

Reinventing rural development in Vietnam: Discursive constructions of grassroots democracy during the renovation reform

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Abstract: *Over the past decades Vietnam has seen striking efforts to reinvent the exercise of democratic rural development. Promotion of grassroots democracy, notably under the Grassroots Democracy Decree (GDD), has been an acute response by Communist Party and government to large scale unrest among the rural populace owing to dissatisfactions with a felt mismatch between espoused commitments to ‘good governance’ and its actual practice. Through evidence from field work, this paper assesses the implications of the GDD in the central and northern highlands, analyzing how the promotion of grassroots democracy is discursively constructed by rural development professionals. The results outline three dominant discourses, which center on their respective interests in liberalist democratization, improved efficiency in state renovation, and enhanced accountability in governing local policy ambiguities. It argues that ‘grassroots democracy’ is serving as a conceptual mediator, supporting learning between diverging interests associated with rural development and different ideological positions shrouding the notion of democracy itself. Yet, given the extent that discourses are reflective of how professionals relate to grassroots aspirations, grassroots movements, which originally ushered the Party and central government to pass the GDD, have a significant struggle ahead of them to affect concrete changes in professionals’ practices.*

Keywords: *accountability, democracy, discourse, policy, rural development, stakeholder*

Introduction

Over the past two and a half decades, Vietnam has undergone significant efforts to reinvent the exercise of democratic rural development. The Renovation Reform, *Doi Moi*, was formally promulgated in 1986 at the 6th National Party Committee Congress, and the country has since embarked on a path towards an increased market economy. The reform process and its transition to market-based socialism has led to a relinquishing of polity and opened more space for more non-state actors to engage in policy adaptation. Here, policy adaptation refers to the

decisions and actions involved in the implementation of political goals, including, in some instances, involvement in the formulation of policy through consultations and participation in the National Assembly. Within rural development, the promotion of grassroots democracy, notably under the Grassroots Democracy Decree (GDD), represents one of the most immediate manifestations of the Communist Party’s and the Vietnamese government’s intentions regarding the renovation of the exercise of democratic governance.

Recent research on local governance change in Vietnam explores different variants of the same question; namely whether observed political changes signify actual changes in practice or merely represent symbolic efforts to appease demands from ‘below’ or outside the Party (e.g. Fforde, 2011; Wischermann, 2011). The promotion of grassroots democracy specifically under

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the GDD is a relatively young process, and there are a limited number of scholarly and 'grey literature' reports available on the experiences to date. These mostly focus on the responses from the local government. This paper sets out to examine the impacts and interpretations of the GDD among the wider community of rural development professionals, not only in government offices but also in non-government organisations (NGOs), development agencies and research institutes. This assessment of the practical implications of the GDD is pursued through an analysis of how the promotion of grassroots democracy is discursively constructed by those who are key players in its implementation.

Reinventing democratic spaces under political reform

The opening to liberalisation in Vietnam under *Doi Moi* has been accompanied by an extensive process of decentralisation and increased sub-national fiscal autonomy, with associated changes in the relationships between centre and periphery. For rural agricultural policies, this was characterised by decentralisation of administrative responsibilities to the provincial level of government (McCann, 2005; World Bank, 2005). These new administrative conditions were central in enabling the agricultural sector to play a crucial role for economic growth in the first years of *Doi Moi*. As a case in point, analyses of the national Living Standards Surveys conducted in 1993 and 1997 concluded that the rising incomes in the agricultural sector accounted for close to 60% of the progress in poverty reduction that occurred at that time (Haughton *et al.*, 2001).

Vietnam, like China, is seen by many outside observers to be performing a novel political experiment in balancing policy instruments in its decentralised public policies, including regulation and coercion, market-based incentives and new forms of deliberation (Turley and Selden, 1993; Morley, 1997). This has seen the establishment of a new set of actors, which play a mediating role in the spaces within the tripartite governance system of the Communist Party (championing the central ideology), the National Assembly (legislative body), and the government (executive body) (Powell *et al.*, 2011a). These

actors are variably defined as 'civil society', 'third sector', 'civic organizations' and NGOs (e.g. Kerkvliet, 2004; Le and Khuat, 2008; Powell *et al.*, 2011b). The profusion of these organisations is representative of a broader diversification of social, political and economic practices under *Doi Moi* (Wischermann and Nguyen, 2003).

Until 1992, such organisations were not formally recognised in Vietnam, and the Mass Organizations offered the only legalised form of organisation outside the core state apparatus (Gray, 2003). Mass Organizations were founded in the early years of the Indochinese Communist Party to include all sectors in the anti-colonial struggle. Subsequently, they became organised under the Vietnam Fatherland Front, led by the Communist Party and constituting the political base of the people's administration (National Assembly, 1999; UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), 2006). For many years, Mass Organizations have been the formal entry point to the political realm for farmers and the modes of organisation for collective action in rural development. During *Doi Moi*, their role has been changing. For instance, Kaime-Atterhog and Anh, (2000) describes how the Women's Union was established in 1930 to mobilise women for war activity but now focuses increasingly on promoting equality in legal rights and recognition of gendered interests at the grassroots level. In 2006, 74% of Vietnamese citizens were members of at least one of the Mass Organizations, and on average each person was member of two to three organisations (Norlund, 2006).

Promotion of grassroots democracy

The first decree on grassroots democracy was issued in 1998 by the government (in contrast to laws, which are passed in the National Assembly) after initial piloting in selected communes (Zingerli, 2004). Since 2002, the GDD has called for the stringent use of new decision-making procedures at commune and village levels. It is argued that the GDD has put in place 'the first legal framework required to expand direct citizen participation in local government to effectuate the popular slogan that 'the people know, the people discuss, the people do and the people monitor', (UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), 2006: IV).

