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Title: NGO-led activism under authoritarian rule of Vietnam: Between cooperation and contestation

Anh Ngoc Vu (Dr)
Postdoctoral Research Fellow
Department of Politics, University of Sheffield

Email: anh.vu@bath.edu; ngocanhvu58@gmail.com

Abstract: There is a significant lacuna in the literature on civil society activism in authoritarian contexts. This research addresses this gap by providing an innovative conceptual framework that draws upon relational approach to civil society and mainstream social movement theories. The research focuses on legitimacy, autonomy as well as formality and informality as defining characteristics of civil society activism. In the light of this framework, the paper provides an in-depth empirical account of the processes through which a local NGO in one-party ruled Vietnam orchestrates community mobilization to improve policy delivery response to the poor. This paper argues that by taking advantage of their embedded relation into the state, working within and through bureaucratic structures, manipulating available structural links, as well as strategizing around both formal and informal channels of activism, Vietnamese NGOs are seeking to carve out more room for themselves to manoeuvre in critical actions. In authoritarian contexts such as Vietnam, the NGO-led activism is unlikely to produce radical shifts in the political structure and power relations, but this is not to say that its significance is trivial.

Keywords: Authoritarianism, civil society activism, embedded activism, legitimacy, NGO-led mobilization

Introduction

The 1986 reform *(i.e. doi moi)* transformed Vietnam economically and socially and led *inter alia* to the emergence of new societal actors, including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other forms of civil society. This has also opened up new spaces of engagement for non-state actors seeking social change and policy impact (Kerkvliet, 2001). The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), however, has still held firmly onto its commitments to uphold the Marxist doctrinism and one-party rule. Despite the economic progress, the unusual marriage of socialist commitments with capitalist aspirations has unleashed a myriad of paradoxes that make the issue of state-society relations highly complex.

It is worth mentioning how the term 'civil society' is used in the authoritarian context of Vietnam. When the term of Western traditions was imported to Vietnam through the international development discourse in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the period coincident with historical events including the collapse of the Eastern European communist regimes and the Tiananmen Square in China, it was shunned by the CPV. That is, the term 'civil society' is unrecognised in the official state discourse and it is almost never used in the mainstream media in Vietnam.

Social change is a ubiquitous narrative across the country, but the nature and politics of this change remains far from conclusive, and this topic is much understudied. Despite the positive economic effects, there is a question mark over whether this change will carry over into the political sphere. Deviating from the economics of change, there are certainly significant factors concerning the politics of change that need to be captured. It is therefore incumbent on the scholarly community to understand analytically the evolving state-society relations under the single-party rule of Vietnam. In order to understand the dynamics of change pertinent to state-society relations, it is important and useful to look carefully at the institutions associated with promoting that change. This research aims to contribute to this

understanding by looking at the phenomenon of civil society activism carried by local NGOs. Vietnamese NGOs (VNGOs), albeit expansive in number and scale since 1990s, have been grappling to work within a restricted space. There is very little scholarship on the political significance of NGO-activism. There is also a significant lacuna in the literature on civil society activism in authoritarian contexts. The existing scholarship is fragmentary and lacks a strong theoretical paradigm. Hence, my research aims at addressing this gap by offering an innovative conceptual framework that draws on relational approaches to civil society and mainstream social movement theories to understand analytical civil society activism in authoritarian contexts such as Vietnam. The relevant concepts developed in this research (legitimacy, autonomy, as well as formality and informality of activism) capture the dynamics of and intricacies of civil society activism. This analytical framework is also resonant to varying degrees with civil society activism in other authoritarian regimes.

To achieve this, this paper provides an in-depth empirical account of NGO-led activism in Vietnam. Specifically, it places emphasis on its processes of legitimation, its coalition building and its strategic recourse to structural links (Houtzager, 2003) at different levels in order to achieve its mobilizing objectives. This detailed account will also take into account the historical and local context within which the NGO emerged and has been operating. State-society relations in Vietnam are evolving and run counter to many assumptions underpinning the dominant theories. This paper also argues that NGOs in Vietnam have to couch their activities within the state agenda and discourse in order to exercise their activism. When state authority under authoritarianism remains strong and resilient in the face of a strengthening civil society, being embedded in the state remains crucial, because it offers a relatively guarded space for NGOs to accomplish collective goals.

The Centre for Community Empowerment and Rural Development (CCE) is the case study NGO of my research. In particular, with this case study, I argue that NGO-led activism, by taking advantage of its embedded connections to the state, working within and through

bureaucratic structures, manipulating the available structural links, as well as strategizing the interplay of formality and informality of activism, carves out valuable room for itself to manoeuvre.

Methodology

The case study NGO, CCE, was selected as a result of the strategic mapping exercise underpinned by my initial review of the historical development of local NGOs and Vietnamese civil society, coupled with the investigation of preliminary case studies. CCE is a medium size organization located in the central region of Vietnam which has been understudied by both local and external scholars and where the land issues facing the ethnic minority groups prevail.

I spent almost five months (November 2014 – March 2015) based in CCE's office to observe the organization's everyday acts. Exploring the nature of social change or the intensity and complexity of a social phenomenon requires the kind of familiarity derived from embeddedness in the context and engaging with the subjects. Participant observation helped me gain this familiarity. Spending time at the CCE's office and at its project sites to observe everyday interactions and behaviours opened a unique avenue to examine its actions and decision making process, especially the logic behind these.

