who have had a head start.

—Allan and Louise Epp, current MCC country representatives in Vietnam

When disputes are highly emotional, they need to be carefully investigated and solved in an emotional way—convincing, mobilizing, and explaining.

Hanoi life begins early in the morning and continues until the sun sets. The songs of the bread-sellers begin in the darkness of the morning, singing to the tune of six tones: "I have bread here." At the local *pho* shop, a woman spoons up generous offerings of fragrant noodle soup. The market nearby overflows with colorful tropical fruits—mangos, papayas, watermelons, and bananas—and an abundance of bright green leafy vegetables, not to mention interesting cuts of meat. Women in conical hats walk briskly by, balancing two large baskets on either end of a long wooden pole; some have baskets filled with fruits and vegetables. Others carry vibrant red roses and some even carry sanitary napkins. Privacy and modesty have no room in a city and culture where people live so closely together.

—Judith McDowell

Persistent mediation can be said to be a basic tendency of settlement of disputes in Vietnam today.

means that the Party and the State grant to the people a "weapon" to protect the common welfare, and therefore, they can protect themselves.

Conclusions

1. Ranking people into different groups and classes with different interests and demands is the most challenging and significant aspect of current social changes in Vietnam. It is this ranking that regulates characteristics as well as trends of disputes nowadays.

2. Based on their own needs, different groups come to different social institutions for settlement of disputes.

3. Using collective "strength and wisdom" as well as relying on convincing, mobilizing, and explaining is the consistent principle in the settlement of disputes of most of the social institutions involved in the settlement of disputes.

4. The majority of people try to solve their disputes internally (in the family, village, hamlet) and in an emotional way. On the contrary, the middle class "absorbing" the values of the "monetary economy" has the tendency to apply the rational or legal aspect in settling disputes.

5. Regional differences have special significance and are expressed in many aspects: family groups, roles of public versus private institutions, and roles of government organizations versus voluntary organizations.

6. Persistent mediation can be said to be a basic tendency of settlement of disputes in Vietnam today.

Recommendations

1. In the current context, besides the authorities, attention should be paid to the role of mediation of mass organizations: mediation teams, Women's Unions, and Elderly Associations. There should be a practical, supportive way to build capacity for these organizations in mediation skills.

2. Besides public institutions (mediation teams, authorities, political and social organizations, and mass organizations), the increasing role of voluntary organizations in social work in general and in mediation particularly should be noted.

3. While sentimental ways are still paid attention to and are still applied by social institutions, legal measures, which are arising with socioeconomic changes, should also be taken into consideration.

4. Mobilizing the exercise of the Regulations on Grassroots Democracy is also one of the ways to improve "community capacity" to reduce disputes in the community. Development projects should pay thorough attention to interests and needs of different groups, especially the poor in the community. This is also an active way to prevent disputes.

5. Cultural differences between different regions—northern, central, and southern—should be taken into consideration in settlement of disputes. For instance, in the north, make use of collective strength (lineage groups, lineage meetings) in settlement of disputes, but on the other hand, the role of individuals should be noticed in the south.

6. Within the framework of programs of community capacity building, there should be plans for training, providing knowledge in skills and institutions of dispute resolution at the grassroots level.

7. From the point of view of organizations doing development work (government or nongovernment), a lack of knowledge in dispute resolution at the local level heavily affects effectiveness in the work. Peacebuilding should be set up as a program for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Vietnam. Peacebuilding programs should include initial activities including providing knowledge for the community, evaluation, research, and organizing workshops to exchange and review experiences. Cooperation among NGOs and with concerned State agencies (such as the Institute of Sociology) should be strengthened in this activity.

8. Disputes and dispute resolution are issues of regional (Southeast and East Asia) and international significance. Research experiences and actual activities in Vietnam relating to dispute resolution should be disseminated and exchanged with other countries in the region through workshops, seminars, and publications to enhance mutual understanding and enrich common knowledge in this topic.

Dr. Bui Quang Dzung is senior researcher at the Institute of Sociology, National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi. Adapted from the executive summary of Dr. Dzung's research on "Disputes and Dispute Resolution in Vietnam."

Hanoi's Civil Society of Syncretism

by Dan Wessner

In Hanoi in the late 1990s, a Vietnamese colleague and I shared a weekly conversation over bowls of *hoan thanh* soup, a flavorful variation on Chinese won ton. We biked from campus to this soup stand, passing many other culinary choices. There were *bia hoi* stands with home brews and stir-fried rice dishes, vendors with crisp rice flour *banh mi* baguettes and slabs of *pate*, a Chinese *ga thuoc* restaurant with medicinal herb chicken, a dog restaurant for men, and numerous *pho* rice noodle shops.