In this view, the GDD stipulated, for the first time, which decisions of local government citizens must be informed of, which require consultation and which require people's direct supervision and inspection. Commune People's Councils and Committees (the legislative and executive arms, respectively) are directly responsible for implementing the decree without further order from higher levels of government. Villagers are encouraged to set up relevant forms of organisation, and village conferences will be held to decide on affairs relevant for the community. The village is also empowered to establish regulations for their internal affairs and upholding the community's customs in compliance with state regulations (DWC (Center for Promoting Development for Women and Children), 2005; Mekong Economics 2006; Fforde 2011).

The decree was launched as part of a larger programme of legislation, which includes improved citizen participation in the operation of state agencies and state owned enterprises (World Bank, n.d.). As such, it is only one of a set of additions to the legislative framework, which underpins direct and representational democracy in the country. The initial promulgation of the GDD also took place in conjunction with a heralded national trend towards increased public participation in rural development in general. Community consultations in 15 provinces were seen to contribute to the formulation of the national Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP) for the first time in the 2006–2010 Plan (JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency), 2006), and the Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (CPRGS), now merged with the SEDP, also drew on what was presented as a novel participatory process. The CPRGS was approved by the Prime Minister in 2002 after what the government described as a highly consultative process for civil society organisations with a Poverty Task Force acting as government–donor-NGO partnership platform (Government of Vietnam, 2002).

The promotion of grassroots democracy in the late 1990s and early 2000s took place in conjunction with amendments of the Land Law in 2003 and the Forest Protection Law in 2004, which provided further steps to support the ongoing devolution of management of rural areas such as forests and agricultural land. These legislative changes opened up political space for

increased grassroots participation in community allocation of land and forest tracts within a formal legal framework (Sikor, 2000, 2006). These initiatives were an acknowledgement that despite a number of ambitious political programmes – such as Regreening the Barren Hills Programme and the Five Million Hectares Reforestation Programme – the process of decentralisation was struggling with harnessing effective grassroots responses to persistent issues of land degradation and deforestation (FAO (United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organization), 1997; Junker 2000). The frustrations over such policy inefficiency were significant, particularly regarding implementation of the decentralised agricultural policies in the socially diverse and often economically marginalised highlands (Jamieson *et al.*, 1998; Le *et al.*, 2003).

Response to rural resistance

Notwithstanding the importance of the recognition of policy inefficiency in rural development, previous political and historical analyses of the push for grassroots democracy have shown how the promulgation of the GDD was primarily an acute response by Party and government to large scale rural unrest during the 1990s, including demonstrations and violence against local officials. Revolts broke out in consequence of complaints over local level corruption, particularly in the Mekong Delta in 1997 and 1998 (Kerkvliet *et al.*, 2003; Minh, 2008). In this view, the GDD thus emerged as one of the responses from the Party and the state apparatus in recognition of the need to demonstrate decisive actions on mismatches between espoused commitments to 'good governance' and actual practice (Kerkvliet *et al.*, 2003). Among others, Fritzen (2003: 237) describes how the Party's response to the uprising of large parts of the rural populace was 'a high-profile "rectification" campaign against corrupt officials, with emphasis on local government . . . Grassroots democracy was the ultimate legal expression of the campaign . . .'. Zingerli (2004: 54) describes how it was 'in order to address such violations of the "people's mastery" such as increasing bureaucracy, democratic deficits, inequality and bribery, [that the Communist Party] and government took steps to (re)establish and strengthen democratic regimes in the localities'.

Part of the citizen dissatisfaction with the state and Party pertained to the way benefits from market reforms were distributed, formally and informally (Fforde, 2009). Experiences of theft and nepotism among officials and Party members came, for many people, on top of rising social and economic inequalities and growing poverty among rural upland communities. Despite a general decline in poverty rates, inequalities were accentuated by increased economic uncertainty and declining coping capacity of local institutions in the face of often uncontrolled market forces (Adger, 1999; ADB (Asian Development Bank), 2002; Thoburn 2004; Lindskog *et al.* 2005). As a case in point, the ratio of the top to bottom 10% of earners, a common indicator for economic inequality, increased from 1993 to 2002 from 8.07 to 9.42 (Fritzen *et al.*, 2005).

Many of the reasons for the rural resistance, and in turn the GDD as one of the legal consequences of the unrest, had to do with an undermining of the connection between citizenry and the Party; challenges which partly due to the history of nation building. Vietnam has, both during self-government and colonial rule, seen a radical and often heavy handed process of standardisation and simplification of local governance institutions, building a well-controlled local government administration at the expense of other forms of organisation (Marr, 2004). In particular, ethnic minority institutions have faced destruction by rural development policies such as New Economic Zones and the Fixed Cultivation and Sedentarization Programme, which, among others, have led to widespread interprovincial relocation of people (Kemf and Vo, 1999; Wessendorf, 2001). Village councils and assemblies that existed in pre-colonial and colonial times have also largely disappeared (UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), 2006). The village, which was the traditional unit of organisation, today does not harbour official government institutions, even though some may have Party cells and Mass Organization branches (Kerkvliet, 2004). Further, as Fforde (2011: 169) observes 'state policy is, in standard Vietnamese, no more than the concretization of Party thinking. This denies state bodies opportunities to secure popular political support by the way these ideas site policy intentionality elsewhere . . . it leads to problems with

securing stable (at least in terms of political presentation) links between problem, solution, and its implementation'. These structural constraints to local ownership of state policy are a chief reason for the many and varied obstacles facing local officials trying to attend to village or hamlet concerns and interests while adhering to directions from higher echelons (Kerkvliet, 2004).

