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WHAT ROLE CAN LOCAL NGOS PLAY TO SUPPORT GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY IN VIETNAM?

THE EXAMPLE OF THE VIETNAMESE NGO CRP



Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum in Hanoi

Field study on local democracy and civil society in Vietnam

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1. Introduction: Content and research questions

a. Summary

Vietnam develops strongly in economic terms but much less so democratically. Thus, the issues of this study, civil society and local-level democracy still play a relatively small but increasing role in this Southeast Asian country. It is important to consider that the Western ideas of civil society and democracy are not identical with those we find in Vietnam. The Communist central government and the big importance of Confucian values influence the values of social life. If we take this into account, we can seriously speak of progress in Vietnam. But still there are considerable deficits in both fields. Whereas the big mass organisations still have an enormous impact, real NGOs are rare and restricted in their action by the state. However, NGOs have more freedoms than before.

NGOs moreover are key actors in terms of democratisation. By cooperating with the state as well as the local population they serve as a medium for both. They are seen as useful service providers and help to introduce government policies. The same legal bases on civil society organisations as well as on grassroots democracy allow NGOs to implement successfully efforts for more democracy. NGOs are mostly seen as more effective than government bodies by the people.

Despite some progress of grassroots democracy – also due to the work of civil society groups – strong improvements in the general state of democracy will have to follow in the next decades. Still, there are several approaches for criticism. However, the Vietnamese government respects the desires of the people and implements policies according to these general wishes. The policies admitting more opportunities for participation on the local level can be seen as one example for the government's desire to be perceived as a representative of the people.

The successful implementation of the decrees on grassroots democracy is very often hindered by remaining old structures and the unwillingness of local politicians. Theory and reality differ considerably in this case. However, local NGOs seem to be able to improve the implementation and to be key actors for grassroots democracy in Vietnam. Civil society and democracy are two variables depending on each other.

b. Background of this paper

This study analyses civil society and grassroots democracy in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Although these issues might also be addressed separately, there are good reasons to have a look at them in connection. This particularly makes sense for the case of Vietnam as here both civil society and local-level democracy are based on the same legal bases and are two variables influencing each other.

Vietnam still is one of the poorest countries in the world. Yet, the country has expanded heavily in economic terms since the policies of economic opening in 1986. In the field of democratisation, however, only little and very slow progress has been achieved yet. I found it very interesting to see which progress is made in this field in a country concentrating in economic development and through which measures. The Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) as a political foundation involved in development assistance seemed to be an appropriate organisation as the issues of my interest are among the topics on their agenda in Vietnam. More information on the KAS can be found in the annex.

The KAS does not implement projects directly in Vietnam but supports and cooperates with local Vietnamese partners. One of the major advantages that is approved in nearly every conversation definitely is the fact that Vietnamese actors are much better aware of the local customs, know the language and thus are much easier accepted by the affected people. Concerning the topic of local democracy, one of the KAS' partners is the Center for Rural Progress (CRP). I therefore had a special focus on this local NGO and their current project on the island of Cat Ba.

The goals of the NGO as well as of the project will be presented in more detail in following sections of this paper.

c. Civil society and grassroots democracy

As just mentioned, the two central topics treated in this paper are civil society and grassroots democracy. In this section I want to clarify what these notions mean in the context of this paper.

Civil society is the sphere between the individual or the household and the state that is organised and acts freely and independently. It includes political, economic, cultural and

moral resources that check and balance the power of the state. Norlund (2007) defines civil society as an “area outside the family, the state and the market where people associate to advance common interests”. Larry Diamond alludes that civil society organisations can give the poor and disadvantaged population a voice (Rantala, 2002).

For this research paper, particularly civil society organisations in Vietnam are relevant. I will speak both of civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) without further distinguishing them. As shall be seen in the following chapters, a classification is very difficult for the case of Vietnam as most organisations cannot seriously be regarded as *non*-governmental.

Civil society and democracy are deeply interconnected. The following statement underlines the importance of civil society for democracy:

“One idea widely supported among donors and some academic scholars today is that supporting civil society in authoritarian countries is fruitful for democratisation” (Brodin, 2000).

This paper will centrally focus in the aspect of democratisation, i.e. the process, as Vietnam is slowly going through this process whereas the state of democracy is not (yet) given. As the term ‘democracy’ is very broad and is connected to cultural and ideological circumstances, I will primarily focus on the aspect of participation and will generally analyse the local level. In this area by far the greatest processes of democratisation in Vietnam take place. I adopted the term ‘grassroots democracy’ that is also used in the government decrees and refers to democratic changes on the lowest levels including the influence of people and groups here.

d. Research questions

The central research question of this paper is: ‘What role can local NGOs play to support democracy on the local level in Vietnam?’ In order to answer this question, I will answer several sub-questions related to the topics civil society and grassroots democracy in different paragraphs. In my research, I will particularly focus on the Center of Rural Progress (CRP), a Vietnamese partner NGO of the KAS and its project in Cat Hai district. Thus, some parts will be general and others will focus on the CRP and the project.

In the following section, I will focus on the Vietnamese civil society and the CRP as a part of it. This section shall answer the questions what civil society looks like in Vietnam and how the CRP as an example of it and as a central subject of study works.

The third section will specifically deal with the project in Cat Hai district. It shall be shown how the CRP works in the field of grassroots democracy.

After this specific view on the CRP and the project, I will put these findings into a broader context. In the fourth paragraph, I will analyse which preconditions for grassroots democracy are given and what role the Vietnamese state plays in this context. I will examine what opportunities CSOs have or what challenges they face and how the role of the state and the Communist party change.

Subsequently to the analysis of NGOs' work on grassroots democracy, I will have a look on the current state of local-level democracy in Vietnam. Here, the Vietnamese conception of democracy shall be examined. I also will try to assess the current state of democracy.

In a final analytical section, I will come back to the CRP and try to assess their work on political empowerment and grassroots democracy. I will particularly focus on the evaluation by the affected population and their interests. After that, I will recap my findings in the conclusion and answer my central research question.

e. Methodology

In order to get information for this paper, several methodologies have been used.

By far the biggest part of sources is literature sources. These are used especially for the more general parts on civil society and democracy. For the more specific sections on the CRP and its project in Cat Hai district I used data provided by the KAS and interviews. Interviews were held in English or German. I formulated questions in a manner that the interviewees had the opportunity to give open answers. As I visited the project in Cat Hai district once and took part in a seminar, I got an insight how the CRP's work actually looks like. Thus, observation is another tool used for this paper.

2. Vietnamese civil society and the CRP

The two central topics of my research are civil society and democracy. They must always be seen as interconnected. In this first paragraph of analysis I want to concentrate on the aspect of civil society. I will thus analyse the civil society in Vietnam and the Center for Rural Progress (CRP) as one part of it.

In this section, first of all an overview about civil society and NGOs in Vietnam shall be given. This part will contain information that will be treated in more detail in further paragraphs of this study but that are relevant as first insights. I will then present the NGO my main focus is on in my research: the CRP. Central questions to be answered in this section shall be: What does civil society look like in Vietnam? What kind of NGO is the CRP and how – also in comparison with other actors – does it work?

a. Civil society, NGOs and their work in Vietnam

Vietnam is a one-party state. This means the notion of civil society and its implications for the political system in Vietnam have to be assessed differently from these standards. Whereas civil society implies, according to Western theory, groups acting autonomous from the state serving as a fertiliser for democratic values and behaviour including different opposing points of view, this does not hold for Vietnam (Dalton et al., 2003). Vietnam claims to have its own conception of civil society.

