

**CIVICUS CIVIL SOCIETY INDEX SHORTENED ASSESSMENT TOOL
CSI-SAT Vietnam**

**THE EMERGING CIVIL SOCIETY
AN INITIAL ASSESSMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY
IN VIETNAM**

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FOREWORD

Globally, civil society organizations are playing an increasingly important role in the goals and efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals on poverty reduction (MDGs). The organizations have been working alongside with governments in activities pertaining to the goals on poverty reduction, empowerment of women, increased transparency, and notably to encouraging people's participation in decision-making and policy implementation.

In Vietnam, as the *Doimoi* process moves forward, a wide range of civil society organizations have been established and tremendously developed. The people's participation in the development process has been increasingly enhanced. However, substantial researches on civil society currently need to be conducted so as to clarify its roles, position and policies to encourage the people's active participation, thus contributing to the socio-economic development of the country.

Under the support from the UNDP, SNV and CIVICUS and the cooperation with local and international research institutes and experts, in 2005, the Vietnam Institute of Development Studies (VIDS) carried out the project titled "Civil Society Index - Shortened Assessment Tool in Vietnam". This document is the Final report of the project.

The main analysis presented in this report reflects the perceptions and standpoints of the National Assessment Group composed of representatives from such different organizations as academic, social, non-governmental ones and so forth in Vietnam. This report took the efforts to introduce initial analysis on the current situations, comprising strengths and weaknesses, and prospects for the civil society in Vietnam.

It is the VIDS's expectation that the analysis and findings of the report will have a part in the solution recommendations in order to improve action-planning process for the implementation of national-level strategies and programs on sustainable development with the participation of people. The wish also extends to that the report will serve as a valuable source of information for all civil society researchers in the country in the coming time.

Prof. Acd. **Dang Huu**

President of Vietnam Institute of Development Studies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Civil Society Index Shortened Assessment Tool (CSI-SAT) has been implemented by the Vietnam Institute of Development Studies (VIDS), a member of the Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA), in cooperation with eight researchers from various institutes and organisations and an International Civil Society Expert. The project approach and methodology were developed by the international non-governmental organisation (INGO) CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation. The study was supported financially by UNDP and the non-governmental organisation SNV (Netherlands Development Organization) in Vietnam.

The Stakeholder Assessment Group (SAG), composed of 12 members from civil society, government organisations and research institutions, represented broad sections of Vietnamese society; with two thirds of the members representing civil society (see Annex 1 for a list of SAG members). The SAG was established early on during the project, and the members played an active role in initially identifying the forces of civil society in Vietnam at the first SAG meeting in May 2005. In September, the draft CSI scoring report was prepared and the SAG took the time to read and score all 74 indicators in accordance with the methodology. A full day was committed to discussing the report. When the draft country report was completed in November, the SAG met again to provide consolidated comments, analyse the findings and make suggestions for further future activities. The National Implementation Team (NIT) would like to express its sincere thanks to all of the members for their concern, contributions and interest in this pioneering project.

Seven researchers collected material and information for the study during the early stages of the project. With the exception of the environment dimension, two researchers prepared sub-reports on each of the four dimensions of civil society: Chu Dung (Centre for Social Work and Community Development in Ho Chi Minh City) and MA Tang The Cuong (NISTPASS in Hanoi) were responsible for the “structure” dimension; Dr. Nguyen Manh Cuong (VUSTA, Hanoi) worked on the socio-economic “environment” dimension; Dang Ngoc Quang (Rural Development Service Centre, Hanoi) and Do Bich Diem (Centre for Social Work and Community Development in Ho Chi Minh City) worked on the “values” dimension; and finally, Dr. Bach Tan Sinh (NISTPASS) and MA Vu Chi Mai (MARD, Hanoi) worked on the “impact” dimension. The research group met regularly while preparing the various sub-reports to discuss problems with the research and writing, and to keep track of each other’s progress. All of them deserve to be thanked warmly for their efforts and contributions, a most challenging process concerning a subject that had not been discussed previously in Vietnam.

The project also commissioned a number of people with inside knowledge of Vietnamese legislation and policy to write papers on that subject. The NIT would like to convey their thanks to everyone involved in those efforts, including VIDS, where Prof. Dang Huu was interested and encouraged the topic, Dr. Vu Duy Phu and Dr. Nguyen Van Thu for their active contribution to the SAG meetings, and Nguyen Ngoc Lam (Ministry of Home Affairs) and Nguyen Vi Khai (Prime Minister’s Research Commission). A special thanks to Dr. Bui The Cuong from the Institute of Sociology, who not only wrote a special paper for the project, but also participated in many of the research meetings and contributed many ideas and comments based on his in-depth knowledge of Vietnamese civic organisations. Finally, the project has benefited very much from the support from VUSTA.

