



# The role of civil society in urban environmental rehabilitation: a case study (Thanh Xuan district, Hanoi, Vietnam)

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1. World Bank (1999), *Strategic View of Urban and Local Government Issues: Implications for the Bank*, The World Bank, Washington DC.

**SUMMARY:** This paper presents the first results of research on a participatory approach to environmental rehabilitation in Thanh Xuan district in Hanoi, Vietnam, that is part of a larger research project that also included four other case studies. The researchers had two main objectives: first, to identify the civil society actors within a socialist, centralized regime where public participation is quite limited; and second, to assess the role of these actors in performing urban environmental management activities – planning and monitoring, urban environmental services delivery, and urban environmental conflict resolution. Findings from the Thanh Xuan case study suggest that members of the organizations that took part benefited from their participation in the areas of training, empowerment and capacity development. However, the benefits did not seem sustainable, as they were the outcome of international aid and support, and few mechanisms existed to ensure their continuation.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THERE IS A growing trend among international bilateral and multilateral agencies to promote public participation and to try and mobilize civil society organizations in urban environmental management. The World Bank plays a leading role in this global approach, which is sometimes identified as “the good urban governance approach”.<sup>(1)</sup>

In their understanding of this approach, all major international agencies refer to the principles put forward at the Rio de Janeiro conference in 1992, particularly those contained in Agenda 21. These principles pertain to the decentralization of responsibilities to local authorities, public participation at the lowest level, and partnerships between local authorities, the private sector and the community-based organizations. These principles are based on the assumption that there is an organized civil society at the local level and that there are a good number of actors and organizations able to act on their own and ready to partner local authorities. International programmes subscribing to these principles support capacity development at the local level and the empowerment of local actors.

Our research in Vietnam, carried out between 2001 and 2004, aimed to assess the role played by Vietnamese civil society organizations in real urban environmental management situations. We wanted to find out whether there were great differences between the kinds of civil society organizations that are familiar in the West and those that exist in Vietnam.

To do this, we decided to work on three different kinds of situations where civil society was mobilized: the planning and management of environmental infrastructure and services, the delivery of environmental services, and environmental conflict resolution. We conducted five case studies, three on urban environmental projects (road, water and waste) and two on community environmental rehabilitation programmes (in Thanh Xuan and Trieu Khuc districts). This paper presents only the results of the case study in Thanh Xuan district.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

THE PARADIGM OF sustainable development has produced new urban environmental management theories, most of which come under the umbrella concept of governance. Governance refers to a relationship between the state and civil society, which supports the development of local capacities, empowerment, decentralized management and initiatives. Urban civil society, in this context, is understood to include the private sector, community-based organizations (CBOs), associations and NGOs; it is assumed, within this paradigm, that these organizations do exist.<sup>(2)</sup>

The next step, if these organizations do exist, is to develop their capacities, empowering them by giving them recognition as potential partners. The aim is to support the development of efficient new local democratic institutions in order to reach a state of sustainable development in line with national objectives. The role of such local institutions is to mobilize beneficiaries and stakeholders through participatory processes and public consultations. It is assumed that CBOs are in the best position to assess needs, and thus to support a demand-led approach in the development of environmental infrastructure and services. CBOs are also seen as potential partners in managing infrastructure and services, especially where capacity and willingness to pay are concerned. They are also expected to play a major role in making choices that promote local knowledge, local resources and environmentally friendly technologies that respect local contexts, and to bring in new revenues through job creation.

In the centralized socialist regimes of Southeast Asia, public participation, as we understand it, is more than limited. Strong NGOs are considered a threat to the state. However, these regimes have created other organizations and mechanisms that mobilize the public in a formal way – organizations such as people's committees and such mass organizations as women's, veterans' and youth unions. (People's committees are executive bodies at national, city and provincial levels; members are appointed by people's councils, which are legislative and elected bodies.) The political and administrative cadres of these regimes say that these organizations fulfill the same function as western CBOs and NGOs, and that they are used efficiently. However, for Westerners, these Southeast Asian socialist institutions and mechanisms are unfamiliar and difficult to understand; they exist in a kind of black box. There are many reasons for this. It is difficult to obtain information about how they work because researchers in these countries do not take great care in documenting and assessing them. Nor do international NGOs rush to examine these organizations – they tend to be ignored. International aid organizations suspect them, doubt their credibility and independence, and push for their replacement with more western-flavoured CBOs by means of seminars and conferences, training, international tours and conditions attached to the aid they provide. Many