Research objective: Analysing the discursive construction of grassroots democracy

The distinctiveness and rapid reform of Vietnamese local governance has attracted substantial scholarly attention and a significant body of evidence today exists regarding the structure of the political system and organisational landscape in Vietnam (e.g. Kerkvliet *et al.*, 2003; Kerkvliet and Marr, 2004; Nguyen, 2006; Le and Khuat, 2008; Fforde, 2011; Wischermann, 2011). Understanding of the particularities regarding Vietnamese governance of rural development has been and remains vital for countries taking on the role as donors through development cooperation, as well as for international trade partners. While the market economy has brought about increased standardisation in social organisation and alignment with the dominant international capitalist order, the reform process has also added to the general puzzlement among overseas observers when seeking to grasp Vietnamese socialist democratic governance, including the apparent contradictions between market liberalism and perpetuation of what appears to be opaque elitism within the Party.

In the first instance, the promotion of grassroots democracy, as represented by the GDD, manifests itself as an outcome of the successful application of overt 'weapons of the weak' (Scott, 1985) by the rural populace. The events associated with the GDD can be read as one of the expressions of rural resistance to rapid and perceived unjust agrarian change, which are observed throughout Southeast Asia (Turner and Cauoette, 2009). However, as with other policy change, it is far from evident the extent to which this decree and its stipulations lead to concrete change in the governance practices on the ground.

Zingerli (2004) has, to the author's knowledge, provided the most explicit assessment of

the implementation of the GDD, showing how local officials in the northern highlands struggle with interpreting the decrees' obligations and their new responsibilities. Problems of 'formalism' (that the decree has led to very few real changes in the practices among government officials) have also been highlighted elsewhere (e.g. Fritzen, 2003; Mekong Economics, 2006; Fforde, 2011; World Bank, n.d.). To wit, there are no evaluations of the impacts of the GDD among the wider community of rural development professionals, not only in government offices but also in NGOs, development agencies and research institutes. An understanding of the way these professionals appropriate the GDD and its ambitions is particularly interesting when – as argued by Turner and Cauoette (2009) – rural resistance under contemporary Southeast Asian politics forms part of increasingly multi-scalar interactions between local, national and international actors.

Recognising that formal institutions only gain significance according to the manner in which they are interpreted and enacted by those who engage in rural development, it is possible to assess the practical implications of the GDD through an analysis of how the promotion of grassroots democracy is discursively constructed by those who are key players in its implementation. In so doing, this paper adopts a view on democratic rural development as a lived social practice, consisting of physical as well as discursive expressions; and that analysis of discursive practices informs us about the way grassroots democracy is enacted (Foucault, 1969).

Below, the paper presents an analysis based on the recognition that in the pursuit of efficient and democratic rural development people share and negotiate perspectives on rural agriculture; and equally, their interpretations relate to the exercise of democracy itself. This acknowledges that constructions of democracy are invariably under contestation (Gaventa, 2006) and form part of a general revisioning of what, in different stakeholders' view, constitutes credible institutions for harnessing rural development. This includes the political dimensions and differentiated interests and perceptions of resource users who actively redefine their mandates under liberal market conditions (Miller, 2006). The analysis views the ability of the governance

system to mediate between competing definitions placed on the desirability of different forms of environmental change as a concrete expression of its democratic performance. It focuses on the discursive constructions of grassroots democracy under the GDD specifically in the context of agriculture, forestry and natural resource management in rural areas, and the efforts for improving livelihoods and increasing production and economic progress through rural development. The emphasis is on upland areas in central and northern Vietnam where rural development is facing particular challenges in achieving lasting progress.

Further, the work has benefited from the new opportunities to conduct research into the relations between Communist Party, the state and its diverse publics, which have emerged in the market-oriented contemporary socialist Vietnam over the recent years (Kerkvliet *et al.*, 2003; Nguyen, 2006). As such, the paper aims to make a contribution not only to an understanding regarding the substantive question of the concrete implications of the GDD but equally to a debate on the methodological development of research in changing socialist contexts (e.g. Scott *et al.*, 2005; Turner, 2010).

Methodology

The fieldwork underlying this paper was conducted during four months in April through July 2006 with the Vietnam–Sweden research cooperation on sustainable rural development in Vietnam (RDViet). The motivation for the study arose in connection to the expectations of the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) to implement the Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (SARD) Initiative in Vietnam, a global multi-stakeholder partnership launched at the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg in 2002. Within the field of rural development, the SARD Initiative was the partnership programme which emerged to support specifically the implementation of Agenda 21, Chapter 14, of the same name. The SARD Initiative was launched as a re-interpretation of the initial SARD-concept of Agenda 21, partly in recognition of the general apprehension towards the lack of Agenda 21 outcomes in the late 1990s (Langeweg, 1998). This work had encountered claims that capacity-

building programmes under the WSSD umbrella continued to be top-down and 'Northern driven', and there were concerns within the UN system regarding the dominance of large international NGOs at the expense of grassroots movements (Paget-Clarke, 2002).

With a mandate from FAO, the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences and the Stockholm Environment Institute undertook to develop an approach to implementing the SARD Initiative together with Vietnamese partners. Particular emphasis was placed on the recognition of the role of local context in shaping the applicability of agricultural practices in the rural highlands and the need for the SARD Initiative to ensure improved ownership by 'local civil society'. Upon initiating the fieldwork, it became evident that the interest in civil society was generally perceived as foreign and confusing under Vietnamese conditions, and participants advised that we recast the emphasis into a concern with grassroots democracy. This was also motivated by the fact that there was great interest in this topic connected to the recent passing of the GDD and its associated events. The study was hence framed to investigate the experiences with grassroots democracy in rural development in the central and northern highlands and prospects for further supporting rural grassroots movements who struggle to improve their livelihoods and protect their environment.