Dr. Dang Ngoc Dinh, the National Coordinator of CSI-SAT and Director of VIDS, took on the very large challenge of organising the project from the start. Without his enthusiasm, long experience and profound knowledge of Vietnamese society and personalities, as well as his excellent organisational skills, the project would not have gotten off the ground. VIDS organised three seminars for the SAG and the researchers and we wish to thank the VIDS staff, Ms. Dinh Phuong Mai and Ms. Huynh Kim Lien, who were the daily backbone of the project, as well as Ms. Bui To Tam, who handled the scoring results and “diamond” with great professionalism.

Thank you also to the donors, UNDP and SNV. Jonas Lövkrona, Head of the Governance Cluster and Katrine R. Pedersen, Programme Officer in the Governance Cluster, UNDP and Harm Duiker, Programme Co-ordinator SNV and Nguyen Duc Thien, Senior Advisor to SNV, were among the initiators of the project and they have followed the process closely all the way. We would also like to especially thank Katrine Pedersen, who took part and provided special comments and input with great and encouraging enthusiasm to each phase of the project and the project report. We would like to thank the CIVICUS team in South Africa, particularly Navin Vasudev and Volkhart Finn Heinrich for their most useful and timely comments, particularly during the process of writing the report.

The National Coordinator and the International Civil Society Expert have cooperated closely as the National Implementation Team (NIT) throughout the project. The final report was edited and compiled by the International Expert and reflects national perceptions of civil society in Vietnam, as well as internal disagreements in the source material, as much as possible given the space available. The international perceptions of Vietnam are also included often in contrast to the national ideas. It is presented with the aim of encouraging a public dialogue.

Finally, we would like to thank David Lehman, a volunteer with the UN's Online Volunteering service, who did a thorough and painstaking job editing the language in the English version of the report.

*Irene Norlund
International Coordinator
Hanoi, March 2006*

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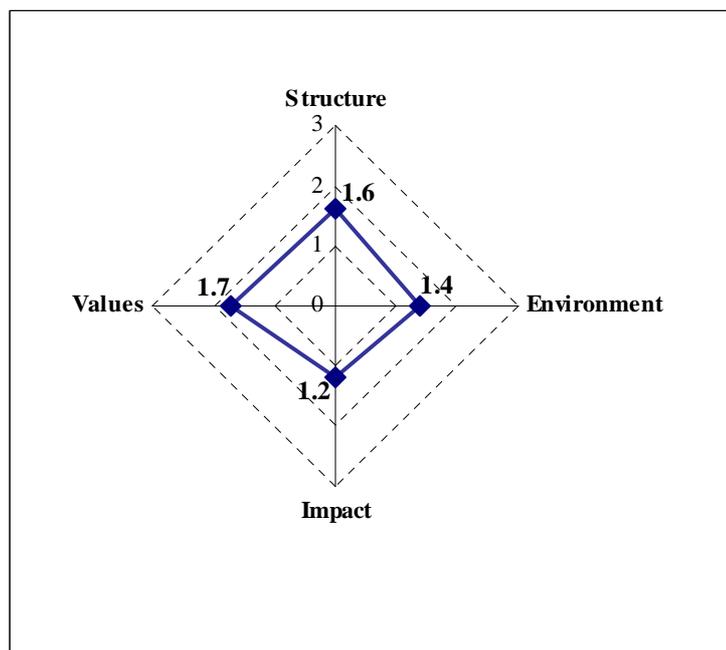
LIST OF ACRONYMS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
CGFED	Research Centre for Gender, Family and Environment in Development
CPRGS	Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (PRSP)
CPV	Communist Party of Vietnam
CRD	Centre for Rural Development in Central Vietnam
CRES	Centre for Research on Environment and Sustainability
CSI	Civil Society Index
CSI-SAT	Civil Society Index-Shortened Assessment Tool
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
ENV	Education for Nature
GDD	Grassroots Democracy Decree
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNP	Gross National Product
HDR	Human Development Report
HEPR	Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
LERES	Centre for Legal Research and Services
MARD	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
MO	Mass Organisation
MOHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
NCAFW	National Committee for the Advancement of Women
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NISTPASS	National Institute for Science and Technology Policy and Strategy Studies
NIT	National Implementation Team
PACCOM	Peoples' Aid Coordinating Committee
PAR	Public Administration Reform
PPP	Purchasing Parity Prices
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers
RDSC	Rural Development Services Centre
SAG	Stakeholder Assessment Group of the CSI-SAT in Vietnam
SDMA	Centre for Sustainable Development in the Mountainous Areas
SDRC	Centre for Social Work and Community Development Research and Consultancy
SNV	Netherlands Development Organization
SRV	Socialist Republic of Vietnam
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
VACVINA	Centre for Training and Transferring VAC Technology
VGCL	Vietnam General Confederation of Labour
VIDS	Vietnam Institute for Development Studies
VND	Vietnam dong (15,800 dong to 1 USD, 2005)
VNGO	Vietnamese Non-Governmental Organisation
VUFO	Vietnam Union for Friendship Organisation
VUPSFO	Vietnam Union for Peace, Solidarity and Friendship Associations (later changed to VUFO)
VUSTA	Vietnam Union for Science and Technology Associations
VWAA	Vietnam Writers and Artists Associations
WVS	World Values Survey
WVSV	World Values Survey Vietnam