Although Vietnam has an outrageous percentage of the population being members of social organisations, this is particularly a consequence of the predominant role of mass organisations close to the Communist Party whose membership is encouraged by the government. Mass organisations such as the Farmers' Union, the Women's Union, the Youth's Union, the Patriotic or Fatherland Front, and others fulfil tasks of lobbying and political education (DED, 2005). They should be considered as civil society organisations, yet are not autonomous NGOs but rather some sort of quasi non-governmental organisations ('QUANGOs'). Membership in mass organisations can be characterised by a low degree of activism.

In general, the conditions for setting up and maintaining organisations are not enabling in Vietnam. Civil society organisations mostly lack financial resources, "basic freedoms, such as the freedom of expression, are limited and international sources rate Vietnam's

press freedoms as very low” (Norlund et al., 2006). Laws for establishing an organisation are complicated and restrictive and advocacy activities are not encouraged. Any organisation has to be established under a state-owned umbrella organisation (ibid).

Similarly, the ‘civil society diamond’ for Vietnam visualising four dimensions of civil society, shows quite disappointing results. Whereas on the values dimension, Vietnamese civil society scores at an average level, it is assessed to work in a slightly disabling environment and has a structure of rather poor average strength. Particularly negative is its impact on society at a large (ibid.).

Even though social organisations in Vietnam are not independent from the state, membership is not always based on voluntariness and thus civil society differs from the Western conception, steps are made into the direction of increasing autonomy. Firstly, the big mass organisations expand on the grassroots level where they engage in social activities.

Secondly, there are professional organisations, Vietnamese NGOs, community based organisations and other groups emerging in Vietnam that are active in a variety of sectors. Many are concerned with development issues and providing services to poor and disadvantaged people. Even more than mass organisations, especially small community-based groups intend to fill the gap that came up after the retirement of the state in social affairs (Frehner, 2006). Yet, a lack of strategy and overall organisation hinders an effective acting of these groups (Norlund, 2007).

According to Dalton and Ong (2003), a differentiation should be made between the two groups of civil society organisations. Whereas high membership in mass organisations is not seen as a basis for the emerging of autonomous social groups, the authors consider sports and cultural groups to be of greater importance. These associations moreover have a considerable number of members. Probably even more interesting is the role of religious and environmental groups. Their number of members is low, but their nature and activities might be most autonomous or even state-challenging. However, also within the state-close organisations there is growing interest in diversity and increasing democracy (Norlund et al., 2006)

While taking a look at the general development of civil society organisations in Vietnam, it can be stated that the predominant role of the mass organisations slowly declines whereas local-self-help groups and pre-stages of Western-type associations have emerged in the last years. (Frehner, 2005).

These might be positive aspects concerning civil society in Vietnam. However, it shall be considered that the government still controls and restrains civil society insofar that movements intending to effect a political change are exceedingly unlikely to be successful.

The finding that social trust is lowest among members of groups not supportive of the state whereas theory assumes that social trust is increased through social group membership gives us a hint that in the single-party state Vietnam, autonomous, perhaps opponent groups, fear consequences of their acting.

Nevertheless, the overall situation for acting as a civil society group in Vietnam has improved in the last years. The first Grassroots Democracy Decree of 1998 was an important milestone giving small local groups the opportunity for political participation. The importance and the effect of the decree on grassroots democracy shall be analysed more in depth in the following chapters of this study.

The Vietnamese government is incrementally accepting civil society actors, though not yet completely, as partners in implementing policies, especially concerning development issues. It is accepted that CSOs can reach the grassroots level much better than do centrally implemented programmes. Even CSOs, however often are not able to reach remote ethnic minorities in the mountains either (Norlund et al., 2006).

A particular type of civil society organisations are NGOs. Though a distinction between NGOs and other organisations is not always straightforward, I want to concentrate on this type of actor predominantly in my research, as the CRP can quite clearly be characterised as an NGO. At least, the CRP is neither a small local self-help group nor a mass organisation.

Because of financial constraints, Vietnamese NGOs often cooperate with international NGOs. Mostly, local NGOs have developed as small groups of professionals and work for the government or donors. As the term 'non-governmental organisation' is unknown and misleading in Vietnam, the organisations often call themselves 'social development organisations' (PRSP, 2000).

Due to Vietnam's openness to the outside world, international NGOs are able to work and support their Vietnamese counterparts. The partnership approach has proved to be successful in Vietnam as in other parts of the developing world. The local root of local NGOs is an advantage of considerable importance concerning the successful implementation of activities. Local groups are much better aware of culture and customs and are much more likely to be considered as 'insiders', whereas direct

implementation of projects by Western NGOs might undermine existing structures such as the traditionally autonomous and self-organised structures in the villages (Mutz, 2003).

Yet, there are also foreign NGOs that directly implement projects, for example the 'Deutsche Entwicklungsdienst' (DED). Additionally, the DED supports the Fatherland Front with the implementation of the Grassroots Democracy Ordinance. Main activities in this context are the conducting of workshops and the provision of information and material (DED Flyer).

Also the DED as a foreign NGO that directly implements projects considers local NGOs to be indispensable for development in all its broadness. Their strong connection to those in power and the fact that current NGO members have made careers in the state administration is an enormous advantage. However, only few Vietnamese NGOs can survive without external financial support (Interview Heinzelmann). This view is approved by many sides and the partnership of foreign donors and local implementing organisations might be the most sustainable approach (Interview Diem).

A central task for local NGOs in Vietnam is the empowerment of the population. This means they try to inform the people of their rights, give them a voice for their interests and intend to have them participate (Frehner, 2006).

Although the absolute number of more or less autonomous NGOs – varying according to the respective assessment – is still limited in Vietnam, both number and diversity are increasing. Also, civil society gains impact through increased participation in participatory assessments and public discussions in the press. The impact of civil society groups is considered biggest as concerns the empowerment of citizens. This can be achieved through information, education, empowering women and supporting people's livelihoods (Norlund, 2007). This is important so far regarding the impact of NGOs on democracy.

b. The CRP

The NGO that I put the focus on in my research is the Center for Rural Progress (CRP). In this paragraph, I intend to show what the nature, work, projects, methods and intentions of this organisation are.

The CRP has been founded as an NGO under the umbrella organisation VACVINA, the state-owned Vietnamese Gardener Association, in April 1994. As the independent formation of NGOs is not possible as no corresponding legal basis exists, the CRP had to address an application to VACVINA. As most Vietnamese NGOs, in terms of resources, i.e. finances, organisation and leadership, the CRP works independently, yet it is not autonomous in legal terms (Interview Long).

Initially, the CRP founded as a formation of scientists researching on rural development issues for clients that needed information on this topic. The activities of the CRP changed depending on its donors. In its beginnings, the NGO was concerned with the development of farmers' cooperatives and the improvement of livelihoods through grassroots initiatives. The CRP has always been financed by the KAS, though the focus of financing changed towards political development in the last years. 'Good governance' in a broader sense is now one of the CRP's key topics. Apart from this, environmental protection is a third fundamental intention particularly in the project in Cat Hai district. In order to sustain the support of the CRP's work in rural development, the German Cooperative and Raiffeisen Confederation (DGRV) joined as a partner of the CRP.