Evidence was generated through individual consultations, focus group meetings and participant observation with national, provincial, district and commune government officials, grassroots organisation representatives, development professionals and researchers involved with grassroots democracy initiatives in the context of rural development. Individual meetings were held with 77 people, primarily in Thua Thien Hue Province and the city of Hanoi, and three field visits were made to rural upland localities in the central and northern highlands. A semi-structured interview format was adopted, starting with inviting comments on the ambitions of the SARD Initiative, inquiring into past experiences with promoting grassroots democracy in rural development and obtaining advice on how to best support grassroots organisations in adopting and upscaling good agricultural practices under current conditions. (Table 1)

Field visits were organised based on invitations from participants who took an interest in the study and its objectives and who were already operating in different parts of Vietnam. Owing to the differences in the scope of their activities, the focus during the visits was on different geographical and administrative levels. Staff from the Hue-based local NGO (LNGO) Nature Care provided an opportunity to experience how a provincial NGO operates in the field of community development and environ-

Table 1. Overview of contributors to the study

Stakeholder coding	#	Examples of affiliation
Government officials at national, provincial, district and commune levels (senior executives, department heads, people's committee representatives).	12	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), Vietnam Agenda 21 Office, Provincial People's Committee.
International researchers	8	Oxford University, Copenhagen University, Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD)
National researchers (lecturers, department heads etc.)	24	HUAF, Hue University, Asian Institute of Technology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences
LNGO staff (directors, program managers, field staff)	9	Nature Care, Towards Ethnic Women (TEW).
INGO staff (directors, program managers, field staff)	9	Netherlands Development Organization (SNV), Helvetas, NGO-VUFO Resource Center, Caritas, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN),
International development agency staff and consultants (national and international employees)	10	GTZ, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), Mekong Economics Ltd., independent consultants
UN staff based in Vietnam	4	FAO Vietnam, UNDP Vietnam, UNEP Vietnam
Total	77	

The categories of Local NGO (LNGO) and International NGO (INGO) are applied as this was the terminology preferred by the majority of people in the encounters. This list does not include more than 50 people who contributed during workshops and focus groups in field visits and informal exchanges.

mental education, focusing on their work in Phong My Commune in Thua Thien Hue Province. In Yen Bai Province, the author joined the staff of the Sida funded Chia Se Poverty Alleviation Program in three days of field visits, meetings and workshops. The emphasis here was primarily on the efforts of the programme and the local government in Van Chan District. The third field visit was to Dak Lak Province in conjunction with participation in a workshop in Buon Ma Thuot on communal land allocation organised by the Provincial government and international research partners.

The study was inspired by principles of action learning in its objective to elicit an understanding of the perspectives of rural development professionals on what constituted meaningful grassroots democracy and how diverging views on effective and desirable rural development were being negotiated and, perhaps eventually, reconciled. Action learning – as a branch of action research – is a scientific tradition which aims at positioning the research efforts in the larger governance context, embedding the research interventions into existing governance mechanisms – as well as embedding stakeholder realities into the research outcomes. This includes recognition that stakeholders must be included as co-researchers, in both generating and analysing evidence, in order to position the research constructively in contested spaces of multiple actors with diverging interests and perceptions (Checkland, 1999; Powell, 2004). Action learning as facilitated in this research project was particularly in building on intersecting developments in farming systems science, systems thinking and action research, which enable an appreciation of the diversity exhibited by agro-environments and the social processes that people engage in (e.g. Röling and Wagemakers, 1998).

Following this action learning tradition, the purpose of this paper is not to claim 'objective validity' of the arguments presented or one 'proper' view on grassroots democracy but to share a number of perspectives, which were shared and co-constructed with/by the participants in the research process. This adopts a view on scientific rigour as dependent on the degree of social validation of the work and its results (e.g. Whitehead and McNiff, 2006). Different action learning projects may be critiqued

according to the extent to which research participants obtain control over research design and the learning process, including the extent to which different actors are able to influence the interpretation of the evidence. It is acknowledged that the present study was constrained by its origin and purpose, and the findings must be judged with reference to those who have had influence in the research process, as described here.

Within the research, the original problem definition for the study was posed by FAO and subsequently interpreted during this study. The interest in civil society mobilisation was recast to a focus on grassroots democracy in collaboration with conversations with the first participants in the study. The research process was designed in dialogue with Vietnamese colleagues within the RDViet programme, and the author was assisted by colleagues from Hue University of Agriculture and Forestry (HUAF) with setting up meetings and interpreting the evidence in informal conversations after meetings. In the meetings, advice was received on further contacts and literature sources to substantiate claims. Questions were also designed to cross-check information and preliminary conclusions from previous meetings – thus giving people a chance to provide complementary interpretations of insights. The field visits were designed and undertaken together with interested partners (Nature Care, Sida staff and government officials) who thus had an ability to influence the study through site selection, organising of meetings and contributions to the interpretation of findings. In the synthesis of evidence, earlier versions of this paper have been reviewed by Swedish and Vietnamese researchers and NGO professionals connected to the RDViet programme and revisions undertaken in response to their comments. Key findings have also been shared and critiqued at the Vietnamese-Swedish partnership conference held in Hanoi in 2008 celebrating 30 years of development cooperation between the two countries.

As is evident above (Table 1), the participants in the study are generally rural development 'professionals'; people who have a professional competence and interest in the questions posed. As such, this paper does not pretend to convey perspectives of grassroots but rather perspectives *on* grassroots democracy – as perceived by those

who are charged to implement and operationalise the GDD ambitions. Further, the three field localities differ significantly in bio-physical, cultural, economic and political circumstances, which to some extent will be brushed over in the results and analysis sections below. This is an acknowledged limitation of the study; however it is also symptomatic of the fragility of the national and international discourses which are the objects of examination, including their tendency to apply generalising arguments. When arguments and observations pertain specifically to any of the localities visited, then such reference will be made.