In addition to participant observation, various other ethnographic techniques were applied to harness and triangulate evidence. They included in-depth interviews (i.e. informal unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews, and key informant interviews), focus group discussions with a variety of organizational workers, documentation of its grey literature, extensive discussions with other stakeholders including local officials, local experts, donors, grassroots community leaders, and staff from other NGOs in the region. I also engaged in many other organizational activities such as capacity building for clients and community meetings. In addition, I visited the organization's key project sites located in the hotspots of forest land conflict in the region. I extensively probed a large volume of the

organization's materials including project reports, research findings and publications on the impacts of lack of access to land on the local poor along with other relevant organizational literature.

To achieve validity and relevance of the data collected, a checklist of key themes was devised for in-depth interviews and focus groups in an attempt to cover systematically a wide range of issues concerning CCE-led mobilization such as NGO's motivation, methods of mobilization, multi-stakeholders' perceptions of the NGO, and so on. The interviews were undertaken in Vietnamese in various forms ranging from semi-structured interviews to extended conversations, lasting between two and three hours. The interviews and related empirical data were translated into English to make it easier for coding process aided by NVIVO software. There were 40 participants in total that took part in the 55 interviews and five focus groups, who came from , from CCE, community based groups, other local NGOs, donor community, local governments, mass organisations, and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs). The fact that my topic on civil society activism was considered sensitive in the Vietnamese political context meant that I had to struggle to find a position in which I could gain trust from people. While researching this NGO case study, I was from time to time prompted by the NGO leader that I should no use the term civil society *(xã hội dân sự)* in conversations and interviews with local authorities, since this could have provoked their reluctance. Instead, I was advised to make some adjustment so as to make the topic less sensitive. So, for instance, I was advised to tell them I was doing research on "the effectiveness and impact of SOCIAL organization interventions at the locality", rather than "social or political change effectuated by CIVIL SOCIETY activism". These prompts provided me with a different slant of evidence aside from the information collected from other channels, which induced me to negotiate my interview questions.

Civil society activism in authoritarian contexts

The paper is guided by the conceptual framework which draws upon the social movement literature, mainstream civil society theories and research on *autonomy*, *legitimacy*, and *(in)formality*. Globally, it is well documented that authoritarian states are reconfiguring the way they rule, which can be evidenced in their selective strategies for dealing with associationalism, whereby they perform varying degrees of tolerance to different forms of civil society activism, such as *electoral* or *competitive authoritarianism*, *semi-authoritarianism*, or *liberalised autocracy* (Lewis, 2013; Cavatorta, 2013). Non-democratic regimes, as Cavatorta (2013) points out, have introduced a handful of institutional reforms propagandised as the promotion of democracy over the last two decades; however, such reforms seem not to have led to any significant structural change in the nature of authoritarianism. Likewise, the classic forms of activism led by formally organised groups (i.e. NGOs) have received more political salience (Walton, 2010). The resilience of authoritarianism, coupled with the NGOs' political significance as well as emerging forms of non-NGO activism (i.e. led by citizens or informal networks), has informed a new trend of scholarly research on civil society activism in authoritarian contexts. Nevertheless, the existing literature remains fragmentary and lacks an established conceptual paradigm (Vu, 2017). The rendezvous between non-democratic political systems and varying forms of associations and engagements outside the state apparatus along with the growth of grassroots activism, are helping to make state-society more complex, making them more difficult for dominant civil society theories to explain.

Scholarship has demonstrated a number of limitations regarding mainstream civil society theories. First, it contradicts the dominant liberal perspective that portrays civil society as a distinct sphere from the state and as a site of confrontation to state hegemony (Teets, 2014; Hannah, 2007). The simplistic view of civil society in liberal tradition is ill-equipped to understanding the complexity and the changing dynamic of state society relations under authoritarian contexts, such as Vietnam where patterns of state-society interactions run

counter to many of the assumptions underpinning this Western model of civil society. Second, the myth that *civil society activism is conducive to democratic change* seems most contested in the existing literature. It implies that where authoritarian rule exists, the rise of civil society activism is always conducive to democratization, in other words, to weakening authoritarian state power (Hyden, 2010).

Since the normative values of the dominant western civil society model are highly controversial, especially in authoritarian contexts, much of the emerging scholarship on this topic has deviated from focusing on civil society in terms of organizational structures to approaching it from the relational approach (Uphoff & Krishna, 2004; Lorch, 2004; Wischermann, 2011). Specifically, rather than seeing civil society as a pre-established static object with prescribed virtues that would correspondingly predetermine the way it interacts with the state and the politics, the relational perspective looks at it in terms of social processes and relations with other objects, examining how it is constituted after such relations (Silva, 2006).

Likewise, much of the scholarship on this topic, appeals to a more sophisticated approach, the Gramscian perspective to explain analytically the complexity of civil society activism and authoritarianism. The reasons for adopting Gramsci lie in that he conceives civil society as a contested sphere with a discursive nature, and that he transforms the simplistic form of state dictatorship into state hegemony over society through domination and consent (Fontana, 2002; Ramasamy, 2004).