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From April to December 2005, the CIVICUS Civil Society Index Shortened Assessment Tool (CSI-SAT) was implemented to assess the state of civil society in Vietnam. The methodology for the project is based on a framework of 74 indicators, divided into four dimensions of civil society: structure, environment, values and impact. The National Implementation Team (NIT), consisting of the National Coordinator and the International Civil Society Expert, together with a group of eight researchers (civil society experts), collected the data, drew up sub-reports on the four dimensions and wrote a consolidated report which was submitted to the members of a Stakeholder Assessment Group (SAG) who discussed and scored the various indicators. The results were summarised in a graph referred to as the “Civil Society Diamond.” The diamond graph is based on the viewpoints of the SAG, but the report also presents data and information from many other secondary sources. The Vietnam civil society diamond visually summarises the assessment’s findings (using scores between 0 and 3) and indicates that civil society is operating in a slightly disabling **environment** (1.4) and has a **structure** of limited strength (1.6). Civil society practices and promotes positive **values** to a moderate extent (1.7) and its **impact** on society at large is relatively limited (1.2). Notably, the values dimension of civil society is the strongest and the impact dimension the weakest dimension (figure 1).

FIGURE 1: Civil Society Diamond for Vietnam



The Civil Society Index (CSI) report for Vietnam highlights a number of features of civil society not previously investigated and a range of new insights. In brief, civil society can be characterised as being very broad-based through numerous civil society organisations (CSOs). However, not all organisations are deeply anchored in civil society, for example some members of the mass organisations are automatically members in the public

sector.¹ Another characteristic is that civil society is segmented into various organisations with different functions. On the one hand, the “old” mass organisations and professional associations, which are broadly accepted as an integrated part of society, and on the other, a “new type” of organisation that developed in the 1990s, but is not fully recognised by society, such as NGOs, CBOs and other types of informal organisations. The report focuses on four main types of organisation: mass organisations (MOs), professional associations, Vietnamese NGOs (VNGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs).² All organisations are seen together as part of the Vietnamese civil society, collectively called civil society organisations (CSOs). The core activities of most CSOs are directed towards poverty reduction, humanitarian relief, self-organisation and professional development, but little CSO effort is directed towards advocacy. On the whole, civil society is an important area of activity for citizens in Vietnam, but it lacks vitality in some respects and areas, among which advocacy is one of the weakest. The environment for civil society is one of the main factors for its relative lack of vitality as the conditions for forming organisations are not enabling.

Civil society in Vietnam was limited and weak before the *doi moi* period (‘renovation’) which put in place the first reforms towards a market-oriented society. This was done by the Communist Party in 1986, which was under pressure to address acute poverty and liberalise the collective landholdings. As the society opened up, the private sector was permitted to operate together with encouragement from foreign investments. After the collapse of Eastern European regimes in the late 1980s, Vietnam had to reorient the country’s foreign relations. When the USA and Vietnam, after the 20 years embargo that followed the American war, normalised relations the door opened up for closer relations to close allies of the USA in Asia and Europe. Consequently, European and Japanese development agencies and the multilateral banks increased development cooperation during the early and mid-1990s. Organisational life changed during this period with an increasing number of international NGOs (INGOs) setting up offices in Vietnam and the number of small local NGOs multiplying. The space for local initiatives broadened both for grassroots organisations and mass organisations, often serving the role as partners for development projects at the community level, as well as for new professional organisations and Community Based Organisations (CBOs).