Below, the evidence is presented through application of a grounded theory approach, in which the analytical codes have emerged from the engagement in the concrete meetings and field visits and the appreciation of the generated data (Charmaz, 2006). Three dominant discourses are presented, which embed the grassroots democracy policy with meanings relevant to different actors. In so doing, these discourses are also using the policy process as a vehicle for advocating their desired views on the renovation of Vietnamese society. The analysis is narrated through observations from the field work and the insights and perspectives provided by the participants. When an observation became known as generally acceptable for a majority of participants it is referred to as such. When a view derives from a particular type of participant/actor, then this is indicated.

Results

Discourse 1: Liberalist democratisation

The first of the dominant discourses on grassroots democracy, encountered predominantly among international development professionals and International NGO (INGO) staff, explained the GDD as a step in promoting liberal democracy with inspiration from outside Vietnam. In this line, several INGO staff argued that the formulation of the GDD had been inspired by the approaches introduced by INGOs in recent years, in the same way as informal rural collaborative groups had been inspired by foreign donors and INGOs. It was commonly highlighted that the GDD was growing out of the national government's positive experiences

with public participation to date, facilitated by such international efforts. Several INGO staff described that they had seen a change in attitude among both central and local government officials who now widely embrace grassroots participation as a means for improved and effective management.

Many INGO staff explained how they felt that civil society in Vietnam was still 'quite shocked' over the increased space for public participation provided by the government. In the words of one INGO professional, the GDD paved the way for an 'emerging civil society, which is still careful and in need of gaining capacity'. Another INGO staff member felt uncertain about whether the people-centred reform represented by the GDD was a 'genuine wish for participation or merely a consequence of persistent donor push'. The GDD was, in this way, considered to be helping to clarify an uncertainty within the Communist Party as to what the role of civil society is. Within this discourse on liberalist democratisation, professionals narrated how from the late 1990s the political space for LINGOs had increased significantly with the improvement in democratic rights, to a large extent deriving from the support from INGOs and development agencies.

In the perspective of several of these professionals from international development agencies, the policy development was also understood as an outcome of an ongoing power struggle between the Party and the emerging civil society, driving democratisation forward. This discourse articulated how the GDD was contributing to improving the conditions for NGOs to carry out their supporting activities. Through a more effective and consolidating civil society, the democratisation process associated with the GDD – and other legislation pertaining to rights of association – was, in the words of one international professional employed in a LINGO, representing a policy intervention in 'the conflict between the wish of People's Committees at different levels to control the emerging "civil society" and civil society's wish for more maneuvering space'.

One international development professional described how some LINGOs, who were navigating this 'maneuvering space' to push the democratisation process forward, had periodical experiences of repression from the Communist Party, sometimes leading to temporary

closure. One LNGO employee perceived this as part of a 'game', where the LNGOs would be testing the rules of the game, and the Party letting them know when they exceeded what was currently acceptable. Due to the associated risks when playing this 'game', a chief technical advisor in development cooperation noted that he 'would never like to be involved in any way with projects related to civil society questions as it could destroy the relationship with local government and People's Committees'.

Discourse 2: Policy efficiency for state renovation

The second major discourse – predominantly evoked by government officials – focused on the ability of grassroots democracy to nurture the process of state renovation. Notably, it was explained how the continued problems of implementing the process of decentralisation and devolution of public policies for sustainable and equitable rural development in Vietnam's highlands had led to an appreciation of the need for improving grassroots involvement. The GDD process was seen as an enabling vehicle for better mobilising the strength of the people. It was frequently highlighted how the GDD had emerged against a background of policy inefficiency, including continuing replacement of natural forest with plantations and rising encroachment on remaining forests driven by, for instance, demands for fuel wood and urbanisation during *Doi Moi*.

It followed that the promotion of grassroots democracy was expected to enable a better harnessing of the multiple institutional belongings and capacities of individual citizens. In many voluntary associations and LNGOs, members and staff had other full time employment, often in government offices or research organisations, and activities were highly integrated with these other duties. For instance, the LNGO Nature Care, head-quartered in Hue City, mobilised close to 50 voluntarily engaged members for the work in Phong My Commune and neighbouring areas, many of whom worked in provincial government departments or as lecturers at Hue University, and the projects were implemented in close collaboration between the state and grassroots. The GDD was here considered to facilitate the creation of better opportunities for

such organisations to collaborate with grassroots institutions and contribute to the reform process. As one of the Nature Care founding members stated 'We feel we have a capacity to help because we have studied forestry, environment, or management. We feel we have the capacity to do something . . . '.

For the socially diverse highlands, particular emphasis was on improving relationships between the *Kinh* ethnic majority and the 53 ethnic minorities recognised by the government – that is, how to better include the minorities in the state renovation project. In this line, two senior officials from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development in Hanoi described independently of each other how the major problem was 'how to organise [people] to protect the forest . . . Farmers do not know how to argue . . . I am sitting here and can change the law, but I do not get any ideas from them'; and that 'ethnic minorities in the highlands are not reacting as hoped for to the decentralisation and devolution due to the history of dependency and pacification'. However, there was in general a low level of interest in the GDD and its implications among most of the provincial and district officials contributing to the study. In Van Chan District, officials from the People's Committee rejected that the GDD had any direct relevance to their work.

In the workshop in Buon Ma Thuot, the Director General of one of the MARD Departments outlined the efforts of MARD to enhance the integration between state law and customary law in the rural villages, which are not part of the formal administration. He explained, that MARD was promoting grassroots democracy to yield new formalised rules for villages, which were to be adopted by the whole community to govern social relations on the basis of self-autonomy. The goal was to maintain good customs and supporting law-based state management. Part of the expectation was that grassroots democracy would foster new and more efficient forms of collaboration between ethnic groups. In proverbial terms, this was commonly expected to serve to overcome the persistent challenge that 'the King's Law stops at the village gates' (vn: *Phep vua thua le lang*, translation in Malesky, 2004).