2. McCarney, Patricia (1996), "Reviving local government: the neglected tier in development" in McCarney, Patricia, *The Changing Nature of Local Government in Developing Countries*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, pages 5–30.

donors from abroad make their aid contingent on the creation of what they see as “real” NGOs, as an alternative to these existing national Vietnamese organizations.

In our research in Vietnam, we tried to identify local CBOs active in real situations, to see how they were mobilized and how they kept their distance from state ministries and agencies. We built a common analytical grid for our case studies according to the definition and hypotheses outlined below.

### III. DEFINITION

MOST RESEARCHERS WORKING with the concept of civil society would agree on the following explanation of the term: “*Civil society is a concept that tries to explain what binds people together in modern states in a civic life beyond their individual interests.*”<sup>(3)</sup>

Hadenius and Ugglä<sup>(4)</sup> propose that civil society organizations should have the following characteristics:

- a certain level of independence from the governmental sector;
- a leading role in mobilizing local associations;
- a capacity to represent people;
- a non-discriminatory working scheme, including partnerships with other sectoral organizations; and
- their own internal democratic rules.

This understanding, however, is not universal. Post and Rosenblum state that the concept of civil society is western, and that as such it might not work within traditional oriental philosophy.<sup>(5)</sup> Nosco comments:

“*Confucianism fundamentally distrusts such axiomatic propositions in European and North American political culture as the ‘rule of law’, instead preferring to foster a sense of self-worth that, it is assumed, will cause the individual to regard any misconduct as demeaning and shameful.*”<sup>(6)</sup>

Chris Hann criticizes the notion put forward by some western scholars and former Central European dissidents that there was no civil society in Central Europe during the communist period.<sup>(7)</sup> Hann asserts that scholars were mistaken in perceiving members of communist societies as isolated individuals, unable to form an authentic civil society. Hann and Dunn, in their joint works, ask for more open and inclusive definitions of civil society.<sup>(8)</sup>

Patricia McCarney defines in a more focused way what one might call urban civil society:

“*In response to the state incapacity to address these local problems, organizations in civil society have flourished. There are now organizations for squatter communities, tenants’ associations, savings and credit associations, area development committees, security committees, women’s associations and even independent research and management advisory bodies. They are engaging in self-help, and building social networks, mutual support groups and other forms of associational life in order to meet their needs for basic services.*”<sup>(9)</sup>

Informed by our literature review and by the need for a definition adapted to the context of the Vietnamese society and regime, we adopted the following definition: civil society is a public space between the state and the citizens, where public-interest projects are conducted and in which people and groups can participate in autonomous, organized and collective activities. We assumed that the Vietnamese civil society could include mass organizations, local associations, professional and commercial associations, minority groups, religious groups, traditional village organizations

3. White, Jenny B (1996), “Civic culture and Islam in urban Turkey” in Hann, Chris and Elizabeth Dunn, *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*, Routledge, London and New York, pages 144–154.

4. Hadenius, Axel and Frederik Ugglä (1998), “Modeler la société civile” in Bernard, Amanda, Henny Helmich and Percy B Lehning, *La société civile et le développement international*, Centre Nord-Sud and OECD, Paris, pages 47–61.

5. Post, R and N Rosenblum (2002), “Introduction” in Post, R and N Rosenblum, *Civil Society and Government*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, pages 1–25.

6. Nosco, P (2002), “Confucian perspectives on civil society and government” in Post and Rosenblum (2002), see reference 5, pages 334–359.

7. Hann, Chris (1996), “Introduction: political society and civil anthropology” in Hann and Dunn (1996), see reference 3, pages 1–26.

8. See reference 3, Hann and Dunn (1996).

9. See reference 2.

and local city organizations such as *To Dan Phos*. (A *To Dan Pho* is an informal organization, based on the traditional model of village organization. It is made up of residents of a street, a block, a building, and is not under Socialist Party organization. A *To Dan Pho* takes care of the problems of daily life in its area.)