During my research, I followed an eclectic approach to conduct the theoretical review, and using this allowed me to respond quickly to the new phenomena emerging from the field. In addition to having a good understanding of civil society theories, it was necessary that I opened my exploration up to social movement theories to examine whether and if so, how they are relevant to my case study. In reviewing literature of this topic, it became clear to me that many scholarly accounts adopted dominant explanatory concepts of social movement

theories (i.e. contentious collective action, political opportunity, mobilising structures, and framing processes) in varying degrees to investigate different episodes of public contestation in authoritarian states (Kuah-Pearce & Guiheux, 2009; Zuo & Benford, 1995). The rise to prominence of collective action from below in many authoritarian political systems such as Vietnam, China, or Burma has necessitated the search for an alternative conceptual framework that is sufficient to understand analytically the emerging forms of contestation (e.g. grassroots collective actions, public protests).

Social movement theories constitute a wide ranging theoretical body involving various schools. Nevertheless, the political process theory (PPT), developed by the leading American theorists of social movement, is most frequently employed to research bottom-up movements and protest actions in authoritarian contexts. The PPT, by and large, follows a state-centric approach, whereby the state is perceived to affect both the distribution of power and resources in society and to define possibilities of challenge. Social movements under this theory are defined as "collective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities" (Tarrow, 1994, p. 4). They emerge "when expanding political opportunities are seized by people who are formally or informally organised, aggrieved, and optimistic that they can successfully redress their concerns" (Goodwin & Jasper, 2004, p. 17).

Nevertheless, the existing scholarship of civil society activism in authoritarian contexts contends that whilst the explanatory terms above are useful for explaining factors that give rise to social movements and specific moments of contention, the model places too much emphasis on the movements targeted at the state or overt forms of political contestation (Cheskin & March, 2015). The state is treated as a unit of analysis, the action of which is a determinant factor shaping movement emergence, dynamics, and outcomes (Voss & Williams, 2012). As a result, only movements and forms of activism that directly confront the state are favoured. The model also tells us very little about the agency of challenge groups,

leadership, the mobilization process, dynamics, interactive sequences, etc. during the course of movements. The prism of this emphasis consequently dismisses a range of forms of civic mobilization/activism for which confrontation with the state is not always overt and straightforward, which is a common practice of the public sphere in many authoritarian regimes including Vietnam.

Understanding civil society activism in Vietnam

The political salience of NGOs action or civic action in Vietnam is still extremely under-researched. Drawing on the above theoretical discussions of mainstream theories on civil society, social movement theory, and relational approach, coupled with my empirical encounters, there are three key concepts I will use as the analytical framework to examine civil society activism in Vietnam. These concepts are legitimacy, autonomy, and formality and informality of activism. These themes prove most analytically relevant and combine to enable me to explore contemporary civil society activism along with reflecting on the politics of state-society relations in Vietnam. The selection of these themes was theoretically informed and subsequently validated and triangulated through my data collection and analysis.

Legitimacy

Legitimacy is a common concern among Vietnamese civil society organizations (VCSOs), because the term 'civil society' as previously indicated, remains absent in the state official documents in Vietnam. The 'legitimacy' theme of this thesis is conceptually grounded in the relational approach and mainstream social movement theories. In the first place, the relational perspective allows for the breaking away from the notion of a pre-established nature of civil society and recognising the need to analyse how civil society expresses itself in specific contexts, as well as how its actors are constituted and situate themselves in the relations that they respond to and become enmeshed within. In this research, I will examine how civil society groups generate and maintain legitimacy for their

organizational structures and for their actions. Second, the 'framing processes' of social movement theory is the term that resonates with legitimacy: "frames help to render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organize experience and guide action" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614).

Legitimacy can constrain or stimulate different actors' ability to act. I chose legitimacy as a key dimension in my research because it is a long-standing issue among CSOs in Vietnam. Much current scholarship on legitimacy builds on Weber's idea of social order, whereby he argues that "a social order is legitimate only if action is approximately or on the average oriented to certain determinate 'maxims' or rules" (Weber, 1978 as cited in Johnston et al., 2006, p. 55). That social order is sustainable, Weber explains, if it is grounded in the continuity of its members' beliefs in its legitimacy (Miller, 1972). The existing scholarship on 'legitimacy' is influenced by Suchman's framework, whereby he conceptualises it as "a generalised perception that actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p.574). Once established, legitimacy provides favourable conditions for civil society groups to mobilise the support of wider society and defend them from having their functionings and conducts questioned and sanctioned (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). However, it is notable that legitimacy has a contested nature, for once given or established, it needs to be maintained, otherwise it can be removed (Walton, 2013). Drawing on Suchman, legitimacy in this research is construed in terms of *how to be socially accepted and recognised for the acts that are right in reason and in nature, desirable, proper, admissible and justifiable and thus, enjoy the support of an identifiable community*.