United Nations staff saw improved grassroots participation as one path to combat issues of

poverty and inequality and implement development targets (see also UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), 2002b). Similarly, one development cooperation programme coordinator in Dak Lak reflected on the provincial government's behalf, that 'after decades of continued slash and burn farming in Dak Lak, Provincial government now recognises that it must listen to what people say if the new policies shall have any effect on forest protection'.

Within this discourse, grassroots democracy is considered to improve legal recognition of organisations, enabling them to respond to decentralised policies and attract funding, as well as facilitating new forms of collaboration. In Phong My Commune, participants referred to a cross-institutional Land Solutions Group as a forum for settling disputes over land allocation issues with an improved collaboration between emerging networks of LNGOs, development agencies and government departments. Such initiatives between the state and non-state actors were, as expressed by one forester, essential for implementing the procedures for land allocation. The collaborative arrangements were, however, seen to be constrained by the lack of resources for government officials to prioritise inter-organisational coordination. Working relationships were often temporary owing to the short-term projects of NGOs and fragility of grassroots initiatives. The GDD was here hoped to be an expression of a government commitment to increased support also for such collaborative efforts.

Discourse 3: Addressing local policy ambiguities and enhancing accountability

The third and final discourse to be presented here contrasted markedly with the two previous discourses. The articulation of the relevance of grassroots democracy was here seen as a response to the need for improved accountability and transparency in policy implementation. Professionals expected that the emerging diversity and new forms of associations and improved local involvement in commune affairs could serve to keep authorities accountable and counteract corruption. As a case in point, one international consultant commented that 'I have not seen indications that a "donor push" is having any significance . . . I think the GDD

was implemented predominantly to avoid an increasing challenge of the Party's control . . . it arose as a response to dissatisfaction with the Communist Party and unrest in the Party's heartland'.

UNDP staff similarly pointed to the realisation of the Communist Party that new measures were needed to enhance the trust in the relationship with its powerbase in the countryside (see also UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), 2006). This view thus suggested that the promotion of grassroots democracy was an outcome of bottom-up demands from citizens. One Vietnamese researcher described how the GDD came about in response to the fact that 'the devolution process [under *Doi Moi*] is by many actually experienced as bringing to people what they do not want, in a form they do not like or do not understand'.

Rural development professionals thus welcomed an increased emphasis on new ways of addressing ambiguities and legal conflicts created during the renovation process. This view emphasised how the implementation of rural development objectives was often ad hoc and its outcomes unpredictable due to local 'trial and error' innovations during the implementation when policy expectations met local realities. Examples were shared by the participants to illustrate this point in relation to the amendments of the Land Law and the Forest Protection Law. In Thua Thien Hue Province, it was explained how village allocations were initially conducted without a policy framework. The sharing of land use rights between men and women was not formally recognised until the Land Law amendments of 2003, but in some communes de facto power-sharing arrangements adopted recognition of women's equal land rights.

Vietnamese researchers acknowledged that the fear of committing what centralise decision-makers would see as mistakes meant that government officials in general would not act until provided with specific guidelines from higher levels of administration on a case by case basis. The GDD was hence expected to provide procedures for commune authorities to be more expedient in their nurturing of citizen demands. This was also considered as a means to counter discriminatory treatments of different villages based on local authority preferences. As des-

cribed by one LNGO director, in rural upland villages inhabited by ethnic minorities, 'those villages that were supportive of the Communists during the war with the United States can better claim their rights and voice dissatisfaction with the government and the Party, as the Party feels it owes them a debt'.

It was hoped that the GDD would contribute to a more level playing field between different ethnic groups in the highlands, which for many years had seen an exacerbation of conflicts between different tenure systems, where local resource management institutions were incompatible with the official land management classification schemes. The renovation of grassroots democracy had, as explained by one Vietnamese anthropologist, to be considered against the fact that 'by not acknowledging the village as part of the state administration, the government has for decades rejected the core mode of organisation of ethnic minorities'. One Vietnamese researcher similarly described how local governments had for decades sought to implement the Party line regarding assimilation of ethnic minorities, through building a 'brotherly relationship', however, there was 'no doubt who is the big brother and who is supposed to be the attentive little brother'.

Concerns were raised that the promotion of grassroots democracy also had to factor in differential access of different NGOs to support new forms of decision making at village and commune level. One LNGO director explained that many LNGOs were established by people with former or current positions in government or Party, and these people had easier access to central bodies and representative forums for lobbying activities. This was in contrast to LNGOs founded by people from outside the centralised structures, and it was hoped the GDD would offer new avenues for a more level playing field, at least at local level. Similarly, it was explained that LNGOs and INGOs were facing rather different prospects for engaging in the policy adaptation processes, owing to the often very different financial and human resource conditions as well as the differentiated relationship with government and Communist Party. One LNGO project manager explained how 'INGOs are criticizing [LNGOs] for being "undeveloped" and not ready for furthering people's participation . . . therefore they often by-pass local organizations

and work directly with villagers via their own participatory approaches'.

In this regard, a number of INGOs and LNGO staff confirmed that the preparation of the strategic policy documents CPRGS and SEDP had involved almost exclusively INGOs, and many suggested that LNGOs were effectively 'crowded out' by INGOs (see also observations in Norlund *et al.*, 2003). LNGOs were concerned about insufficient resources in comparison to INGOs, and that they were limited to smaller consultancy jobs. According to one Working Group Coordinator at the NGO Resource Centre in Hanoi, 'many INGOs have grown so big now that they do not depend much on collaboration with other NGOs'.