Today, the KAS and the DGRV are the most important donors of the CRP and its resources increased strongly since the KAS has been supporting the NGO in 1997. The cooperation of KAS and CRP intends the institutional support for a member of civil society on the one hand and the actual support to CRP's activities in developing model projects on the other (KAS 1).

The CRP today seeks to establish a link between community-based initiatives, quality research and public policy. As a team of highly educated economists, it encourages grassroots initiatives and considers its understanding of the local culture as an important advantage. In the following, the five main forms of activities of the CRP are listed:

- I. Model socio-economic development projects in rural areas
- II. Community-based rural research addressing development issues
- III. A vast network of consultants providing research and project expertise to international agencies
- IV. Management Training Program designed for co-operative managers and rural entrepreneurs
- V. Public policy initiatives based on CRP's research and project results

(KAS 2)

Concerning the issue of 'good governance' the CRP primarily intends to connect and establish trust between the local population and the state. This aspect shall be elaborated in more detail in the following paragraphs.

In its activities, the CRP is keen on interfering as little as possible in state affairs. Whereas in former times, the state has been suspicious towards NGOs, both international NGOs and Vietnamese partners supported by them, the government now appreciates the benefits of NGOs and co-operations between NGOs. This paradigm shift of the government towards acceptance and trust in NGOs has improved the working conditions for organisations such as the CRP. The centre now has fewer restrictions in what it says and accomplishes.

As the KAS is currently declining the financial support for the CRP incrementally and the organisation has to look for new partners, there are even thoughts that the centre might be financially supported by government resources. This reflects well the increasingly supportive role of the Vietnamese government towards NGOs.

It also shows that the focuses of Vietnamese NGOs might change with different partners and that financing is a crucial problem. Although the CRP states that it will stick to its goals and not shift its focus dramatically, it is obvious that the actual work is influenced by the interests of its donors.

Yet, whoever the donor is, local NGOs have the great advantage to be closer to the target population than any international donor can be. At least in the context of the CRP, the dependence is a mutual one (KAS 3; Interview Long).

Today, the CRP can be seen as an important player in the Vietnamese civil society as it assists, besides the implementation of projects, the public and private sector in policy formulation and the design of "comprehensive development plans and strategies" (KAS 4).

3. The project in Cat Hai district

The following section presents the CRP's project in Cat Hai district supported by the KAS. There will first be an overview of the district and second a presentation of the overall project. The most important part in this paragraph is point 'c.' in which the CRP's efforts on supporting grassroots democracy in the framework of this project shall be presented. The main question for this sequence is therefore: How does the CRP support grassroots democracy in the Cat Hai district project?

a. Cat Hai district

Cat Hai District administratively belongs to the city of Hai Phong that is located about 100 kilometres east of Hanoi. Hai Phong is one of the large Vietnamese cities with provincial-level status. Cat Hai District is located sixty kilometres south-east of the city centre of Hai Phong and is composed of two big islands, Cat Ba Island (315 square kilometres) and Cat Hai Island (30 square kilometres). Apart from that, there are about 350 small, mostly uninhabited islands. Cat Hai District is surrounded by the UNESCO World Heritage Ha Long Bay to the north-east, and the South China Sea in the east and south.

Big areas of the district are unpopulated and the overall population is about 30,000 living in two towns and ten villages. The main sources of income in the district are fishing-related activities such as wild capture, aquaculture and mariculture, and sea product processing. Apart from that, tourism presents the other important economic activity that is moreover heavily expanding in this area. Whereas in general, the district is relatively poor, only the town of Cat Ba being a bit wealthier, tourism presents an opportunity for increased wealth of the district (Rösner, 2005).

In many respects, the district is typical of Vietnam: Rapid economic growth in the recent years, uncertainty of the future due to limitations in local planning, weak governance capacity, weak capacity of business management and lack of cooperation between government and business. At the same time, as in other coastal areas of Vietnam, good governance and business development as key components may lead to sustainable growth and job creation and can reduce poverty.

In this respect, the district’s master plan estimates an increase in local GDP from present US\$ 476 to US\$ 5,778 in 2020 and annual growth rates between 14.5 and 18 per cent. This goes along with a shift among the economic sectors, particularly a decrease in the agricultural sector and an increase in the already eminent service sector (KAS 4). The following graphic clarifies this expected shift:

	Vietnam	Cat Hai District	CHD	CHD
	2004	2004	2010	2020
Agriculture	21,8 %	28,7 %	23,4 %	15,7 %
Industry	40,1 %	11,6 %	12,5 %	11,8 %
Services	38,1 %	59,7 %	64,1 %	72,5 %

Development of economic sectors: own graphic

In April 2005, the Cat Ba archipelago of Cat Hai District has received a UNESCO title as a World Biosphere Reserve due to its wide variety of ecologies. Among these are mangrove forests, tropical rain forests, coral reefs, caves, and beaches (KAS 8; KAS 12).

In political terms, the district includes three components: The Party Committee, the People’s Committee and the People’s Council. The Party Committee is composed of selected National Party representatives responsible for setting the district’s policy agenda and ensuring the agenda is aligned with national policy goals and directions. The Peoples Committee (‘cabinet’) is responsible for implementing the district policy agenda, and as such controls the 17 offices and divisions of the district government. The People’s Council (‘congress’) is composed of publicly elected representatives. The Council discusses the district policy agenda and implementation, and is the group from and by which the members of the Peoples Committee are selected.

One of the main challenges for Cat Hai’s future will be the fight against unemployment. The workforce is estimated to increase up to 15,000 by 2010 and thus the expansion of existing industries and the development of new industries will be necessary. Definitely, the booming tourism sector mentioned above will be able to cushion the big supply of labour force at least to some extent. Yet, this may lead to the increase of another

problem: The growing environmental degradation (CRP 2). Policies in the future will predominantly have to take into account the conflict between increasing tourism and environmental protection (Rösner, 2005).

b. The project

The project in the Cat Hai District implemented by the CRP and supported by the KAS is called 'Cat Hai Participatory Community Development Project'. Its overall objectives are poverty reduction and democratic development of Cat Hai as a model project for rural coastal areas. Another formulation is to "strengthen Cat Hai community's ability to self-determine and control future development paths through participatory approaches inclusive of all community sectors" (CRP 1). Thus, sustainable poverty reduction shall be achieved through fostering a combination of economic development and political participation.

Apart from the overall objective, the four specific objectives are listed in the following:

- I. To improve capacity of local government in participatory planning and decision-making
- II. To strengthen capacity of local businesses to provide better quality services and products
- III. To strengthen capacity of local households to conduct profitable enterprises
- IV. To establish an active partnership between local authorities, businesses and household enterprises

(KAS 5)

Former activities of the CRP, supported by the KAS, have been the rehabilitation of traditional orange species in Gia Luan commune, a community-based Coastal Resource Management Project in Phu Long (KAS 13) as well as a programme on coastal resources management (KAS 8).

Whereas initially the project was of pre-political nature, that means the CRP together with the KAS conducted initiatives against dynamite fishing and other projects of environmental protection, today the focus has shifted to other issues, among these is 'grassroots democracy'.

Today, general principles of the project are the promotion of the potentials of the district, a focus on sustainable development rather than rapid growth, equity, and decentralisation. Furthermore, the work of the CRP is intended to be closely related to the corresponding population. It is oriented on the needs of the people who are deeply involved in a bottom-up approach (KAS 6).