Hanoi's culinary diversity is underappreciated by foreigners, who have certain concepts of "restaurant" in mind. Foreigners comment on the redundancy: *rice* noodle soup, bread with too much *rice* flour, or plates piled high with *rice* alongside vegetables. But focusing on rice is to mistake a *part* for the *whole*.

Outsiders similarly critique what seems to be Hanoi's monocultural politics. Then follows the assumption that the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) dominates, even stifles, the growth of "civil society." As with food, foreigners look for "politics" or "civil society" in ways familiar to them. Thus civil society is believed to be healthy only if nonstate actors contend with the one-party state. But who says "healthy politics" is necessarily conflicted? Students, teaching colleagues, and I discussed these topics in the context of Vietnam's postwar renovation (*doi moi*) during my two years of curriculum development at Hanoi's Institute for International Relations.

Mapping the Mosaic

A vital first step in comprehending Vietnam's mosaic is to discern how people define their own assets, needs, obstacles, as well as their sociopolitical pathways for dealing with them. This discernment became the framework for our two-year curriculum. On one level, students posited that Vietnam's governance is a "three-in-one" structure with the VCP at the top. It sets a general principle (*ton chi*) for state-societal relations with its oversight of 23 ministries, the National Assembly's legislation under the state president, and a phalanx of Fatherland Front mass organizations responsive to diverse groups and the VCP. Clearly, the "rice" of Vietnamese politicking is the VCP.

Yet on another level, my students explained that nonformal, traditional, and local venues are equally valued. Hanoi journals, news-magazines, and academic conferences affirmed their argument. The sociopolitical aroma and tastes of Hanoi's streets are more complex and flavorful. To this, my *hoan thanh* colleague added, "Nothing is as it seems in Hanoi." She did not mean that Hanoians conceal their ways. Rather, she hinted that Hanoi's marketplace, society, politics, spirituality, many-village composition, and our government employer were far more interesting than they appeared on the surface.

I asked whether Hanoians are just fond of irony. Had mobilization for war efforts muted civic input into political decision-making? Was Hanoi's "hidden transcript" due to overlapping layers of Chinese and Southeast Asian civilizations?

The answer lay, she suggested, in how Hanoians build consensus. People deliberate over meanings and strategies from different sources, drawing together elements of different cultures. These deliberations make decision making long and frustrating, even though "clear enough" direction usually ensues.

She was hinting at the politicking over our curriculum development. When I arrived, there was underway a curriculum of international relations, political economy, and international law. Yet the students needed English-language materials and skills. Some faculty and administrators favored an aggressive course that would plunge these youth into a "foreign study of politics." Others wanted input from only one or two "foreign articles" per semester, saying political topics belonged exclusively to Vietnamese faculty.

While neither side prevailed, both were represented. Consensus settled on a curriculum that recognized the VCP's position, introduced political theory and global events from Western perspectives, and addressed language and analytical skills. Students were to articulate their perceived political assets, needs, obstacles, and pathways for overcoming hurdles and delivering Vietnam's long-awaited development. The institute's pedagogical camps, like bamboo, bent for the sake of larger goals.

Although the average income is still just \$400 a year, Vietnam has successfully reduced child mortality and made primary education universal. However, millions of Vietnamese under the age of five still suffer from malnutrition. There are thousands of street children who are either unable to access an education or drop out to earn a living. Increased divorce rates have also left many children without proper care. The government has outlined measures to deal with the shortcomings in the protection and care of children. Without proper care and attention many will not receive the education and health care needed for a successful future. Real action is needed to ensure that the benefits of development reach every Vietnamese child.

—Allan and Louise Epp

My Hanoi students argued that in postwar reconstruction, one turns to many sources and loyalties—never to just one or two. Consensus building and syncretism are neither efficient nor speedy. And in this process, there is likely ordeal.

The streets of Hanoi are similar to those of other major Asian cities such as Bangkok and Hong Kong, teeming with traffic . . . daunting at first (and second) glance. Hanoi differs in that motorcycles dominate traffic, with bicycles and *cyclos* (rickshaws) a close second, and cars, though still a rarity, becoming more and more popular with the expatriates. The local mass transit system consists of buses, bursting from the seams with people, slowing down for passengers but never stopping. There are *xeoms* (motorcycle taxis), taxis, and pedestrians, moving and swaying to a secret rhythm requiring an inevitable street savvy to survive.