Analysis and discussion

The results above have outlined three core discourses among rural development professionals, interpreting grassroots democracy in relation to their respective interests in liberalist democratisation, improved efficiency in state renovation and enhanced accountability in governing local policy ambiguities. These discourses applied rather different vocabularies and frames of reference to construct images of what meaningful grassroots democracy constitutes. This illustrates how the grassroots democracy policy has taken the form of a set of practices, in which the role of contestation between discourses and their interpretation play a key role in determining the outcomes of the implementation of the policy (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003).

Contesting 'good governance'

The coexistence of discourses demonstrates the ongoing negotiation of the meaning of democratic rural development, including an encounter between diverging ideological presumptions shrouding the rhetoric of 'democracy'. The promulgation of the GDD came shortly before the launch of a process of high-level dialogue between representatives of the Communist Party, the government and international actors, exploring different meanings of 'deep democracy' (UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), 2006). As hinted from the diverging interpretations of the GDD, there are major issues still to resolve in this debate, coupled

with underlying tensions in the conceptualisation of socialist and liberal democracy in rural development.

In mainstream international development rhetoric on 'deep democracy', as a process of more substantive and empowered citizen participation, democracy is implicitly assumed to refer to capitalist liberalism. The notions of civil society and public deliberation are seen to emerge from within the genealogy of liberal democratic theory rooted in the heritage of European Enlightenment (UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), 2002a; Kumar 1993). Here, the notion of 'civil society', broadly defined as the arena of non-state institutions and practices that enjoy a high degree of autonomy, is used to comprehend the existence of NGOs and social movements as part of the heralded shift from government to governance, where public, private and civil society sectors are expected to jointly contribute to sustainable development (e.g. Kumar, 1993; Anheier, 2005; Jensen, 2006).

In Vietnam, terms such as 'civil society' remain opaque for large parts of the Communist Party, government and citizenry; for many, such terms are associated with experiences of earlier attempts to impose alien views on what comprises actual democratic governance, including during French colonialism and American aggression. As a case in point, the law on the rights of association, which by many international professionals has been perceived as the future 'law on civil society', was initially negotiated in the National Assembly in 1993, but was only approved in 2006 – after 13 years of contestation (Van Nghe Weekly, 2006).

Within international development, appropriations by development banks and strong states of a 'proper' definition of democracy continue to inspire what Roberts (2008) refers to as 'transitology', which refers to the assumption of democracy as an essentially portable concept which can be transplanted into societies through foreign intervention. This ignores the many characteristics of socialist democracy, including how the distinction between 'state' and 'civil society' in socialist states is traditionally blurred because party and party systems extend networks of organisation throughout society (Mair, 1998). As Amartya Sen eloquently argues, it also reflects a culturally biased perspective which negates

the many and diverse global origins of the values which we today associate with democratic governance (Sen, 2006).

Conceptual mediation in the Vietnamese negotiation culture

The diversity of interpretations of the purpose of grassroots democracy highlights an interesting parallel to the popularity of decentralisation reform itself. In Vietnam, as in other Asian countries, decentralisation is seen to have currency across the political spectrum as a popular remedy for renovating public bureaucracies with excessive concentration of decision-making authority with the central government (Turner and Hulme, 1997). The widespread buy-in to grassroots democracy suggests that the concept has achieved a similarly 'universal' currency. The coexistence of the different discourses also indicates how the notion of grassroots democracy has become a 'conceptual mediator' between different interests in Vietnamese rural development. That is, a concept embodying a seemingly common set of assumptions, which are understood to be politically correct at present and which professionals ought to operationalise in their discourses, despite embedding it with rather diverging shades of meaning based on their own histories and desires.

The role of such conceptual mediators has to be positioned in the particular negotiation culture in which professionals are active (Leeuwis, 2000). The Vietnamese negotiation culture is distinctly rooted in the legacy of Confucian ideology surviving through shifting forms of centralised authority under the imperial court and successive eras of concentrated powers during the French reign and subsequent Leninist democratic centralism (Le and Khuat, 2008). Confucianism is seen as playing a continuing role in the shaping of the modern ideas of the nature of reality, proper social relationships and the righteous path in life (Woodside, 1970; Jamieson, 1995). Among others, this includes deterring overt questioning of authority (Scott *et al.*, 2005). There is thus a long tradition in the one-party state to seek 'consensus governance' where important state decisions go through extensive consultancies at several administrative levels prior to approval (Norlund *et al.*, 2003). Emphasis is here placed on reaching (even

apparent) consensus and people will go a long way to achieve this and avoid anyone loosing face. This tradition was, during the fieldwork, referred to by some participants as being due to Ho Chi Minh's thinking regarding the idea of the state as characterised by Oneness; a collective, organic whole which ought to act in concert for the common good of the people.

Arguably, within such a negotiation culture, stakeholders benefit more from drawing on seemingly shared norms than confrontational strategies, and conceptual mediators such as the notion of 'grassroots democracy' achieve a great significance. This is also one of the reasons why national debates in Vietnam regarding the distinction between the state and non-state actors tend to focus on the practical consequence of such difference rather than categorical or nominal differences, which tend to provoke greater confrontation. For instance, the 2006 Vietnamese Civil Society Evaluation, conducted by a national Stakeholder Assessment Group, recommended a focus on function and interactions rather than a priori categorical entities when debating organisational issues related to grassroots democracy (Kaime-Atterhog and Anh, 2000; Norlund, 2006).

The richness of the discourses associated with grassroots democracy is thus both an asset for and a consequence of the tradition of consensus governance. When diverging perspectives exist, it enables a process of discursive exchange and learning in which stakeholders may gradually reconstruct their perspectives and decide on relevant forms of collaboration despite ideological disagreements (Collins and Ison, 2006). As a case in point, Wischermann (2011) has provided evidence that creative encounters between different discourses may lead to incremental but appreciable change from within the state apparatus.