The whole project is separated into several topic-related sectors. In the sector 'community-based coastal resource management', for instance, the improved protection of natural resources and the achievement of higher awareness of local people for sustainable development are intended. 'Capacity building for local authority' implies – among others – giving training courses on governance and law, land law and natural resource protection, legal framework on environmental protection, coastal resource protection, and governance skills.

Cat Hai District project might even be or become a role model for whole Vietnam as, due to its economic importance, the project raises awareness from province and central government. This exemplary position is even expanded because of Ha Long Bay's character as World Cultural Heritage. However, exactly this fact might present a danger to the self-determination of the local population. The nation-wide importance of the district might decline the people's ability to decide and participate in local decisions (Rösner, 2005).

As can be seen, the CRP's project in Cat Hai District includes a variety of approaches and measures. Not at least due to the support of the KAS, the project included more and more political issues. Today, the three goals poverty reduction, environmental protection and political education have to be supported simultaneously and require each other (Rösner, 2005). Despite this interconnection, the support of good governance and democracy is among the most important ones and shall be analysed in the following section.

c. CRP's action on grassroots democracy

Promoting democracy in a single-party system such as Vietnam is a sensitive issue as the borders of what is permitted and what has to be avoided must be strictly adhered to. The CRP is just in this position and applies its work where changes are best feasible by addressing the local population. Whereas the Vietnamese government controls that no organisation works against its own predominant position in society, there are some appendages allowing and even encouraging limited extents on grassroots democracy (Rösner, 2005). The accordant legal bases shall be analysed in further sections. Before that, I want to present the CRP's work in this field.

In a common application with the KAS for the support of project sent to the European Union, it was stated that democratisation on the local level shall be achieved through the implementation of participatory development planning, strengthening democratic rights of the people through grassroots democracy programmes, as well as through a people-oriented administration (KAS 7). Concerning the aspect 'Participatory Community Development', which is also the name of the whole project, the CRP states the following in its annual report of 2007:

"This is an integrated development program aiming at local good governance and poverty reduction through strengthening grassroot democracy, participatory planning, capacity building for local officials and businesses, revitalizing the partnership between local government, businesses and local communities in the development of Cat Hai District in an equitable and sustainable manner." (CRP 1)

The activities mostly consist of training courses for local officials and participatory planning together with the population. In 2007 there have been four training courses on good governance and civilised behaviours for 148 cadres of the Cat Hai District People's Committee (DPC). The courses mainly intend to develop inclusive and participatory modes of governance and planning and treat issues such as law, government administration and grassroots democracy (KAS 8; CRP 1). Besides seminars and workshops, exposure visits to other developing countries with similar projects present another tool of capacity building (Socialist Republic of Vietnam).

Another main issue of promoting grassroots democracy is providing participatory planning together with the local people. Planning can take place evident-based and is intended to include the whole community population in local decision-making. In this context, it is first of all important to raise the citizens' awareness of their rights and

opportunities. The CRP, as other NGOs, is an important mediating actor in this respect. Campaigns on grassroots democracy can serve as counterparts to what are seminars and training courses for local officials.

The outcomes of the CRP initiatives are assessed as very positive and are highly appreciated both by officials and the people. Yet, a big obstacle to further success and a broader scope of the whole project are limitations in resources. It is even doubtful whether the project can be carried on in its current scope.

However, hoping that new partners will join, the CRP intends to carry on its activities in 2008 in the fields of good governance and community development, capacity building for local governments and support for local initiatives in order to achieve better governance and sustainable development (CRP).

It is important to know, moreover, that the fostering of democracy is conducted very subtly mostly due to the restrictions imposed by the political system. Democratisation, as desired by Western donors, can only take place incrementally. Thus, in the field of 'good governance' and 'grassroots democracy', the CRP considers its main tasks in "building bridges" and trust between the local population and state representatives. Main tasks in this respect are advocating, raising awareness of local politicians and people, support and pragmatic problem-solving.

Whereas, particularly vis-à-vis the state, officially no efforts are made towards a pluralist democracy, in fact some democratisation takes place insofar as the CRP gains influence through trust, makes the government listen to the people, and together with the people influences decisions relevant to the local population (Interview Long).

The promotion of democracy has several positive features and must not be seen as an end in itself. First of all, the people are given an increased feeling of community through more political influence. Whereas in former times distrust between the population and the state hindered participation, the people now can be seen as both more self-confident and more trusting in the local government (Rösner, 2007).

Furthermore, participation and grassroots democracy are important tools for poverty alleviation especially in rural Vietnam. After some training and advice it is odds on that poor people in poor communities themselves will be able to plan, prepare, implement and control projects (KAS 9). Together with business development, good governance is seen as the key issue for sustainable growth, job creation and poverty reduction.

The CRP's involvement in the project and in its work for grassroots democracy has moreover positive implications for the NGO itself. As training is provided by the CRP, it is

consolidated as an NGO for development. Thus, the project does not only serve the issues the project contains, but also strengthens a civil society actor in Vietnam.

Whereas the CRP assumes government tasks through addressing the poverty issue and enables the people to create their livelihoods in the sense of 'ownership', the CRP does not only seek to strengthen its own role but also the capacity of the local government. It does not intend to undermine the state but rather tries to work with local government as a reliable partner for development (KAS 8).

4. Preconditions for civil society and the role of the state

The specific findings for the project in Cat Hai district shall now be integrated into a general framework. In a first section, the relationship between the state and NGOs shall be analysed on the basis of literature. In a second step, I will try to assess the general environment for NGOs supporting democracy in Vietnam.

Questions to be answered in this chapter shall be: What are the preconditions for civil society, NGOs and democracy in Vietnam, in particular on the local level? What opportunities do civil society organisations have and how do they use them? What roles do the state and the VCP play and how have these roles changed?

- a. The relationship between the state and NGOs and implications for democratic development

In the literature, NGOs active in developing countries are often characterised as key players in processes of democratisation in those countries that have democratic deficits. As they cooperate with small grassroots organisations containing often poor and marginalised people, they can improve and widen political participation. As the number and influence of NGOs increases, thus, more 'voice' is given to different groups of society. Democratisation takes place insofar as more 'voices' are expressed. In the same way, more control and pressure can be exercised on the state. The strengths of NGOs lie particularly in promoting grassroots democracy (Desai, 2002). Van Rooy (2002) considers strengthening NGOs as weakening the (autocratic) state.

However, the rise of NGOs does not necessarily imply a threat towards the state. Rather, NGOs can support the government in its efforts and raise its legitimacy. They can serve as a connector between the people and the state improving the efficiency of government services, filling in gaps in service provision and cushioning negative impacts of government policies for the people. The possible advantages of NGOs in comparison with the state bureaucracy are manifold: They can be more innovative, adaptable, cost effective and better aware of local circumstances (Desai, 2002).

NGOs might be a welcome partner for the government in holding on to the reins. Legitimacy is increased if the different social groups are given freedom of action as long as they do not undermine the government. NGOs can be worthy 'sensors of society' or

'early warning mechanisms' for politicians that reflect immediately what the people need and want. States that do not permit free civil society therefore risk being isolated from their populations. Accordingly, regulations to form a CSO should not be too strict. A government supportive of NGOs can support these in several ways: These are information about state programmes and policies, partnerships, opportunities for collaboration and strengthening, involving NGOs in policy debate and public consultations, encouraging co-ordination between different NGOs, and financial support such as funding, loans and contracts (Clark, 2002).