Autonomy

Autonomy is a classical topical concern of the liberal civil society theory and the new social movement literature (Offe, 1985). The research rejects the liberal understanding of autonomy that focuses on state-society polarity or structural autonomy by approaching

autonomy in terms of capacity to act in relation to the state. This is because in authoritarian contexts, such as Vietnam, all forms of civil society activism are constrained by the state, and they have to be aligned with the state agenda and discourse in order to achieve success. Autonomy concerns the self-rule and states of a person (Dworkin, 1998). , or refers to the capacity of people in varying degrees to govern their lives and determine their course (Raz, 1986)). Autonomy in general is associated with the level of competence of the person in acting, reflection, and decision making on the basis of factors that are somehow his/her own. Drawing on Dworkin, I view autonomy as the ability of civil society groups to act and to determine their course in accord with their interests or values and desires when negotiating with the state. Autonomy, in this research, is not a collective goal that civil society groups seek to claim from the state. It is analysed in relation to 'embeddedness' in the state. While working on my case studies, I realised that autonomy retains strong resonance, since together with legitimacy, it is an important factor that shapes how civil society groups can act and orchestrate collective actions.

Formality and informality of activism

This theme is theoretically informed by the relational approach as well as the dominant explanatory term *mobilizing structures* of social movement theories. As indicated, the relational perspective considers civil society in terms of social processes and relations. The mobilising structures is defined as the collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilise and engage in collective action (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996).

There is no rigorous and consistent conceptualisation in the literature on (in)formality, for it encompasses a wide range of strands that consider these terms in varying or even competing views. Helmke and Levitsky (2004) define "formal institutions as rules that are openly codified, in the sense that they are established and communicated through channels that are widely accepted as official. By contrast, informal institutions are socially shared rules,

usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels" (pp. 8-9). Drawing on Goffman (1983), Morand (1995) considers formality and informality as two distinct types of interaction orders. Goffman's interaction order refers to the situation when participating in social gatherings, actors tend to generate a set of conventions or rules for co-mingling, which shape how individuals are to conduct themselves (Morand, 1995). (In)formality exhibits a distinct set of understandings or conventions about how actors are to perform. The former is characterised by looser, more casual modes of behaviour and situational involvement, whilst the latter is characterised by tighter, more disciplined ones (ibid). Formality and informality of activism will be approached in terms of processes and interactions performed by different structures, formal or informal, in this research. Specifically, I define formal activism as a process through which civil society groups overtly engage with and/or perform their acts through formal channels and structures. In contrast, informal activism is a process through which civil society groups engage with and/or perform their acts through informal channels and structures in either an overt or a covert manner.

This section has discussed theories and concepts relating to civil society activism in authoritarian contexts. Evolving state-society relations in Vietnam are running counter to many of the assumptions underpinning this traditional civil society model and many episodes of public contestation. I therefore developed three key concepts: legitimacy, autonomy, along with formality and informality as defining characteristics of civil society activism in Vietnam. They are considered as possessing the explanatory power to respond to my concrete empirical encounters. Each of them alone provides a particular slant on the complexity and dynamics of the evolving state-society relations in Vietnam. I will use this framework to analyse the case study of this paper.

The setting and emergence of the NGO case study: CCE

State ambivalence to the NGO sector still prevails in Vietnam, of which salient evidence can be observed in its continuing delay in putting in place an enabling legal framework for civic associations. The Law on Association has yet to be approved despite having been discussed for over twenty years. As a consequence, VNGOs have to grapple within a matrix of intertwined legalistic requirements and bureaucratic practices for registration and operation. Emerging as early as 2003, which makes it one of the earliest NGOs in a poor province along the north-central coast of Vietnam, the rural-based Centre for Community Empowerment (CCE) was established as a continuation of a large, long-standing Dutch INGO-funded poverty reduction project in the locality. It carried on the work after the INGO project was completed. This rural based formation stands in quite stark contrast with the NGO trend of that time, which tended to be urban based and managed by retired government officials with close links to the state apparatus (Gray, 1999).

CCE is committed to combatting local poverty and empowering the poorest and most marginalised groups, especially ethnic minority women in the locality. The organization distances itself from a radical or confrontational ideology and advocates the idea of incremental and sustainable change. Mr. Linh, the NGO director, believes that adversity causes more harm than good in this political context. Partnering or nurturing good relationships with state institutions, he explains, is the key to securing organizational viability and a needed level of autonomy to access target groups, to seek donor funding, and to implement activities.

CCE registered directly with the district-level[i] people's committee (i.e. district government) in the form of a fund, but this government body played a minimal role in its organizational development and decision-making. Its main project sites were the two mountainous borderland communes of the district, which were home to the ethnic minority group called Bru-Van Kieu, but forest land conflicts between local communities and the state forestry company prevailed. After long-standing development engagement efforts with

grassroots communities and the local government, CCE decided to integrate land issues into its activities. The director explained as follows:

> "Lack of or no access to arable land makes poor people unable to escape from poverty, and combatting poverty without addressing its root cause (i.e. land entitlement) seems to be barking up the wrong tree. The ethnic minority Bru-Van Kieu is in severe shortage of land and they have long been trapped in chronic poverty." (Interview, February 10, 2015, Research site)

Forest land conflict at the research site

> "Forest land is not only our life, for it is also our tears, our sweat and our happiness. Right behind me is the forest of massive hectares, but it does not belong to us. It has been controlled by the state-owned forest company. Living next to the forest for decades, my family can't even have an inch of land for cultivation. Much of the area of these forests has been subject to dispute for years, those having too much land fail to manage it, whilst those with too little or almost none are chronically poor and can't get access to it." (Interview, 24 December 2014, Research site)

The revelation above by a Van Kieu ethnic minority poor female, who has been involved with CCE's activities for many years, captures well the dynamics of forest land conflict in the research site. CCE's main project site is among the poorest communes of the province and one of the areas most affected during the American war. This mountainous commune is home to 4,400 people, 60% of which belongs to the ethnic minority group called the Bru-Van Kieu. Compared with other localities, it has the largest coverage of forest land that occupies 95% of the total commune area. State institutions manage a total of 70,000 hectares (nearly 90%) whilst the commune government controls 6,121 hectares (8.3%) and local people as little as 1,413 hectares (1.9%).