Examining the current **structure** of civil society in Vietnam reveals that it is broad-based and comprises a large number of groups, organisations and associations. The breadth of civil society is particularly large due to the large membership of the mass organisations. Among Vietnamese citizens, 74% are members of at least one organisation; 62% are members of more than one CSO and, on average, each citizen is a member of 2.3 organisations.³ The groups with the largest membership include mass organisations, women’s groups, social welfare groups, local community groups, sports and recreation groups, groups for education, arts and music and professional associations. Some of the groups are government, or party-sponsored, a fact which causes debate over whether or not they should be included as part of civil society. However, they have become more independent since the *doi moi* reforms of 1986 and, given their considerable expansion at

¹ Mass organisations denominate the originally state sponsored organisations with broad popular base like Women’s Union, Farmers’ Association, Labour Organisation, Youth Organisation.

² VNGOs are organisations set up in the 1990s by individuals or groups with a humanitarian or development purpose.

³ According to World Values Survey Vietnam (WVSV) 2001.

the grassroots level during the 1990s, they constitute an important arena for citizens' activity in many communities. The mass organisations are sometimes less participatory, in the sense that people may be members without being actively involved. Nevertheless, they provide an important connection between the centre and the communities which can be used in different ways, according to the needs and interests of each community. Another type of organisation, the VNGO, has been appearing since 1990. Mainly active in the cities, VNGOs have added a new dimension to organisational life. They have a narrow membership base, but provide services to disadvantaged groups that were previously excluded (eg. ethnic minorities, HIV/AIDS sufferers, invalids and Agent Orange victims).⁴ In recent years, community groups have begun to flourish in the rural areas, mainly in support of essential services, though cultural and recreational groups have also expanded considerably. Volunteering is widespread, but the depth of citizens' participation varies greatly from organisation to organisation.

In terms of their structure, many organisations belong to various umbrella organisations. However, these do not always function well. They are sometimes bureaucratic and do not always coordinate the activities of their member-organisations. The VNGO networks are particularly weak, having only been established in recent years. In general, CSOs lack financial resources. Some mass organisations therefore receive support from central or provincial governments for their core expenses. Many CSOs receive support from foreign donors and INGOs to implement projects and conduct research. Professional organisations are more dependent on membership and local resources than the VNGOs, and CBOs are often sustainable on their own resources, but foreign donors and NGOs are beginning to support this type of informal groups as well.

The **environment** for civil society in Vietnam presents quite a mixed picture of conducive and less conducive factors. Poverty reduction has progressed at a spectacularly rapid pace since the 1990s, with the number of people living in poverty falling from two-thirds to about one-quarter from 1990 to 2005. The socio-economic conditions have fundamentally changed with the diversification of the economy, the establishment of a market economy and the increasing small-scale private sector. In the last decade Vietnam has experienced an active integration into the world economy and a multiplication of organisations within all fields of activity. The SAG assessed state effectiveness as high given Vietnam's level of development. However, the general level of corruption is also deemed very high and causes problems even within organisations that handle large budgets.

Whereas political competition and some political rights are limited, leaving room for considerable improvement, the government takes social rights very seriously and during the 1990s worked in collaboration with CSOs to improve social conditions. With respect to political rights, the results of the CSI-SAT on rule of law and corruption in society are not positive, reasons for this include the restrictive and complicated laws for establishing an organisation, and advocacy activities not being encouraged. These factors create obstacles for the further development of civil society. Basic freedoms, such as the freedom of expression, are limited and international sources rate Vietnam's press freedoms as very low; however, the SAG found that room to manoeuvre is considerably greater than the international sources suggest.

⁴ Agent Orange was spread during the American War in Vietnam (1964-73) to destroy the forest. Today many children are born with genetic defects.

Socio-cultural factors are fairly conducive for cooperation, with the family being the core unit and the party as another organising factor. Level of trust is fairly high in Vietnam, with 41% of citizens saying they trust their fellow citizens. Surprisingly, the level of trust is not much higher among those who are members of a CSO compared to those who are not, indicating that civil society may not in itself strengthen the level of trust. Trust in a society with Confucian norms and strong family values might be generated in other ways than through civil society and this result points to a special type of civil society in Vietnam, due to the strong influence of political institutions. Citizens not only trust each other, but also have a high level of trust in the state and its institutions, quite unlike many countries in Eastern Europe, where the level of trust is low. There is close cooperation between the state and mass organisations, whereas relations between professional organisations and the state are less direct and relations between the state and VNGOs are generally cooperative. However, this is mainly because of good personal relations between state officials and the leaders of organisations. Some VNGOs find they have greater difficulty cooperating with the state (more so in Hanoi than Ho Chi Minh City), which somewhat limits their autonomy. Finally, the SAG does not consider the private sector very important for civil society, as it does not often engage with CSOs or charity.