NGOs are deeply connected with democracy and good governance. They are both source for and result of democratisation. A wide array of NGOs within an authoritarian society can even lead to immense political changes (Desai, 2002). However, governments open to NGOs might also be more likely to be responsive to the people's needs, whereas governments restrictive towards NGOs might similarly intend to scotch any opposition or movement towards democratisation.

Constitutive on this theoretical foreword, I will now analyse the actual relationship between the Vietnamese state and local NGOs supporting democracy. In how far does the theory hold for the case of Vietnam?

b. Assessment of the environment for NGOs supporting democracy in Vietnam

The Vietnamese government supports civil society in the country according to the principle 'people know, people discuss, people execute and people supervise'. This slogan reflects the desire to encourage every organisation and citizen to participate in, formulate, implement and monitor policies. Participation is especially facilitated on the local level as some power has been decentralised towards local governments in the last years. Thus, the Vietnamese central government has recognised the need to cooperate with grassroots organisations working for the benefits and needs of the people. In this context, some legal provisions on NGOs have been settled (UN et al., 2004). These have been ordinances on mass organisations and associations released in 1989 and 1990 encouraging non-state activities, participation and organisation of living conditions on one's own authority (DED, 2005).

By far more important is the Decree 29 on Grassroots Democracy of 1998 that – besides important implications for democracy on the local level that shall be analysed in later

sections – opened space for more active participation at commune and village levels where informal groups are playing an increasingly active role (Norlund et al., 2006).

Indeed, there are plenty of examples for good cooperation between Vietnamese NGOs and government structures, in particular on the local level, and through their working relationships also with donors and international NGOs (PRSP, 2000). The recognition for NGOs by the government is considerably greater today than this has been the case in the past (Friis, 2007).

The Vietnamese government is particularly supportive of local self-help organisations that emerged after the retirement of the state in several social sectors in order to fill this gap (Frehner, 2007a). This development might have been eased moreover by the traditionally autonomous, self-organising structures in the villages following lowly formalised rules (Mutz, 2003).

Also in Vietnam, thus, NGOs cushion negative effects of political decisions. Moreover, the thesis that CSOs of all types reach down better to the grassroots level than similar government programmes and policies, as found in the literature, can be stated for the case of Vietnam (Norlund et al., 2006). In household interviews on mass organisations, though they are not typical NGOs as analysed in this study, a support for these as providers of information has been revealed. In return, the associations' understanding of the needs of the people has been increased (Poverty Task Force, 2003).

Yet, on the other side and as mentioned in paragraph two, the overall situation for NGOs still needs improvement in Vietnam. For instance, more and better opportunities for establishing an organisation as well as improvements in the field of freedom of speech are very likely to ease the working atmosphere of NGOs especially when it comes to democratisation (Norlund et al., 2006). Vietnamese NGOs still have limited access to state resources and, despite all visions, are not fully accepted by the government as partners in development (Norlund, 2007). Thus, improved communication with the state would moreover improve NGOs' working conditions.

As insufficient as the current state of civil society promoting democracy might be, a process of liberalisation and democratisation cannot be neglected. There are chances that the power of civil society will raise in the future due to lower state control and freer press. Ha (2005) even considers severe challenges to the political system to be possible. Yet, this development is in no respect mandatory as the state's power is predominant and strong opposition is still persecuted in Vietnam.

Moreover, there are some hints that the Vietnamese government only admits more political freedoms in general, and more rights and opportunities for civil society in particular, insofar as it is necessary to keep its power. By admitting more space for NGOs the government does not only intend to avoid a clash with opponents but furthermore keeps up the ties to the population which has been shown to be important in the last paragraph.

But whatever the intentions might be, Vietnam now offers increased opportunities for democracy and participation especially on community level (Frehner, 2005). This includes more rights for civil society groups. The organisations have greater space of action today and can concentrate on a larger variety of issues (Interview Long).

The state of democratic rights, particularly participatory rights for people on the local level, shall be analysed in the following. The development of grassroots democracy stands in strong connection with increased opportunities for civil society.

5. The current state of local democratic developments in Vietnam

I have just shown that there are improved opportunities for NGOs to act although the overall situation still can be described as rather obstructive. The following section will concentrate on the development of local-level democracy. This issue is profoundly interconnected with civil society and there are common legal bases for developments on both fields.

For this paragraph, I will first depict the Vietnamese conception(s) of 'democracy' and then try to assess the current state of grassroots democracy. The central questions in this context are: What are the conceptions of democracy in Vietnam? What state of democracy has been achieved (on the local level) and what opportunities for participation exist?

a. The Vietnamese conception of democracy

Western discussions on democratisation in East Asia are often dominated by a Western liberal conception of democracy that includes the existence of a plurality of political parties and an important stance of human rights, particularly the freedom of speech, assembly and organisation. Comparing this perception to the situation in Vietnam, the country is definitely no democracy (Ala-Rantala, 2002). Yet, due to a different cultural context, it might not be appropriate to impose Western values on Southeast Asian countries. Thus, I will show in the following what Vietnamese values and perceptions of democracy look like and which states of affairs can be seen as undemocratic.

First of all, the official perception of democracy in Vietnam is strongly influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideologies of centralised democracy whereas Western liberal democracy is rather depicted in a negative way. But probably even more than the Marxist-Leninist ideologies, it is the Confucian beliefs that influence Vietnamese values of social life as well as the perception of democracy. There are some aspects that can be seen as contrasting Western perceptions. For instance, Confucianism sees the importance of the society over the family and the family over the individual, whereas self-realisation can be seen as one of the highest values in Western societies. Moreover, the strong emphasis on harmony and the avoidance of conflict runs counter the liberal

point of view according to which solutions often can only be found in conflict (Duong, 2004).

This may already be part of the explanation why a one-party political system exists and why this system is broadly seen as advantageous. Even though there are different fractions within the Communist Party and these are increasing in number and variety, lobbying and conflict between the different groups always takes place behind the scenes and is never brought to public (ibid.) The idea of a multiparty system following the Western example is rejected by large parts of the population and even by critical voices within the VCP. According to a survey, 96 per cent of the Vietnamese population is satisfied with the current political system and 90 per cent are confident with the government, the parliament and the party. However, there are doubts if everybody dared to express his or her opinion openly in this survey.

Apart from this, there is a wide consensus among the population that economic growth and political stability are more important than democratic development. This has to be considered when efforts for strengthening democracy in Vietnam are made. Moreover, the importance of principles such as community, harmony and continuity has to be taken into account (Ala-Rantala 2002; Ha, 2005).

However, it is disputed what importance these 'Asian values' actually have. Eun-Jeung Lee (2003) rather stresses the importance of factors such as political and societal institutions in a country, the structure of elites, postcolonial history and a country's position in the international system of power and economy at the expense of cultural values that can only have supportive or constraining side-effects in his view.

It is interesting that, despite some contradictions on the first view, there are some similarities between Socialism and Confucianism, such as the stressing of community and obedience.

As will also be presented in the following paragraph, the concrete amount and quality of democratic rights that the Vietnamese state concedes its citizens is often difficult to figure out as legal provisions are often vague and contradictory. People's rights are always limited to the overall sovereignty of the Party and the state. This also holds for the latest decree on grassroots democracy (Article 3) (Decree No. 79, 2003).

The assessment of the quality of democracy thus always depends on the point of view and the Western idea of democracy does not fit very well the circumstances in Vietnam. Beresford and Norlund (1998) bring forward a conception of democracy that concentrates on the people's ability to influence the political process rather than on

formal procedures. Whereas people do not have the power to change the government they indeed do have the power to influence the operations of their government. Taking this into account one can, despite all incompleteness, speak of some sort of democracy in Vietnam.