According to the commune government report of 2013, the number of poor[ii] households in the commune stands at 52%, whilst that of the Van Kieu group stands at over 80%. Local poverty is exacerbated by the remoteness of the area, the underdeveloped traffic system and infrastructure, and the lack of access to electricity and clean water. However, the main driver of poverty is the severe lack of available productive land.

Formerly, Van Kieu's livelihoods relied on traditional slash-and-burn agricultural practices, forest production, and petty agricultural cultivation. Originally, the first households that settled down in the villages cleared the waste land, grew cassava and swiddened rice near river or streams. The traditional cultivation method was considered harmful to the environment, so the state mobilized ethnic minorities to terminate this practice and shift to sedentary methods. The Van Kieu people complied. Nonetheless, the government was unable to redistribute adequate productive and forest land to them, for most of the better-quality land had already been allocated to forest management boards and state forest companies (To, Nghi, & Zagt, 2013).

The State Forest Company (SFC), one of the protagonists in the forest land conflict in the commune, was established in 1981, of which the main functions focus on forest management, protection, and forest product processing and services. The company is under the official control of the provincial people's committee. When established, it was given an extensive forest land area to manage, including the land which villagers had put great efforts into clearing and cultivating. Once the company obtained its land use certificate, it prevented the villagers from accessing their former land, claiming that it had exclusive rights to the timber and land, and declared villagers' logging and cultivation illegal. With no land for cultivation, local villagers had to encroach upon the company managed land to cultivate or engage in clandestine logging or deforestation (To et al., 2013 and confirmed in my own interview data). The local villagers repeatedly sent petitions to the commune and upper-level

governments and met with the local people's elected representatives. Nevertheless, there was no effective response from the government officials.

NGO-led activism

The following paragraphs provide an ethnographic account into NGO-led mobilization in the light of the analytical framework that focuses on three analytical themes: legitimacy, autonomy and (in)formality. I will use these themes to shed light on the processes through which the local NGO built legitimacy for its organization and community mobilization as well as how it strategically articulated the interplay of both formal and informal activism to claim forest land back to the local community.

Legitimation by conforming to and manipulating the state agenda and discourse

Emerging in 2003, CCE began its life by implementing a number of humanitarian activities and livelihood development initiatives such as innovative livestock models, micro credit for poor women, building technical and political capacities of both local communities and local governments, promoting indigenous culture of Bru-Van Kieu people, and so forth. VNGOs, Hannah (2007, p. 243) indicates, are "rational, law-abiding, constructive, and working for the betterment of their nation," and CCE has similar traits.

The local development efforts of the NGO are in fact the process through which it built legitimacy as a locally based social organization working side by side with local communities and local government. Being a local NGO means that CCE has to live up to expected standards and expectations. In other words, the NGO has to gain and enhance its legitimacy in the eyes of local communities and local authorities through its performance. According to Suchman's (1995) framework, implementing development efforts locally is actually the process through which CCE builds pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy. Pragmatic legitimacy, according to Suchman, derives from getting things done effectively for clients or beneficiaries (i.e. addressing social needs). This kind of legitimacy is relatively straightforward in that it is a direct exchange between the NGO and its specific constituents

involving the delivery of social services on the one hand and gaining client or customer loyalty on the other. Cognitive legitimacy relates to conformity to established cognitive structures in society, which are often described as having a taken-for-granted status (Suchman, 1995). The latter is strongly resonant with the role of NGOs in development promoted by the academic and practitioner worlds for over twenty years, where they are believed to be pro-poor, efficient, participatory and committed to empower the local poor.

Throughout its local development engagement and mobilization, as part of its legitimation process, CCE built its identity locally as a *social* organization, being a benevolent partner with local communities and local government, building and enhancing its pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy. In asserting its nature as a social organization, it aligned itself well with the communist party's agenda around the socialization of the welfare service'. The unifying discourse is captured in the party's favoured maxim "state and people work together". Finding a proper language, tone, and approach to work with local government is strategically important especially in a political setting such as Vietnam, where the institutional preconditions for NGO legitimacy are unsettled, uncertain, and precarious. By accentuating 'social' characteristics, CCE depoliticises its identity, creates a guarded rhetoric for the organization that legitimises its actions. The organization upholds a non-adversarial approach and stresses its complementary role to the state. This enables it to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the local authorities.