## IV. HYPOTHESES

ALTHOUGH THE HADENIUS and Uggle definition may not be considered universally applicable, we found it to be a useful starting point for conducting the Vietnamese case studies and for comparing the civil society organizations in question to their counterparts in the West. The following five hypotheses, inspired by Hadenius and Uggle (although not limited to their definition), consist of a series of indicators that were used in assessing these organizations. They were all detailed in the case study analysis grid used by local researchers, who documented the case study through interviews, participant observations, project reports, analyses and questionnaires.

- The participation of civil society in urban environmental management, from the perspective of sustainable development and good governance, must be equal and just in representation. That is, all concerned people – individuals and groups – should be represented without discrimination. Civil society organizations representing people's interests should be able to: develop their own strategies; back representation on democratic mechanisms; work within the territories where actual problems occur and not be limited to territories imposed by administratively predefined limits; act free from political interference from the state; and be in a position, and have the means, to deal with a wide variety of social and economic problems, including those of minority groups and fragile populations.
- Civil society participation should be hands-on throughout all management processes. It should be involved in all planning and management phases, from preliminary assessment and feasibility studies, through definitions of alternatives, decision-making and construction, to operation, maintenance and monitoring.
- The actions of civil society organizations should be independent and should allow the development of greater autonomy for the actors involved. This depends on free and continuous access to information, the freedom to obtain information from neutral and external experts, and the capacity and means to produce and disseminate new information and freely manage material and financial resources.
- Civil society participation should provide benefits to the participants, such as training for members, and guarantees such as legal contracts and regulatory protection. Conditions should be set to allow the development of the representative, organizational and administrative capacities of involved groups and associations. They should get access to training in order to gain new expertise, both professional and administrative. They should be supported in extending their partnership networks and in finding new partners. They should in one way or another get legal and regulatory protection in order to guarantee sustainability of their participation. Access to political organizations and actors should be easy, free and friendly.
- Finally, sustainable participation in civil society is guaranteed only if it

gives the participants a chance to enhance their capacities to develop financial resources. They should be allowed to get external financial aid and should be free to raise funds by themselves. This can be achieved through, for example, creating jobs, managing their resources in order to raise new revenues, and obtaining credit and loans.

## V. THANH XUAN DISTRICT

THANH XUAN DISTRICT in Hanoi underwent a huge, integrated environmental rehabilitation programme in 1999, partly funded by DANIDA (the Danish International Development Agency). The programme focused on environmental infrastructure and services and adopted a strong participatory approach.

Thanh Xuan was built in the 1980s on a strict Soviet urban development plan. There were 63 high-density buildings organized into five groups (A, B, C, D and E), and people living in these buildings were grouped into 74 local residents' groups following the *To Dan Pho* model. Prior to rehabilitation, the roads and alleys had not been maintained and were severely damaged; there was severe flooding during the rainy season, and the streets and alleys were crowded with all sorts of informal and commercial activities.

At the time of the study, the district had a population of 23,000, in approximately 4,800 households. Mean distribution was approximately four persons per household, that is, two adults and two children. Ten per cent were single-person households, 14 per cent were one-generation families and 18 per cent were three-generation families. Close to 6,000 residents were under the age of 16 and 3,500 residents were aged 60 or more. Workers were mainly civil servants in large public companies and local administrations, and many were on the point of retiring. Unemployment was relatively high and many jobs were not permanent. Median income was around 400,000 VND per person per month (approximately US\$ 40). Participation in groups and union meetings was relatively low. Union membership was also relatively low, for example not more than 20 per cent among the young. All the local groups and associations were hierarchically related to the district, city, provincial and national levels of their organizations.

## VI. ENVIRONMENTAL REHABILITATION PROGRAMME

WATER IN THANH Xuan came from the Tu Liem water treatment plant. It was pumped into four large district reservoirs and then pumped again into individual reservoirs in residential buildings; many households might share a single reservoir. None of these facilities had been taken care of for years and water quality was considered poor.