The SAG assessed civil society's **values** as positive and at a fairly high level, with the highest score among the four dimensions. The CSI-SAT methodology divides this dimension into two factors: 1) values practised within civil society and 2) values that are promoted in larger society. The promotion of values, such as poverty reduction, non-violence and gender equity are particularly strong. According to the SAG, all CSOs promote these values, but to a more limited degree than practising certain internal values. Exceptions include tolerance, gender equity and transparency, which are promoted more in society than actually practised by organisations internally. Statistical data shows that the share of female leaders is considerably higher in CSOs than in the public sector, but it is still not equitable.

The values of democracy, tolerance and environmental sustainability promoted by civil society were seen as less strong by the SAG, and were viewed at a lower medium level. Environmental organisations have begun to emerge and an understanding of the importance of the environment is being taken more seriously by both people and the state, though until recently only a few organisations pursued this goal. The most problematic area is transparency, which the SAG rates as low. The rules of transparency are generally not applied in either society or within CSOs. There is no general evidence about the level of corruption within CSOs, but large-scale corruption seems to be not widespread. A culture of petty corruption has penetrated society, and also exists in CSOs. However, it is believed to be lower than in society overall. CSOs have mainly taken on the role of service delivery organisations and have not strongly pursued advocacy. Still, the participatory principles introduced in recent years, with support from INGOs and donors, have been broadly accepted in governmental projects. The Grassroots Democracy Decree of 1998 opened the space for more active participation in decisions at the commune and village levels, where informal groups are playing a more active role.

The **impact** of civil society in Vietnam was the most difficult dimension to assess. Objective data is limited, especially because, with respect to many activities, the impacts of CSOs and of the various levels of government cannot be clearly separated. Due to their focus on service delivery, various CSO activities often supplement each other, work in parallel or even overlap. However, it was found that CSOs of all types reach down to the grassroots level better than similar government programmes and policies. In that regard,

CSOs have had an impact ensuring that disadvantaged people and the poor have been included in policies, such as those for HIV/AIDS, children's rights, Agent Orange victims and gender issues.⁵ However, one exception must be noted, few organizations reach the most remote areas, such as the regions inhabited by ethnic minorities in the Northern Mountains and the Central Highlands. Mass organisations, and others, may even have a limiting effect on the development of indigenous knowledge, due to their policies of “mainstreaming” development thinking and activities.

Mass organisations have more direct impact on national policies than other types of CSOs, though some of the large professional associations have recently been permitted to comment on laws passed by parliament.⁶ VNGOs use other channels, such as lobbying and pressuring individual members of the National Assembly, usually through personal connections. CSOs do not consider their main purpose to be holding the state or state-owned enterprises accountable (and even less private corporations) because they do not pursue advocacy in the usual sense of the word. Nevertheless, there are examples of communities and workers raising their voices in response to unfair or unethical treatment of people or the environment. At the community level, mass organisations constitute a very important organic link between the various administrative levels, from the centre to the communes and villages. This is particularly the case for the Women's Union and the Old Aged Association, which serve as means to promote activities, initiatives, funding and ideas at the grassroots level. Furthermore, VNGOs and INGOs support projects all over the country for disadvantaged groups and communities. The fairly high level of trust and the rich associational life have played a key role in leading to the rapid reduction of poverty in Vietnam.

This first assessment of civil society in Vietnam has shown that there is considerable potential within civil society for further participation by individuals organised to work towards a better society. Currently the fragmentation of civil society may appear to be a disadvantage, but could turn into an advantage if society opens up further and if the various groups and organisations connect more strongly and improve the division of labour so that each one can focus on what it does best. Simultaneously, organisations should work on deepening the involvement and responsibilities of their members.

The purpose of the CSI-SAT project in Vietnam was to describe civil society in Vietnam and provide a first analysis of its strengths and weaknesses, and of the opportunities and threats to it, as part of an action-oriented learning process. This was done with the hope of providing a basis for enhancing people's participation in decision-making at all levels, through a dialogue with the organisations and the public administration. The other purpose of this study was to initiate a broader discussion in Vietnam about civil society. Such a discussion should lead to further activities which can contribute to strengthening Vietnam's civil society through dialogue between CSOs, the government and society at large. There is a clear need for further studies on the situation of civil society in the provinces and communities, as well as on the role and performance of umbrella organisations. There is also a clear need to improve the environment and support for CSOs so that they can develop into stronger organisations advancing the living conditions of Vietnamese people.

⁵ People exposed to the herbicide Agent Orange during the American war in Vietnam give birth to a high rate of handicapped children.

⁶ Vietnam Union for Science and Technology Association (VUSTA) recommended the Law of Education to be postponed in 2005. It also suggests changes to the draft Law on Associations planned to be passed by the National Assembly in 2006.