In 2009, CCE decided to become more political by becoming more directly involved in land issues. In particular, it decided to support ethnic minorities (its primary clients) to access their land entitlements. Through a non-adversarial approach, CCE identified potential and strategic partners, both locally and beyond, including them in its mobilising structure and organising activism accordingly. The shift by the NGO to more political action draws on the organization's recognition that poverty among the Bru-Van Kieu group is not a technical problem but a systematic and structural one that is deeply rooted in unjust land distribution

and land right deprivation. The transformational event that provoked CCE to officially take part in land mobilization was the boycott by the villagers in the local election. The stark discrepancy in land ownership between the SFC and local Van Kieu was indicative of the contradiction that had endured over time in the commune. Villagers repeatedly sent numerous petitions and complaints to the local government to alert them to how land shortage was negatively impacting their livelihoods. The latter's response however was inconsequential. Local people no longer felt the local government could represent their interests. Villagers' pressures intensified and reached a peak when they refused to vote in the election of the commune people's council in 2010. This surprised local officials who always believed the community was too timid and reserved to publicly resist in that way. This was also a threat to local officials' reputation. Vietnamese people have the right to vote for people's elected deputies at all levels, but this is considered a sham democratic practice, because public votes count for nothing (Lewis, 2016).

The boycott opened up a political opportunity for the NGO to enter the fray officially. This triggered a step-up in terms of activism. The NGO director stated as follows:

> "This was the right time for us to enter the fray to support the commune government and local communities. We participated so as to intensify pressures on higher levels of governments and the SFC. Yet, we were not agitators, our activism was not violent, in fact villagers did not wage any violent acts, all they did was to carry out a peaceful boycott." (Interview, December 15, 2014, Research site)

Collective mobilization remains a risk-laden activity in Vietnam, especially on the part of NGOs. Hence, CCE had to calculate risks when it decided to get involved in land issues. Although it worked in a real hot spot for land disputes, CCE knew it could not stay at the frontline of land claim struggles. Its legal status is guaranteed through its formal registration, which imposes legal bounds. As such CCE has constrained autonomy to challenge local political power overtly. Autonomy is understood in this research as the ability

of civil society actors to act and to determine their course in accord with their interests or values and desires when negotiating with the state (Vu, 2017). Embedded in the state and adhering to its regulatory requirements opens up guarded space for CCE to act autonomously. However, it has no authority to legitimately represent local landless farmers to the upper power structures. Its aim, therefore, is to mobilise local actors to act for themselves and to integrate them in wider strategic coalitions through which they could stand up to exercise their land claims effectively.

Claiming land back to local communities was a complex process. CCE needed to protect and further legitimize its actions, meaning that it still had to ensure the mobilizing strategy was seen to be legitimate. CCE knew that several forest land policies had already been put in place by the national government, and these were supposed to support local communities to access forest land. However, the laws were not being enforced at the local level. During its engagement with local stakeholders, CCE stressed the legality and rightfulness of the land claim safeguarded by the existing national land reform policy that had yet to be enforced effectively at the local level. By showing that the actions conformed to existing laws and regulations, CCE helped build a consensus among the local actors on the legitimacy of the collective action. In other words, their actions were lawful, enshrined in law and policy, and were intended to make policy delivery better.

Articulating the interplay of both formal and informal activism

CCE, a formal structure, mainly exercised its activism through formal structures and channels and in quite overt ways. Its actions were embedded in the official legal framework on forest land reform. The Government Decree 200 specifically stipulates that the disputed land between local people and SFCs would be measured and returned to local government and local communities for management and production. However, these formal policies were often not implemented at local levels. Rules or directives were broken, re-interpreted, or ignored. By implementing what was set out in Decree 200, CCE could not only say it was

acting legally and legitimately, but it was also delivering on key government commitments. The Decree was therefore an important bargaining tool in discussions at local levels.

In my research site, the central policies on land redistribution were blocked at the provincial level by a combination of provincial government and its affiliate, the SFC. CCE's approach helped it challenge this collusion but also reinforce the status quo; it challenged vested interests by appealing to other vested interests. It appropriated available formal channels to engage with local actors in an attempt to help them think differently and take more pro-active action in the land claiming process. Through these channels, CCE wanted to break the ground of confusion and passivity, which had remained for long, whereby no one knew exactly what to do, who to meet, how to forge cohesion, or how to mobilize collectively. It focused its efforts on building legal and political capacities, as well as enhancing awareness of local communities and local government regarding the legal framework. Strengthening their understanding of why these policies failed to be enforced at local level and why the SFC was able to circumvent them was an important component in CCE's mobilising strategy. Once people were appropriately informed, they acted differently, and they made informed decisions accordingly.

To help local communities claim land, cultivating a strong coalition with relevant local actors was a priority for the NGO. To make mobilization a success, CCE had to work within and through the existing bureaucratic structures of the state. Locally, however, officials can be risk averse and therefore are not incentivised to undertake innovative ideas. The final objective of CCE's mobilization was to make the provincial political power deliver policy outputs effectively. Hence, it had to engage with the lower political power structures, i.e. district and commune governments, along with local poor to make inroads into the provincial government. The role of these government structures is distinguishable in two senses. First, they are institutions responsible for directly delivering various public services to local people. Second, they frequently have to engage with the upper levels in time-consuming

day-to-day bureaucratic meetings and other forms of interactions, which are nevertheless important channels to convey local land issues. The involvement of the NGO from a local official's standpoint might cause more harm than good, especially in sensitive cases such as land conflict that call into question sensitive relationships and state legitimacy.