Wastewater from Thanh Xuan went untreated into Me Tri Lake via three large collectors. These collectors had neither been maintained nor cleaned for years and were regularly blocked by solid waste. Septic tanks that had been installed when the district was constructed had never been drained.

The electricity distribution network was managed by the Dong Da district centre. The network was not safe; cables and lines were exposed, had been poorly repaired and had often been damaged by individuals in the course of making their own connections.

Waste collection was the responsibility of URENCO–Hanoi (Urban Environmental Company). For years, waste had been dumped on the streets, in designated areas where URENCO was supposed to collect it. URENCO did install waste tanks, but they were too small, not rust-resistant and there were too few of them. The residents got used to dumping waste in parks and public spaces, and street merchants also used parks and streets as dumping sites.

Because of the high densities, households had used backyards, public spaces and sidewalks to build extensions to their flats. Extensions were also being built onto the flats' existing balconies or onto balconies attached to the building's main structure. The original shape of many buildings had disappeared. Many flats had been sub-divided and now held more than one household. In some cases, one household had the kitchen, another the bathroom, and a third the balcony.

The district was quite well equipped with health centres, primary schools, a secondary school, two kindergartens and some technical schools. It had a police station (which shared the offices of the people's committee, behind the market), a supermarket, a cultural centre, a pool, tennis courts and many small neighbourhood parks.

The participatory approach adopted by the rehabilitation programme under the guidance of DANIDA was considered a first in Hanoi. It was intended to provide lessons and experience that could be exported to other districts. DANIDA staff worked with a team from the Hanoi Architectural University that had an office in the district, supporting the unions (mainly the women's union) that were in charge of training and capacity-building for their members. The unions published leaflets, held community meetings, kept their members informed and so on.

The programme was funded by DANIDA, by government ministries and from local development funds. Large district infrastructure projects, such as rebuilding roads, sewers and main electricity lines, were undertaken by public companies in the district. Many smaller projects, initiated by local groups such as the women's union and local resident groups (*To Dan Phos*), were also planned. These included cleaning and replacing water tanks, cleaning sewers, improving waste collection in streets and parks, planting trees, and cleaning and re-designing playgrounds and parks. A small project fund, managed separately, was set aside by DANIDA to support these local initiatives.

The programme's executing agency consisted of representatives from major state ministries and from the Thanh Xuan district people's committee, the people's committee of Hanoi, the women's union, and the Hanoi Architectural University. The programme had a management unit composed of representatives from the local people's council, the local people's committees (district and wards), the women's union and the youth union. This management unit had to back up the projects of the executing agency with regard to information, mobilization, education and training, and had quite extensive responsibilities in choosing, supervising and assessing the small-scale projects under the special fund put aside by DANIDA.

## VII. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

IN VIETNAM, THE National Fathers' Front is an organization which acts as a general umbrella for all other unions, and its local unit acted as the

umbrella for the programme in Thanh Xuan. It was composed of representatives from local unions and from the local cell of Party representatives. It supervised all activities and managed the special small-project fund. The local unit had an annual budget of 11 million dong (US\$ 1,100), and this amount was not increased to take into account its new responsibilities in the programme.

The women's union was the most active partner in the rehabilitation programme. The Thanh Xuan district women's union membership was 1,116. Its executing committee had 15 members, of whom the president, the vice-president and the three permanent elected members had five-year mandates. Of course, the local union was under the city, provincial and national levels of the union. Thus, the president was paid by the city of Hanoi (350,000 dong per year, or US\$ 35) and the vice-president was paid by the union at the national level, from membership fees. The local union was subsidized in its routine work by the district people's committee (10 million dong per year, or US\$ 1,000). For its special programmes and activities, the local union raised separate funds. Routine membership fees and funds raised for special activities amounted to 6,000 dong (US\$ 0.60) per registered member, of which the local union kept 40 per cent and the rest went to the higher levels. Women in Thanh Xuan also raised funds for special activities within the programme through a special contribution of 2,000 dong (US\$ 0.20) per member. In this case, the local union could keep up to 50 per cent of money raised, the rest going up the line.