Whither grassroots empowerment?

While the discourses on liberalist democratisation and state renovation were exercised largely by international development professionals and government officials, respectively, the discourse on increased accountability was promoted chiefly by local practitioners. They were pointing to policy ambiguities and the problems faced by new forms of grassroots organisations

and how both international and government actors could improve their support to village and commune level initiatives. Notably, this concerned, as observed in previous studies, a lack of appropriate institutions to navigate the diversity in land relations and the conflicting perspectives on the concept of property under top-down implementation of the reform – where de facto outcomes largely derived from informal negotiations among villagers and between villagers and various state agencies (e.g. Akram-Lodhi, 2002; Sikor, 2004; To, 2006).

A significant number of rural development professionals, including INGOs and government employees, approach the GDD and its ambitions in ways which are not immediately connected to concerns for grassroots empowerment. In this regard, the GDD must be seen in the context of new and supposedly more inclusive forms of governance deployed only to legitimate the interests of the state and development donors. Arguably, there is a risk that such discourses lead to 'domestication' of grassroots participation in the political reform process (e.g. Wakeford and Singh, 2008; Larsen *et al.*, 2010). Indeed, the recasting of roles and mandates under an evolving market socialism means that stakes are high for the individual citizen, government and the Communist Party – and for external partners who have bilateral bonds through trade and international politics. When embedding the GDD with preferred connotations, professionals discursively insert their agendas into the renovation reform.

The present reform politics are but the most recent efforts to regenerate the countryside and harness its productive forces. Vietnam has a long history of peasant rebellions under persistent tensions between an incompletely centralised authority (Confucian monarchy/colonial rulers) and rural leadership and the masses (Woodside, 1970, 1989; Marr, 2004). It is likely that this history has contributed to the Party's interpretations as a means of addressing the concerns of the rural populace when they respond with dissatisfaction to perceived failures of Party and state to govern. For the Party and parts of the state apparatus the promotion of grassroots democracy invariably serves to embellish the state and the national programme for rural development with increased legitimacy (Kerkvliet *et al.*, 2003; Vietnews, 2010). This positions the mainstreaming of

public participation as part of nurturing the larger political project of the state, without necessarily challenging its central assumptions and powers (Hickey and Mohan, 2005). Similarly, Gray (2003) argues that allowing increased space for non-state organisations in the 'science and technology' sector was a pragmatic decision by the Communist Party and Vietnamese government to scale back the bureaucracy in the hope of increased service delivery by NGOs. A similar 'paradigm shift' occurred in the catering for war invalids (Vasiljev, 2003).

In Fforde's (2011: 168) linguistic analysis of Vietnamese politics, he finds that 'common references to grassroots communities are better translated as references to the base of an apparatus'. These references emphasise the instrumental function of the 'grassroots' in the Party and state project. In this light, the GDD risks being subsumed as a formalistic modification within the vertical hierarchical model of governance, which has been practised in Vietnam for centuries (Marr, 2004). Other evidence has shown that within the decentralised state administration, different levels of sub-national administration can act as 'black boxes', with the result that even quite extensive participation at village level will lose its significance (Mekong Economics, 2006).

The reinvention of rural development is not only a national project but equally shaped by an active involvement of international actors, such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, bilateral trade partners, donors of development aid, international NGOs and corporate lobby groups (Kerkvliet *et al.*, 2003; Norlund *et al.*, 2003; Malesky, 2004; Miller, 2006; Engel, 2008;). International development donors have often deliberately aimed their interventions at improved governance within a liberal democratic model in order to achieve their specific goals (Fritzen, 2003). It should not be overlooked that the advocacy for deepening democracy by international organisations also reflects the tendency to seek a replacement of economic coercion with participatory processes as a 'dialogical method' intended to alter and control the terrain of debate with Vietnamese partners (Engel, 2008). As a case in point, it is interesting to note how international professionals has described informal rural groups as being inspired by INGOs, rather than as groups who organise and

initiate their own projects. One of the few existing studies into informal rural groups in Vietnam has in fact concluded that international donors until very recently have all but ignored these groups in their programmes (Fforde, 2008).

Conclusions

During the dynamic unfolding of political reform, Vietnam has experienced a radical transformation of the democratic spaces for professionals in rural development in the central and northern upland regions. The promulgation of grassroots democracy under the GDD represents one of the most heralded initiatives in this regard. Previous historical analyses have shown that it was expressions of dissatisfaction with the performance of Party and government from the rural populace in the late 1990s and early 2000s that led to the high-profile promotion of grassroots democracy and the GDD. In order to examine the practical implications of this policy change, the present paper has undertaken a discursive analysis of how professionals construct desired images of grassroots democracy, which match their respective interests.

In its current form, the promotion of grassroots democracy has come to serve as a conceptual mediator between diverging interests associated with rural development as well as between different ideological positions shrouding the notion of democracy itself. The three dominant discourses centre on their respective interests in liberalist democratisation, improved efficiency in state renovation and enhanced accountability in governing local policy ambiguities. In the Vietnamese negotiation culture, characterised by its Confucian heritage and a preference for consensus governance, the coexistence and exchange between contradictory views on the significance of grassroots democracy may support a peaceful and gradual improvement in rural development governance. This may also support a continued learning process between differing positions held by various local groups, party, government, newly emerging NGOs, businesses and international actors.

Yet, given the extent that the discourses of professionals are reflective of how they relate to grassroots aspirations and actions, it is worrying that professionals in international organisations and state administration generally prefer to

evoke ideologically founded discourses on democratisation and the political project of the nation state, which do not openly acknowledge grassroots empowerment as a priority. This suggests that the grassroots movements, which originally ushered the Party and central government to pass the GDD, have a significant struggle ahead of them to affect concrete changes in professionals' practices.

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