To make local government structures feel more secure, CCE allied itself with the district level mass organization, namely, the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF). So why did CCE have to reach out to the VFF and work through it? The VFF, the umbrella organization of all mass organizations (MOs), such as Women's Union, Farmers' Association, Workers' Union, among others, is structured and organized throughout four levels of government (central, provincial, district, and commune). Being a non-membership organization, CCE co-opted this formal structure in order to take advantage of the latter's large-scale membership and position or status. In doing so, CCE was able to manipulate the available structural links that the VFF already has with local government structures. The director explained further:

> "The VFF's involvement will help break down the suspicion towards our motive, i.e. we are mobilising for the local poor, and help us exercise our mobilization more explicitly." (Interview, February 12, 2015, Quang Binh)

As stated in the quote, the VFF's engagement would eliminate the suspicion towards the organization's activities on sensitive issues such as land use rights or grassroots democracy. In practice, the VFF at the local level faces multiple difficulties regarding resources and capacities. They themselves are in need of capacity building and financial assistance. CCE co-opted the VFF through an agreement contract that focused on policy propagation for local communities. The content of the policy information to be disseminated was guided by CCE, most of which centred on land rights for ethnic minorities. Working with and through the VFF opened up a guarded space for CCE to make inroads into the government structures in an effective way. CCE took advantage of the structural links of the VFF with the local

political power to consolidate the local government's involvement in the mobilization process. How did so CCE engage with these structures?

In the aftermath of the villagers' boycott, the commune officials felt embarrassed because they were pressured by both the villagers and the upper government at the same time. The reason why CCE wanted to co-opt the commune government is because it plays a key role in local everyday politics of villagers. There exists a strong tie between commune officials and villagers for everyday activities. The commune leadership is the knot, which implements national policies at the grassroots levels. If the knot is weak, this negatively affects the delivery of policy outputs at grassroots levels. Its role, as the director explained, is also considered as a village gate keeper, who can help the organization access specific groups within the commune. It is very difficult to organize grassroots activities without the support of the commune leaders, because their presence encourages local people to participate in the NGO's mobilising activities. Additionally, CCE appealed to this formal structure to take advantage of its position as a conduit to transmit collective messages to the upper level.

With the support of the commune leadership and the VFF, the district government was tactically integrated into CCE's mobilising activities. An information exchange mechanism between the NGO and local authorities was established and sustained with strong commitments from both sides. Over time CCE's credibility increased further, and local officials accepted the NGO as a reliable source of information and consultation before their engagement with the upper level and the SFC. In addition, they also provided further support for the NGO actions. This reflects how CCE succeeded in working within and manipulating the bureaucratic structures of the state, conducive with its organized actions. Under CCE's coordination, the commune and district leadership, the VFF, together with the local landless, collectively prepared a detailed dossier of land conflict to be sent to the provincial government. This important document included detailed empirical evidence on disputed land

with specific figures and data, a list of intermediate and long-term needs of the local landless, and a set of recommendations and proposed solutions.

In short, advocating a collaborative approach, CCE co-opted powerful local actors, such as the VFF and other bureaucratic structures of the state to build legitimacy and exert influence on related stakeholders. Working within and through these structures, CCE anchored itself to the available structural links that its allies already had with the political power structures. All this opened up guarded spaces for CCE to orchestrate further mobilization.

The way CCE couched activism within the available political space and worked within and through bureaucratic structures of the state resonates strongly with NGOs activism in other authoritarian contexts. Indeed, NGOs under authoritarian regimes tend to choose to work within the state agenda and utilize their structural links with the state agencies to search for political opportunities to work in favour of their organizational and development objectives (Foster, 2001; Heulin, 2010). A large account on Chinese NGOs practices, for example, indicates that within the restrictive political space, they strategically develop formal and informal ties with state actors as a strategy to gain access to resources or strengthen their own legitimacy (Gleiss & Sæther, 2017; Hsu, 2010). Likewise, they consciously pursue a non-adversarial approach, carefully depoliticizing their activism, and skilfully mobilizing support from various actors including government, the media, and the general public, to advocate and engender changes (Ho & Edmonds, 2007).

During the mobilization process, setting up strategic links with different stakeholders situated at various levels plays a crucial role towards achieving the final objective. Understanding this importance, CCE extended its efforts to establish vertical links with the influential formal structures at the central level including the Hanoi-based NGO Towards Sustainable Development (TSD), national media, and the state agency in charge of land reform known as VINAFOR. Both CCE and TSD were among members of an informal

network working on forest land for ethnic minorities. This network gave CCE the political leverage and opportunity to bring national government agencies and media to its local operational sites, including those with land conflicts. Establishing a stronger national link with the TSD opened up links for CCE to reach the national political structures and effectively mobilize greater support from higher level political agents.

As a matter of fact, at the local level, CCE faced a number of challenges to involve the national media. This is not only because of the geographical remoteness of the organization's operational sites, but also because of its close connections to the state. It is not difficult to imagine that the provincial government would respond negatively if it came to know that CCE had invited the national media to shame them. Hence CCE had to work behind the scenes and make sure TSD was were taking the lead in inviting the national media. In the end when media representatives arrived at the conflict site to film evidence, the local authorities and the SFC had accepted it as a fait accompli and would not have known the role played by CCE. The resulting documentary chronicled very well the suffering of the local landless and was broadcast nationwide. The documentary was widely regarded as having an impact upon the provincial government and the SFC.