The women of Thanh Xuan were satisfied with the work of their local union. Cadres were competent and devoted: they shared information and experiences, maintained good relations with other unions, kept the administrative costs of the local union low, and they organized frequent, regular meetings. However, they felt that they should get more money from the district.

The union participated in the waste collection projects, informing and mobilizing the residents, businesses and street merchants not to throw waste everywhere. Union members set up a waste bag distribution programme in commercial and residential areas, they initiated recycling projects and composting demonstration projects, and they organized regular public meetings on waste management. They also participated in environmental health improvement programmes, mainly through public posting. Finally, women organized and participated in collective projects for cleaning public spaces in residential areas.

The local youth union had 100 members, out of the 3,000 young people in the district. It was organized into 24 small cells in schools, and sent representatives to the local people's committee and to residents' groups. Each cell had its own executing committee, composed of three people, and the executing secretary acted as the representative to the district administration, the people's committee and the national level of the union. The local union executing committee was composed of nine people. It met once a week and organized social activities twice a week, and had to report on its activities every month to the local cell of the Party. The secretary and the vice-secretary were trained in regular, formal training sessions at higher levels of the youth union. The role of the local union was to educate young people in the area about the political and ideological lines of the Party, to mobilize them for the defence of the nation, and to help those young people with social and psychological problems. Participation was low, as it was limited by school activities. The district subsidy to the local union was also low.

In the rehabilitation programme, the local youth union worked mainly under the direction of the local women's union in its collective campaign for environmental health and waste bag distribution. On its own, it also cleaned graffiti and posters from public spaces, collected needles in the parks, took steps to protect trees against pests, and installed garbage cans in public areas.

Thanh Xuan Aged Association was one of the biggest local unions, with more than 1,400 members, organized into 51 smaller groups and five cells. Of the 1,400 members, 625 were registered members of the Communist Party, 198 were retired military cadres and 2 were members of the central commission of the Party. They were mainly high-level civil servants and 27 per cent were high-level employees of central organizations in local and district government. Three hundred had a university degree. The union, its executing committee and the cells met regularly every month to plan upcoming activities and to assess past ones. The union's sole source of income was membership fees – 12,000 dongs per year (US\$ 1.20) per registered member. The local people's committee added 5–8 million dongs per year (US\$ 500–800) for the union's special activities. The union owned, and got revenue from, a house and a meeting hall. The union said it needed 60 million dongs a year (US\$ 6,000) to conduct its normal activities, which included supporting old people with difficulties, integrating old people into the community, mobilizing voters for elections, combating social problems, and organizing sports activities and health campaigns for the aged. Projects and actions by the local union were highly valued in the community. In the rehabilitation programme, the union mainly supported the activities and initiatives of the local women's union.

The Vietnamese Red Cross, seen as a humanitarian association, also had a local unit in Thanh Xuan. It had 300 members, many fewer than in previous years, and the numbers were falling. In cooperation with local health centres, it mainly concentrated on public health issues. However, this work was slowly being taken over by the women's union. Its financial resources came from membership fees – 6,000 dongs (US\$ 0.60) per year per registered member – and an annual 5 million dong subsidy (US\$ 500) from the local people's committee. Funds raised by the local Red Cross for humanitarian activities all went to the provincial and national levels of the Red Cross. Its special humanitarian activities were decided on and subsidized by the people's committee. The association's situation was considered difficult and not sustainable; its role in the rehabilitation programme was marginal, confined to such health concerns as drug problems, contraception and senior citizen health issues, and it worked mainly under the initiative of the women's union.

The veterans' union had 300 registered members. Most of its activities were closely linked to national security and national defence, and it was responsible for mobilizing young people for these objectives. On the environmental front, it decided on whether construction was legal, and monitored illegal actions affecting public properties, including illegal dumping of waste. Its role in the programme was more or less that of an environmental police force.

## VIII. DISCUSSION

THE FIVE HYPOTHESES may now be discussed as they apply to the Thanh Xuan case study results.

**Participation of civil society in urban environmental management (representation, equity, autonomy).** Only traditional and well-recognized unions participated in this programme. However, their usual actions and ways of doing things may have changed in the context of the project. The programme took them outside their traditional fields of political mobilization and humanitarian aid, and gave them expertise in the management of basic urban environmental infrastructure and services. They had to face actual environmental problems in their local community. They designed solutions, built action projects and implemented them. In this role, quite new to them, they positioned themselves between the residents, the local authorities and the technical and administrative services.