—Judith McDowell

Was there an underlying logic to this state-societal politicking? How do Confucianism, Marxist-Leninism, Southeast Asian values, and Western neoliberalism figure into this consensus building? Our language classroom became a place to appreciate political settings and influences: things were named and defined, in several languages, and finally in dialogue among diverse peoples.

Crafting Political Identity

Hanoi is crafting its own political identity. So do other regions and the collective of Vietnam. In its discourse with globalism, Vietnam searches for a syncretism of the village, single-party state, and other forces. Its sense of the political includes economic, social, and cultural issues that address how this transitional state-society will provide, protect, and produce for Vietnam's 80 million citizens. Nonformal political actors, central institutions, government ministries, and the VCP are involved.

My students argued that sustained development depended on complementary loyalties, invigorated government branches, countless locales, and family relations. Surely, loyalties overlapped and contended for space, but not as in Western adversarial politics of state and nonstate actors. There is vigorous debate about the Leninist concept of "democratic centralism," whereby the lesser part submits to the whole, the minority to the majority, locales to the center, and all forms of governance to the VCP. This made sense during wartime mobilization and postwar unification, but today's VCP, new state institutions, and reinvigorated National Assembly are more prone to follow a *ton chi* co-crafted at local and central levels.

Thus the government and academic institutions debate democracy: they consider the positive and negative aspects of bourgeois democracy, the promise and shortcomings of socialist democracy, pluralism versus one-partyism, traditional peasants' democracy, a democracy for a multisector economy, a Vietnamese democracy rooted in popular and national struggle, and "social justice" or "rule of law" as the touchstones of democracy. In this debate, my students reiterated that consensus building works its way up to central levels, which leads to the formation of policy platforms that are affirmed at Party congresses and then discussed and researched by the Standing Committee of the National Assembly.

Moreover, there remains a considerable sense of local autonomy vis-à-vis central authorities. While VCP directives are disseminated via educational institutions, the media, and mass organizations, they are still interpreted and implemented locally. For centuries, local interpretations have remained resilient in matters such as Vietnamizing Confucianism and Marxism, balancing patriotism and village autonomy, and honoring Southeast Asian values of communalism, clans, and ancestralism.

Importantly, the Fatherland Front becomes a two-way conveyor belt. From the capital, mass organizations are a means for conveying laws, ideology, and VCP platforms. So, too, they carry ideas and criticism from lower social levels and settings to higher state-societal bodies. *Doi moi* reform itself circulated from the bottom of this nationwide framework to the apex of the system. "Fence-breaking" and "fence-jumping" by peasant farmers, village-level specialization, widespread disregard of "collectivized farming," and inheritance norms affected consensus in local branches of mass organizations. This consensus, in turn, influenced the course of VCP Politburo and Central Committee decisions that gave legislative shape to *doi moi*.

Many Sources

My Hanoi students argued that in postwar reconstruction, one turns to many sources and loyalties—never to just one or two. Consensus building and syncretism are neither efficient nor speedy. And in this process, there is likely ordeal.

I continue to work on curriculum development, now in the south, where Vietnamese students are acquiring analytical skills, information technology, and bilingualism to articulate Vietnam's unique state-societal response to globalization and sustainable development.

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Expressions of Peacebuilding in Vietnam

by Kenneth Martens Friesen

Mennonite Central Committee's longstanding commitment to peace and dispute resolution has made it an appropriate organization to deal with issues of dispute resolution in many countries in which it works. Many MCC country programs include significant focus on peace and reconciliation.

The roots of MCC's work in peace and reconciliation in Vietnam go back to 1954, when MCC established a program in Vietnam. Over the next 20 years there were many occasions during the "American War" when MCC called on the U.S. government to settle the conflict peacefully.

At the war's end in 1975, the United States continued to punish Vietnam through diplomatic isolation and a 20-year-long economic embargo. MCC remained committed to peace and reconciliation between the United States and Vietnam. In Vietnam during these postwar years MCC also continued to emphasize its humanitarian and development work. The U.S. isolation of Vietnam made the country's efforts at rebuilding after the war doubly difficult. Emergency relief and reconstruction efforts, together with continued calls in North America for improved relations with Vietnam, were central to MCC Vietnam's immediate postwar rebuilding efforts.

Seeking Peace

As relations with the United States improved in the 1990s (diplomatic relations were restored in 1994), MCC began to look for other relevant ways of building peace with Vietnam. There remained, however, great issues of mistrust between the United States and Vietnam.