In the following section, I shall assess the state of democracy in Vietnam in more detail with a particular focus on the grassroots level where most of the democratic development currently takes place.

b. Democracy on the local level

In this section I will first give an overview of the state of democracy in Vietnam and will then particularly concentrate on democracy on the grassroots level.

While democracy has been spreading all over the globe in the last decades, the focus in Vietnam was by far more on economic progress than on democratisation. Similar developments towards political liberalisation did not take place (Ala-Rantala, 2002). Yet, the 'Doi Moi' policies of economic opening slowly begin to result in incremental increases of democracy as well (Frehner, 2005).

Assessing the actual state of democracy is difficult not only due to cultural perceptions that have to be taken into account as mentioned in the last paragraph. Moreover, formulations on democratic rights are vague and often contradictory. Whereas a large provision of democratic rights exists, these can be restricted at the same time by required loyalties to the motherland and for reasons of 'public interest'. Because of imprecise formulations, citizens often cannot be sure whether their behaviour violates the laws or not. This very often prevents people to exercise their democratic rights. Nevertheless, a committee established by the Ministry of Justice with which the KAS cooperates plans to establish a constitutional court. This change is likely to solve some of the problems mentioned above.

As long as they are party members, citizens enjoy the right of freedom of expression to a considerable extent. Suggestions can be made freely and openly until a decision is taken. Opposition outside the VCP is not permitted, but within its borders, several conflicting views on the extent of social and economic freedoms exist (Wischermann, 1993).

As to participatory rights for the overall population, a distinction between direct and representative democracy can be made. Directly, people can select among several

candidates both for the Local People's Council and for the National Assembly. Moreover they can participate in the forms of discussion, monitoring, inspection and the placement of opinions towards the local government. Indirectly, the elected members of the National Assembly and of the local People's Councils are seen to represent the people (Duong, 2004). Even though the number of candidates and thus the opportunities for choice has increased which can be seen as a considerable advantage, the candidates still do not represent the whole population (Frehner, 2007b).

There are also restrictions about who is permitted to stand as a candidate. Whereas formally this is possible for everybody at the age of 21, it is in fact very difficult for persons not in line with socialist ideals. Whereas formally candidates do no longer have to be member of the Communist Party and independent candidates are permitted now, a certain affiliation with the Party is still required (Duong, 2004).

A further aspect of democratic progress on the national level in Vietnam is the strengthened position of the National Assembly. Whereas one can definitely not speak of a separation of powers in Vietnam, the assembly yet has more and more become a space of open discussions and some kind of counterbalance to the Politburo. Far more than in former times, the parliament holds the Politburo responsible for its actions (EG Strategiepapier, 2006). Furthermore, the assembly itself has gained more independence and in the bureaucracy, old party veterans have been replaced by more flexible technocrats.

Laws on grassroots democracy, the establishment of the rule of law and decentralisation, as well as the press reporting on deplorable states of affairs are examples for initial steps into the direction of real democracy (Frehner, 2005; Ha, 2005). Despite of this vague trend towards democracy, basic requirements remain unfulfilled. Article 4 in the constitution still allows the VCP to stop any development threatening its dominance. Neither separation of powers nor rule of law, free press, democratic elections or effective opportunities for people to participate on the national level exist (Frehner, 2007a). The freedom of expression and association is limited by a very strong emphasis on individual duties and public or national interests (Duong, 2004). The number of executed death penalties remains high, and the opportunities for a free civil society, as analysed above, are limited. However, Vietnam is one of the most stable countries in Southeast Asia (EG Strategiepapier, 2006).

One strong aspect of the Vietnamese government certainly is its high responsiveness towards the will of the people. As mentioned before, civil society organisations can bring

government and people closer together. Local dissatisfaction often results in significant concessions by the central government towards political change (Mitlin, 2004).

The most important steps for democratisation in Vietnam are currently made on the grassroots level. Although still raising uncomfortable feelings with some government agencies, progress can be noticed on this level. Local and international actors play a crucial role in this context (Küster, 2005). I will refer to the state of local-level and grassroots democracy in the following.

The reforms on grassroots democracy since 1998 have been necessary after opposition by the population towards land reform plans and scandals of corruption and embezzlement of communal finances through authorities as well as rural unrest in 1996 and 1997. The reforms can be considered as measures towards decentralisation and participation. Another intention for reforms was to improve the accountability of officials and the transparency of their work (Le, 2007; Embassy of Finland, 2006). By the way, the democratic rights that are now conceded in the Grassroots Democracy Decrees have already been promoted by Ho Chi Minh during the struggle for independence but it is only recently that the Vietnamese political leaders considered that the time had come for their implementation (Duong, 2004).

Article 2 of both the Decree 29 and its 2003 follow-up Decree 79 include the prevention and overcoming of “the situation of degradation, red tape and corruption among a number of officials and Party members”. Article 3 states that that the “people’s right to mastery must be closely linked to the mechanism of ‘the Party’s leadership, the State’s management and the people’s mastery.” Grassroots democracy shall be implemented in a way that “the people can directly decide on important and practical issues closely related to their interests and obligations.” (Decree No. 79, 2003)

The Decree 29 on Grassroots Democracy includes four levels of participation: Sharing information, providing comments, participation in decision-making and monitoring (UN et al., 2004). The following overview shows what these principles imply:

- I. Information: The administration must inform the people. This means more transparency. Issues are land use and budget, for instance.
- II. Discussion: The administration has to consult the people on certain topics. Among these are the socio-economic development plans of communes and economic restructuring. Public opinions can be collected through discussion

meetings, comment gathering cards for each household and placing letter boxes for public comments.

- III. Participation: In some areas, the administration depends on the majority vote of the population. These are e.g. decisions on infrastructure and public-welfare facilities.
- IV. Control: Among the works to be supervised and inspected by the people are activities of the commune administrations and organisations in the commune, the management of land use and the detection of corruptions and wastefulness.

(KAS 10; Decree No. 79, 2003).

Probably the strongest aspect in the decrees is the vote of confidence against the president of the PC and PCOM (Le, 2007). A big emphasis on the Confucian value of community as well as the Socialist ideology of collective mastery can be found in the text of the two decrees, whereas the role on the individual is not mentioned (Duong, 2004).

The reason for the Decree 79 coming into force was Decree 29's ineffectiveness. Its implementation has been insufficient in many respects or has been fulfilled according to formalistic principles only (Embassy of Finland, 2006). Whereas the content of the two decrees is the same for the most parts, the change in Decree 79 was to give the responsibility for the implementation of the decree to the commune's People's Council and Committee. Also, Decree 29 has been extended and clarified through Decree 79 (Duong, 2004).

But still the quality of implementation of the decrees on grassroots democracy remains very different among the provinces (Le, 2007) and is not satisfying from an overall perspective. Only 18-20 per cent of the provinces have implemented the decrees successfully, which means they exploited the full extent of provisions, the local leaders understood them completely, and they have proven to be experienced in working with the community and allowing the people to participate. 10 to 15 per cent of the provinces fulfil none of these requirements, and most provinces, 60 to 70 percent, fulfil them partly and perform on an average level.