Are the impacts of this programme on existing civil society organizations sustainable? We doubt it. The unions did not fundamentally change; they remained solidly controlled by the upper levels, strongly subordinated to the people's committee. Chances are that they would return to the old patterns of passivity and subordination to initiatives coming from above once the programme ended.

Coordination between unions, necessary during the programme, was likely to stop as it is not supported by the authorities. These unions belonged to strong vertical organizations, each one having sectoral responsibilities and delimited territories. The Fathers' National Front and the Party would likely continue to have strict control over all of them, as horizontal links and coordination were not in their programme.

Finally, the development and the very existence of these unions might come to be questioned. As the country's economy improves, bringing with it improvements in standards of living, households are now acquiring resources to pay for services that were formerly offered by the unions on a humanitarian basis. Above all, by avoiding a reliance on union services, households could free themselves from the unions' political and ideological control.

There is a strong probability that the waning role of these unions may leave a void in Vietnamese civil society, as there are no intervening social structures between the existing unions and the households.

**Civil society participation for real in management processes.** In the programme's small initiatives, participants developed the capacity to manage projects from conception through to monitoring. They participated in the implementation of these projects, learning how to ask for specialized technical services and how to supervise the work being undertaken.

Their participation, however, was mainly in small sectoral projects. They did not have occasion to participate in any full strategic and integrated urban environmental programmes on the scale of a whole district.

**The development of more autonomy for civil society organizations.** Unions and groups participating in this rehabilitation programme initiated small projects and acted with relative autonomy. They did their own planning and programming, and either did the work themselves or supervised it. They regularly organized public meetings to inform residents. They had easy access to experts, with the Hanoi Architectural University having a permanent office in the district during the programme. Women and young people appeared on TV and radio to explain what they were doing, and published a monthly leaflet.

**Benefits for civil society organizations participating in the programme.** The unions themselves managed the budgets allocated to small projects. They developed the capacity to organize and hold working groups, meetings and roundtables. They had easy access to foreign infor-

mation about similar programmes and to all information about this programme. They produced their own information, having access to editing and printing services, the costs of which were reimbursed.

Partnering and sharing information with foreign NGOs had been planned but was actually limited, due to language difficulties and difficulties in using new communication technologies.

Participants in the programme developed expertise in urban environmental management, in sorting and recycling waste, composting organic waste, installing solar panels and using solar energy for water heating.

City technical services, heavy equipment and machinery brought into the district for work on water, sanitation and electricity infrastructure became a common sight in the district for a long time. Participants became well versed in the logistics of heavy works and in techniques used to repair basic infrastructure. They learned what was necessary to maintain the infrastructure and, importantly, who to report damages and failures to. The technical services and experts were expected to assist in this, by writing and disseminating easy-to-read brochures and leaflets about maintaining basic infrastructure, and by giving information kits to the unions.

**Increased financial resources.** Unions participating in the programme did not get additional financial resources for their participation. Budgets for small projects were tightly controlled and were relatively small. Unions could not allocate funds as they would have wished. Small projects did not create new permanent jobs. Additional staff were almost exclusively imported from the district, the city and the large public companies.

New financial resources came essentially from the Danish International Development Agency, DANIDA. These funds were relatively limited, as they were for small projects (such as street cleaning, park cleaning, and tree planting), and will not last after the closure of the Danish aid programme for Thanh Xuan.

At the end of the programme, the professionals and experts will have left, and the Danish aid programme will have ended. The unions will continue to lack resources and technical and administrative support. Thus, links built between themselves, other local communities and international NGOs are weak and not sustainable.

The Thanh Xuan project resulted in a good deal of learning and some changes in practice over the period of its implementation. But as noted above, we doubt whether its impacts on civil society will be sustained. The unions had no chance to augment their revenues in sustainable ways that would allow them to become independent of DANIDA's aid.