A 1998 program evaluation called for MCC Vietnam to accentuate peace and dispute resolution in its programs. It stressed that MCC Vietnam needed to commit itself to peacemaking through events like mediation training and supporting research into traditional ways of dispute resolution.

Though the call for more emphasis was clear, implementing this in Vietnam was a challenge. The Vietnamese government plays an active role among the international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) working in Vietnam. It carefully oversees their activities and requires all foreign organiza-

tions to report their activities. Any proposed MCC activity needs to have the permission of the government body that oversees the work of INGOs.

MCC Vietnam has one advantage among the INGOs. Its strong commitment to Vietnam, through the long, difficult postwar years, had made an impression on Vietnamese officials. There was only a handful of foreign organizations that maintained development programs in the struggling nation. Because of its strong relationship with Vietnam, MCC began to seek ways to pursue appropriate modes of dispute resolution. MCC volunteers and national staff wanted the program to be low key, to integrate into the existing MCC community development focus, and to focus on adapting the program to the existing patterns for dispute resolution within Vietnamese society.

Dispute Resolution Workshops

In 2000 MCC invited Ron and Roxanne Claassen to teach dispute resolution in Vietnam. Ron Claassen had a 20-year background in California promoting the Victim Offender Reconciliation Program; Roxanne had taught peer mediation in schools. Together they had trained hundreds in dispute resolution. Their credentials brought them recognition within the INGO community in Vietnam, though the idea of dispute resolution training was virtually unheard of in postwar Vietnam.

MCC sponsored a training by the Claassens under the umbrella of the NGO Training Project, an INGO that trained Vietnamese community development workers. Though many expatriates expressed interest, it was agreed that only Vietnamese development workers would attend the training.

The five-day introductory training in May 2000 was attended by 25 Vietnamese development workers, mostly staff of INGOs in Hanoi. There was a very positive response and affirmation for a follow-up training as well as additional trainings for those who could not participate because of lack of space.

In 2001 Ron and Roxanne returned to Vietnam for a second round of dispute resolution training. During this training an additional 25 Vietnamese were introduced to dispute resolution concepts and 15 previous

MCC Responses to Iraq and North Korea

As we go to press it appears likely that the United States administration will pursue a preemptive war against Iraq, as it has always made it clear that this war would be undertaken with or without United Nations approval.

For a variety of materials addressing the Iraq crisis from a peace perspective, visit <http://www.mcc.org/areaserv/middleeast/iraq/sanctions.html>.

Another unfolding crisis involves North Korea and the possibility of further proliferation of nuclear arms. Underlying this crisis is the ongoing extreme poverty of the people of North Korea. View MCC's response to the humanitarian crisis at http://www.mcc.org/respond/rapid_respond/northkorea/index.html.

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participants attended a follow-up training. In all of these trainings, the Claassens wondered whether this material, designed primarily in the United States, was appropriate in Vietnam. Many of the Vietnamese participants encouraged Ron and Roxanne to teach the material as they had taught it in the West, and to allow the participants to decide how best to use and adapt the material for their own context.

In addition to these trainings MCC sponsored five Vietnamese people to study in Davao City, Philippines, where MCC and Catholic Relief Services had begun a peacebuilding institute modeled after the one at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU), Harrisonburg, Virginia.

Staffing the Program

In 2001 MCC Vietnam hired a new community development staff person, whose role in part was to help develop dispute resolution skills in Vietnam. This was the first such position established among Vietnamese staff of INGOs in Vietnam. Integrating the position into the community development work of MCC strengthened the core vision: to enable community development people at

the grass roots to deal more effectively with disputes in their communities. The person hired brought extensive community development training. She also had participated in both of the Claassens' trainings and attended EMU's Summer Peacebuilding Institute in May 2002.

While these efforts at training Vietnamese community development staff were being conducted, MCC Vietnam was also interested in learning how disputes are addressed in Vietnamese society. MCC was fortunate to develop a relationship with a sociologist at the Institute for Sociology, Dr. Bui Quang Dzung, who had already completed substantial research on rural life in Vietnam. The story of Dr. Dzung's two studies is told in Dr. Bui Quang Dzung's article "Disputes and Dispute Resolution in Vietnam" (p. 6) and in the article by Fran Martens Friesen, "Peacebuilding and Traditional Culture in Vietnam" (p. 4).

The results so far may make it seem that little progress has been made in working in dispute resolution in Vietnam. Yet the interest in the topic by development workers, academics, and others makes it clear that the time is ripe to pursue it further.