CCE sought to take advantage of TSD's links with important national political agents in charge of forest land issues, i.e. the Vietnam Forest Administration of Forestry (VINAFOR). This gave CCE a gateway to the wider policy context of land reform. VINAFOR is tasked with reviewing and devising appropriate policy positions and presenting them to the national government, providing personnel, and overseeing the actual implementation of the forest land reform policy. By incorporating VINAFOR into the mobilising strategy, CCE hoped to first take advantage of its structural links with the national government, which would enhance the legitimacy of its campaigns locally and open up further room for manoeuvre. Also, by incorporating VINAFOR, CCE hoped that government agencies would exert influence swiftly and effectively on the provincial government.

It is important to note that NGOs in Vietnam are involved in the policy process in a very ad-hoc manner because there is no official platform or obvious forum where public consultation can occur. In practice, NGOs wait and if called to a state-led public consultation they will attend. This contrasts with experiences elsewhere where NGOs have a more formal space or platform to engage with government (see Devine, 2002 for a good example of government–nongovernmental collaboration on land reform). In Vietnam, the party-owned MOs are responsible for engaging with the state but are ineffective, passive, and lack imagination. As a result, VNGOs find it difficult to secure room to engage with the state on policy reform and implementation. This sheds light on the significance of CCE's collaboration with VINAFOR – it opened up spaces that CCE alone could not have created. To summarize, NGOs in authoritarian contexts such as Vietnam have to couch their activism within the state agenda and discourse to build legitimacy and enlarge their participation base. As a result, being embedded in the authoritarian state matters, because it offers a relatively guarded space for NGOs to achieve collective goals. However, my research also shows that being embedded is not necessarily the same as being co-opted since at the same time civil society actors work to co-opt government. This is evidenced in this NGO case study where CCE secured support of national agents in order to pressure local government officials and, in effect, force their compliance and cooperation. This paper has argued that in authoritarian contexts such as Vietnam the NGO-led activism is unlikely to produce radical shifts in the political structure and power relations, but this is not to say that its significance is trivial. The NGO in this research managed to trigger change and this change has transformative potential in the sense that under the NGO-led collective pressures, the state had to deliver better policy outcomes to the local poor. This NGO practice can also be evidenced in the authoritarian context of China where NGO activism also generates incremental change that leads to better policies and improvement in human and social welfare (Ho & Edmonds, 2007).

Conclusion

The success of CCE-led activism in this research suggests that the NGO's ability to influence the redistribution of forest land was based on three intertwined factors. First, it built loyalty among its clients owing to its development roots, which helped it increase participation and legitimise its position locally. Second, it worked with and through the formal structures of the state as well as took advantage of the available structural links pertinent to the institutions that it allied with. CCE, in this research, strategically connected itself to wider coalitions to manipulate these structural links to make them work for its collective goal. Third, it articulated strategically the interplay of both formal and informal activism. As an immediate result, 2,123 hectares were removed from the SFC and returned to the commune government for redistribution to the landless villagers. In subsequent years, the provincial government withdrew a further 1,600 hectares from the SFC.

The paper has examined a particular form of activism led by a local NGO. The involvement of CCE to a certain degree improved the policy delivery mechanism, resulting in direct and intermediate benefits to landless farmers. It also opened up further space for policy reform in the future. In authoritarian contexts such as Vietnam, NGO-led collective mobilization faces multiple political constraints due to the politically restricted environment. Given this, it would be politically naive to conclude that such activism will soon mature into a driving force for progressive change. At best, NGOs implement a co-opted activism that accommodates rather than challenges the status quo. However, this accommodation can generate change, albeit incremental. This is resonant with NGO practice in other authoritarian contexts like China and Central Asia (Gleiss & Sæther, 2017) where NGOs also exercise embedded activism, successfully orchestrating community mobilizations within the state agenda and discourse and through state bureaucratic structures to generate better policy outcomes.

With this case study, I have argued that by taking advantage of their embedded connections to the state, working within and through formal structures, manipulating

structural links, as well as strategizing the interplay of formality and informality of activism, VNGOs are carving out more room for themselves to manoeuvre in critical actions. Since state authority under authoritarianism remains strong and resilient in the face of a strengthening civil society, being embedded in the state is critical because it offers some guarded room for manoeuvre for civil society groups to achieve collective goals. This collaborative and embedded form of activism counters much of the literature that portrays state-civil society relations in a more conflictive manner. At the same time, it challenges the conventional wisdom of civil society activism in authoritarian contexts that tends to downplay the dynamic and political significance of NGO-led activism.

There is a significant and sizeable lacuna in the literature on civil society activism in authoritarian contexts. This paper addressed this gap by offering a conceptual framework that is analytically agile to understand civil society activism built around legitimacy, autonomy, and (in)formality. This has been applied to the context of Vietnam but could, I would argue, be applied in other authoritarian contexts. In an authoritarian context, NGO-led activism could carve out valuable room for itself to manoeuvre, by taking advantage of its embeddedness in the state, working within and through bureaucratic structures, manipulating the available structural links, as well as strategizing the interplay of formality and informality of activism.

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ⁱ District level government is sub-provincial level government. Vietnam generally has four administrative levels: central, provincial, district and commune.

ⁱⁱ A new poverty line was announced for the period 2011-2015 by the Vietnamese government, whereby it is VND750,000/person/month in urban areas and VND550,000/person/month in rural areas. US$1 equivalent to VND21,000 (World Bank, 2012).