Probably the most important reason for insufficient implementation is the lack of will by local officials who might fear to lose some of their own power. Other reasons might be

mistrust and the lack of knowledge and skills by officials (Duong, 2004). A considerable hindrance to an effective implementation furthermore are deadlocked old structures and, on the people's side, lack of knowledge and education on their rights and on participation, limited time resources and limited assistance they are provided with (KAS 8). The strict command-and-control structure from the higher to the lower level of government and the lack of decentralisation going along with it is seen as a further disadvantage concerning the promotion of local-level democracy (Ala-Rantala, 2002).

An important difference as to the knowledge on the decrees can be made between different societal groups. The Kinh, forming the vast majority of the Vietnamese, are much better aware of the decrees than are the ethnic minorities that mostly live in remote villages. Also, men are better aware of the decrees than are women (Embassy of Finland, 2006).

The interest for participation is highest for those issues that affect the people immediately, such as waste management and the environment. It is important that in a political system encouraging only little private initiative that these issues fall under the responsibility of the people in order to get used to democratic processes (KAS 10).

As far as the implementation of the decrees on grassroots democracy is relatively successful, one of its major strengths definitely is that it enables the people to replace unpopular politicians (Frehner, 2005). However, there are clear limits to the power at district level to influence decisions of national interests. Also, one third of the people think that there is no wide choice of candidates to the People's Council (Embassy of Finland, 2006).

Despite these weaknesses, there are provinces in which implementation is successful and in which real grassroots democratisation takes place. One of these is Ninh Thuan, in which the CRP did a Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) together with other NGOs. Here, the grassroots democracy decrees lead to more openness in public life and increased participation and responsibility. As to participation, people are well aware of their rights in Ninh Thuan, are informed about activities going on and have more opportunities to participate. This has resulted in an increase in de facto participation. Yet, considerable problems exist also in Ninh Thuan province. Also within the province, success is heavily dependent on the activities of the local mass organisations that only command a limited budget.

Implementation is moreover assessed differently by officials and by the people. Whereas the former concentrate on activities that have taken place, the latter focus on

actual results. Thus the officials' picture is often more positive. A lot of officials furthermore tend to paint a too 'rosy picture' when reporting on development. Main obstacles for effective participation still are a limited infrastructure for information dissemination, particularly for the poor, and lack of knowledge and job skills by local officials. Real empowerment of the poor would also mean to let them participate directly in the decision-making process which is not the case currently.

Concerning the provision of information and the reception of feedbacks, door-to-door dialogues can be an appropriate measure. Moreover, civil society organisations such as Women's Union and the Farmer's Union can play an important role in information dissemination. People can then gain voice either through direct involvement or through involvement via these mass organisations (Poverty Task Force, 2003).

In this section I have shown that although Vietnam does by far not fulfil Western standards of democracy, there are some developments towards democratisation particularly on the lower levels. When assessing democracy it is important to take into account the specific conditions. For Vietnam, this means that the Marxist-Leninist ideology is still very influential, and even more the Confucian values such as community and harmony must not be neglected.

The further development of democracy in Vietnam is definitely very interesting for further research. Hitherto, the VCP was successful in keeping its power and conceded democratic rights only as far as necessary while always having an ear on the people's wishes. It is possible that the current one-party system will prevail for decades. Yet, the more economic growth in connection with greater socio-economic differences changes Vietnam, the more different social groups will emerge. This again might one day end up in more political differentiation.

However, the current policy focus rather is on economic issues (Duong, 2004) with the huge inflation being the most urgent problem at the moment (Interview Diem). As to democratisation, the most important processes take place at the local level. Whatever the actual intentions of the grassroots democracy decrees might be, they can serve as a serious measure to empower the marginalised people if they are reasonably implemented. Local leaders with the intention to be re-elected now also have to listen directly to the population. There is the opportunity of a democratic spill-over to higher levels of government and this spill-over actually takes place slowly. Though, for real

democratic change, a real restructuring of the administrative system is necessary as well as the emplacement and enforcement of human rights.

The implementation of the grassroots democracy decrees might be a first step of real democratisation in Vietnam without neglecting existing important cultural preconditions.

6. Assessment of the CRP's work and the people's interests

After having tried to characterise the current state of democracy in Vietnam, I want to give an assessment of the CRP's work on grassroots democracy in this chapter.

It is a central point of criticism concerning development work in general and grassroots democracy in Vietnam in particular that the voice of the affected population is not taken into account sufficiently. I will therefore particularly focus on the interests of the population affected by the CRP's work as well as by work in grassroots democracy in general. Questions to be answered in this section are: How effective are measures on grassroots democracy and the CRP's work? How does the affected population assess the efforts on grassroots democracy and what is important for these people?

The state of grassroots democracy in Vietnam can be assessed as negative insofar that although people are better informed on their rights, they often think they cannot change a situation as officials take pre-determined decisions. Mostly, people are only interested in politics in case there is the chance of the improvement of the personal economic situation. In spite of this negative fact, a general increase of control towards local officials by the people has led to a decline of corruption on the local level (Ala-Rantala, 2002).

In the following, I shall now concentrate on the assessment of the CRP's work on grassroots democracy in Cat Hai district. In contradiction to what I have just said, on the two islands Cat Hai and Cat Ba, half of the population thinks that there are many or very many possibilities to inform and participate whereas the other half thinks there are little or none at all. Considering the several aspects of the decrees on grassroots democracy, the assessment is quite positive as to information and consultation, less so for participation and poor for the aspect of control.

An interesting finding is that the rural population on the islands gives a more positive assessment than the citizens in the two towns Cat Hai and Cat Ba. This more positive assessment by the rural population also holds for the assessment whether there have been improvements in the last years. In opposition to that, the urban population does not see much progress, especially not in the field of control. Also, the rural people have more trust in the People's Committee.

There are moreover structural differences in interests between the rural and town population. The most urgent problems for the former are illegal foresting and dynamite

fishing whereas the latter consider air pollution as the main problem. Particularly Cat Hai's population considers communal waste management as an urgent issue. Here, the wish and the motivation for participation are significantly higher than for others.

Interestingly, there is big interest in participation and planning and even in making own contributions but the residents' interests are generally seen to be of low importance also by themselves. Most people prefer cooperation between the citizens and the People's Committee. As concerns the support of democracy, the People's Committee is considered to have a strong impact. As the two islands are very different from each other in many respects, however, there is also disagreement about what aspects of democracy are most urgent to be supported.

On Cat Ba Island, the assumption that the people themselves can promote democracy is widespread. Concerning the promotion of democracy, three groups can be differentiated:

- I. *People interested in democracy* are positive as to the changes but are not interested or willing to contribute and exercise in projects themselves
- II. *Democracy supporters* are even more optimistic and would participate and act
- III. *Sceptics* assess the development of democracy negatively, do not favour cooperation between the people and the state but yet have a general interest of acting

These groups vary enormously among the several towns and villages on the two islands. For an ongoing process of democratisation, probably the group of sceptics and the democracy supporters are most important. Together they form 83 per cent of the Cat Hai district population.

Although the number of those who are satisfied with the process of democratisation is relatively low with only about 50 per cent, the general attitude can be described as positive because strong improvements are recognised (KAS 10).

Generally speaking, Cat Hai district performs better than the average of Vietnam on grassroots democracy and good governance. This might also be a consequence of the long-term involvement of the CRP as a local NGO (Interview Diem).

An external evaluation of the Cat Hai district project detected several weaknesses, however. It recommends that the local population should be given a more active role in the rapid development of the area. Moreover, a better integration of several goals is

required. The support of grassroots democracy shall be better connected with poverty reduction and there should be special education on grassroots democracy.