## IX. FINDINGS DRAWN FROM THE LARGER PROJECT

THIS PAPER HAS focused specifically on the Thanh Xuan rehabilitation project. However, the other four case studies, soon to be written up, have also yielded interesting insights and provide a wider perspective on issues relating to the role of civil society in urban environmental management in Vietnam.

According to our definition, there is a public space between the state and the people in Vietnam in the field of urban environmental management. Essentially, this public space is filled by large, recognized unions and local groups of residents (*To Dan Phos*). The unions are well known and their role is well documented, but we know very little about the *To Dan*

*Phos* except that they represent households, they are not necessarily organized by the Party, and participation in them is voluntary and based on place of residence.

People's councils and committees and local units of the Party cannot be considered civil society organizations, as they represent the state and the single political party organization.

Unions and groups do not represent all members of the local communities; unions, participation in which is voluntary, count for no more than 20 per cent of potential members. For example, they do not represent illegal residents, workers in the informal sector, or small street merchants. (Instead, they try to police them.) Most of the elected representatives of these unions and groups have to be named by the Party or the people's committee, giving a strong bias for participation to persons who are close to the Party. We did not find any religious group, any representative of the folk industry, any representative of minority groups, or any NGO – according to its western meaning – involved in the participatory processes under study.

Unions and groups are quite active in informing the population and in mobilizing volunteers to conduct local initiatives. They hold public meetings, although participation is mostly limited to their own members. They produce and disseminate information on their own, with permission from the people's committee, but on the whole their actions are limited to specific fields and they rarely work together in partnership.

Public participation is not systematically organized. Local authorities get information on projects at the very last minute, just before implementation. Public participation comes afterwards, mainly to ease implementation. Unions act mainly as transmission lines for the Party and the people's committees. Exceptions were encountered in the programme's small projects where, for example, the women's union, apparently the most active of the unions, played a leading role. However, the projects were considered as experiments in participatory planning and were also strongly supported by an external agency. It is likely that new capacities developed through these projects will not be sustained after the programme is completed and union members have returned to their normal activities.

We did not see any civil society organization participating in environmental impact assessments. Civil society organizations were not involved in the planning, design, implementation, operation or maintenance of the larger technical projects. We did not see any mechanism for environmental conflict resolution, nor for hearing and treating grievances. This programme (including the small projects) has not left behind any new institutional organization that could last, reproduce experiences or share acquired new capacities.

Actors and organizations participating in the programme did not have full and easy access to all available information, except for the small projects, which could rely on experts from the Hanoi Architectural University. Links with foreign NGOs were planned, but they did not really work out because of the lack of means, the lack of capacity to use the new communication technologies and because of language problems. Participants did not get any new or special funds; they had to rely on their existing resources. The programme did not give access to new and permanent jobs in the community. The small projects have not allowed local organizations and groups to start new revenue-raising activities.

The Party and the people's committees' networks are tightly knit. Unions and groups are continuously overlooked; their action plans have to be approved, and a good part of the funds they raise goes back up along the

vertical line. And there are not that many unions and groups in the public space – no more than two to four – each one with a specific mission, and none encouraged to partner with others. However, they represent great potential, as they can be rapidly mobilized, their cadres are considered competent, honest and devoted, and they have experience in informing the public and in raising funds for humanitarian causes.

Still, there are whole parts of civil society that are not included, for example, all of the informal sector, all of the small merchants, a good number of small private industries and services, and a growing number of young people. They also represent great potential, but their participation in urban environmental management is not possible for the moment.

In short, findings from the larger study show that organizations of civil society in Vietnam have not yet found their place in urban environmental governance; their win-win participation in urban environmental management projects still depends on foreign aid. Although existing organizations and unions in Vietnam have responded effectively to externally supported projects, mobilizing their members and acquiring new practical capacities, the potential for sustaining these benefits appears to be limited. Lack of full representation, strong hierarchical structures of control, and an absence of mechanisms to ensure the continuation of new practices suggest that the participating unions do not in fact have enough autonomy for partnering fully with local authorities in implementing the objectives of “good urban governance”. But these organizations and unions have great potential; their leaders are competent, they are close to the people, can rapidly mobilize their members, raise funds by themselves, and provide local, small-scale solutions to urban daily-life problems.