After this analysis of the CRP's project, the following data is about a CRP's project in Ninh Thuan province in the south of Vietnam. The general assessment of grassroots democracy by the people is more negative than the assessment by the official side.

People in Ninh Thuan complain that discussion meetings are not successful insofar that many people are too busy to visit them or do not understand the issues, only certain people are invited so that not everybody can attend the meetings, and that recommendations made do not end up in real changes. Incompetent elected deputies are not able to reflect the people's views and are little in touch with them (Poverty Task Force, 2003)

The people's assessment contradicts the official positive assessment in most aspects. This gives us a hint that different assessments must be taken into account and that the people's perceptions must be stronger respected. The CRP does so by asking for the assessment of grassroots democracy both by officials and citizens.

Progress in the fields of good governance and democratisation can only emerge if officials are willing and able to comply with their functions and if the people have the opportunities and the interest in participation. Besides education on democracy the strengthening of civil society is an important measure for this purpose (DED, 2005). The current approach of the CRP in Cat Hai district already takes into account a lot of these findings: Combining democratisation and poverty reduction, strengthening civil society, strengthening links between officials and the population and increasing responsiveness to the needs of the poor (KAS 11).

For the case of Vietnam, it should also be considered that often, both for officials and citizens, "political stability and economic progress achieved through a single party are preferred to poorly performing economic system with multiparty rule" (Ala-Rantala, 2002). Thus, economic issues are considered more urgent than democratisation. This explains why democratic process only takes place incrementally. However, in the perception of most people, an increase in democracy also means more development (Interview Long).

7. Conclusion and outlook

In this final section, I will firstly sum up my findings in this study and then try to give a short outlook on possible developments concerning civil society and democratisation on the local level.

Initially, I figured out that the conception of civil society, such as the conception of democracy as well, is different from the Western idea. Big mass organisations that are closely connected to the state and thus would not be called *non-governmental* organisations in Western countries have the majority of members of civil society organisations in Vietnam. In opposition to that, the number and influence of independent NGOs is small and even these groups have to work under a state-owned umbrella organisation.

However, I have shown that the influence of these organisations is increasing whereas mass organisations slowly lose power. Today, NGOs are increasingly able to work independently and might even challenge the state. But still, NGOs have to follow different rules in an authoritarian state. A difference to Western civil society definitely is the fact that groups membership in Vietnam does not necessarily go along with an increase in social capital.

The CRP is one example for an NGO that is under government control but still is independent in its work and action. Starting as a small group assisting farmers, it widened its scope as foreign donors, among these the KAS, cooperated with the CRP. Thus, the issue of good governance and grassroots democracy has appeared on the NGO's agenda. The work grassroots democracy mainly consists of training courses for local officials and participatory planning together with the population.

Whereas democratisation is the main purpose of the CRP in these seminars, democracy should not be considered as an end in itself. Among others, democracy is an opportunity for the people to organise their livelihoods according to their needs. For CRP, the engagement in democracy also means strengthening its own position as a development NGO and civil society actor.

The more 'voice' admitted to NGOs, the more 'voice' is usually admitted to the people as well. NGOs can make use of this gain of independence, as it takes place in Vietnam currently, in two different ways. They can either try to undermine the existing structures and take the role of an opposition group or they can integrate in the given system and try to widen their opportunities for action. The CRP can clearly be seen as a

representative of the latter. It supports the Vietnamese government by, for example, helping to implement the decrees on grassroots democracy that represent eminent changes towards – at least grassroots – democracy. NGOs are considered as helpful providers of services that reach the people much better than does the state bureaucracy.

Despite all efforts on grassroots democracy, Vietnam still is no democratic country, particularly not if Western perceptions are applied. Similar to assessing the state of civil society in Vietnam, for democracy the specific cultural and societal circumstances have to be respected. Besides the Marxist-Leninist political ideology that is deeply rooted in the Vietnamese political system, Confucian values play a predominant role. These values often contradict the Western perceptions of democracy. It also needs to be kept in mind that both the policy focus of the government as well as the interests of the majority of the people is rather on economic than on democratic development.

Yet, due to the fact that the government has to have a look at the interests of the people and roughly follows its wishes gives the population the power to influence political decisions indirectly. One can therefore speak of some sort of democracy in this context, particularly if the substantive concept of democracy is adopted according to which the focus is on substance and results of democracy rather than on formal procedures. The actual state of democracy in Vietnam is difficult to assess because legal bases are often vague or contradictory.

Albeit these problems the central government is interested in admitting more democratic rights on the local levels. Though critics argue that the government does so simply in order to keep its power and only admits participatory rights insofar as it is necessary, there are considerable opportunities coming along with the decrees on grassroots democracy. People now have increased opportunities to inform, discuss, participate and control. An important instrument is the possible replacement of local politicians.

There are, however, big discrepancies concerning the implementation of the Decree 79 on Grassroots Democracy among the different provinces in Vietnam. In only a small percentage of provinces, the implementation is completely successful whereas particularly the poor and marginalised people do not profit from it.

Although my analysis of the CRP's project in Cat Hai district as well as the analysis of Ninh Thuan province is not representative for Vietnam, the fact that the implementation of the Decree 79 is much more successful here than in other provinces might mean that

the work of NGOs, and of the CRP in particular, has a positive impact. As mostly the lack of knowledge and skills both of officials and of the people presents the biggest problem and the CRP provides information and workshops particularly in this field, the connection cannot be proven but is at least very likely.

This also answers the central question of this research. Local NGOs obviously have a strong direct impact on promoting democracy on the local level, especially as to implementing the Decree 79. Moreover, I have shown that the fostering of civil society and (grassroots) democracy are deeply interconnected. An influential civil society is likely to end up in more democracy and vice versa. Also, civil society groups together with their partners increasingly focus on issues of democracy and good governance. Thus, the role for NGOs as the basis for democracy might increase in the next years.

The future development of democracy in Vietnam is a highly interesting topic and the results cannot be foreseen very exactly. It is, for example, possible but not necessary that the development of participatory rights that now exist on the lowest levels spill over to higher levels. Why then should it not spill over to the central level of government one day that gives the people a much broader choice to select among candidates for the National Assembly?

Moreover, it is definitely interesting to find analyse whether the more democratic rights conceded by the central government rather strengthen or undermine it. Is the VCP still capable to satisfy the needs of all or will there exist conflicting parties one day?

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The short forms to be found in the text are typed in *bold*.

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KAS 6: Overview – Project Activities under the Partnership Cooperation Cat Hai-CRP-KAS

KAS 7: EU Application

KAS 8: Participatory Community Development for Cat Hai District in the period 2005-07

KAS 9: Community Management in rural areas

KAS 10: Stärkung der Demokratie auf lokaler Ebene

KAS 11: European Commission

KAS 12: Cat Ba Island – An Overview

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Interviews:

Interview Mr Long (6.3.2008; 9h; ca. 35 min)

Interviewer: Niklas Aschhoff
Interviewee: Mr Tran Van Long

Interview Ms. Heizelmann (DED), 18.3.,9h, 30 min

Interviewer: Niklas Aschhoff
Interviewee: Barbara Heizelmann (DED)

Interview Pham Van Diem (Programme Advisor), 18.04.2008; 20:30, 30 min

Interviewer: Niklas Aschhoff
Interviewee: Pham Van Diem

