

**THE UNCERTAINTY THAT SHAPES THE OPERATIONS OF
HEALTH-FOCUSED NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS IN VIETNAM**

by

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This research project explores how uncertainty shapes NGOs operating in the health sector in relation to other institutions, and how NGOs strategize to maintain their image and survive under uncertain conditions, while working to improve population well-being.

Methods: The research questions were answered through qualitative methods. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted, thirteen with the representatives of NGOs, and seven with high-ranking government officers at both central and provincial levels. In addition, documents (decisions, proposals, reports) were reviewed.

Results: Numerous uncertainties internal and external to NGOs greatly influence their operations. As a result, they adjust their mandates, roles vis-à-vis government, accountability, and delivery methods to manage these uncertainties. Although relations with government were sometimes difficult, in general NGOs confirmed that they supported government priorities. Several lessons about operations, programming, policy making, and relationship building have been learned through this study, resulting in recommendations being made to the government, to NGOs in Vietnam (including their headquarters), and to donors, aiming to facilitate smooth NGO operations and benefit communities.

Conclusion: NGOs have no standing in the local socio-political structure, a problem arising from the government's restrictive control of the civil society sector. NGOs do their best to avoid notice, "hiding themselves" to avoid attention or scrutiny. As a result, government-NGO relations are highly problematic, and NGOs often struggle to implement sustainable programs at the community level. Further studies are required to identify effective modes of NGO operations under such circumstances, including work to identify methods for strengthening NGO capacity, increasing appropriate donor engagement, and facilitating the localization of foreign NGOs.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AIDS	Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HIV	Human Immuno-Deficiency Virus
HPG	Health Partnership Group
ILSS	Institute for Labour Sciences and Society
LMIC	Low-Middle-Income Countries
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
NGO	Non-Government Organizations
ODA	Official Development Assistance
PACCOM	People’s Aid Coordination Committee
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SEDP	Socio-Economic Development Plan
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VNR	Voluntary National Review
VUFO	Vietnam Union for Friendship Organizations
YAEP	Youth Act to End Poverty Network

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Vietnam's so-called Open-Door policy, which began in 1986, has increased international investment flows to Vietnam. Economically, Vietnam is striving to become a middle-income country, as indicated by the great efforts of the government towards economic growth. United Nation Agencies in Vietnam, the Delegation of the European Union to Vietnam, and the Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam (2014) regard this country as one of the most dynamic economies in the developing world, especially during the period between its initial economic reform and the global financial crisis of 2007-2008. This development, however, does not guarantee equal access to development resources among populations across the country (World Bank, 2014). In addition, foreign assistance has tended to be rescheduled and redirected because of the nation's wealthier status (UN Agencies in Vietnam, Delegation of EU to Vietnam, MPI of Vietnam, 2014). The 1986 renovation brought the country to a new standing in the global economy, but it has also left the nation with several social development challenges.

Before the Open-Door policy, the one-party government did not support the growth of an independent civil society. The Communist Party of Vietnam would not accept any expression of collective identity and interests outside the Party frame (Sabharwar & Huong, 2005). Therefore, although Vietnam had numerous mass organizations, associations, and several other socio-political organizations, all these agencies were formed, funded, mandated, and controlled by government. An independent civil society had not yet appeared.

Since 1986, NGOs have come to Vietnam, and numerous social groupings (voluntary groups, self-help groups, and several other charity clubs) have formed. While NGOs deliver development

activities ranging from direct support to policy advocacy, these other social groups provide material assistance for the poor. Recently, various local NGOs and technical associations have appeared, and many of them have partnered with the above social organizations or foreign NGOs to implement activities that target disadvantaged populations. Together, these entities have organized poverty reduction and community development activities in Vietnam.

In legal terms, while foreign NGOs, local NGOs, and technical associations can register their operations with the government, other social groups are not legally allowed to do so. However, registered or not, all these organizations are considered unofficial because they are not government sanctioned. In addition, government and the political party neither deny nor recognize the development of these organizations. Therefore, their social status is blurred. More seriously, the organizations are considered a threat to stable society (Duong, 2012), and the Communist Party of Vietnam does not allow their members to promote or even to discuss civil society. Sabharwar and Huong (2005) note that civil society in Vietnam remains in an “embryonic stage”. The path ahead for this sector is unknown.

This research was motivated by the author’s many years of professional and academic work with international Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), in which questions arose around the tensions between a government that wants alignment with NGOs regarding its policies, priorities, and directives, while at the same time NGOs commit to human rights and other priorities that may differ from those of government. NGOs both complement as well as, where necessary, challenge government. Please see Appendix 1 for details about the research author.

This project is motivated by two specific objectives. First, it was undertaken to contribute to knowledge about the relationship between the NGO sector, governments, and other social sectors. In the context of developing countries, where economic development tends to be valued before social development, and civil society remains unrecognized in national development, these relations are vulnerable and prone to instability or breakdown. Better understanding of the uncertainty surrounding NGOs would support addressing such problems, and could be used to guide further research and organizational development. Second, this research focused on presenting and evaluating critically the recommendations made by NGO practitioners. Although this research did not aim for generalizing to settings outside of Vietnam, the findings are useful to other LMIC contexts where NGOs are an important component of health governance, and particularly in contexts where governments have undertaken to control NGO activities.

I argue here that uncertainty represents a major determinant of NGO structures and practices in Vietnam (Watkins, Swidler, & Hannan, 2012, MacPhail, 2010). Although current literature offers several solid descriptions of NGO structures and practices, there are few references to the concept of uncertainty as I develop it here. This thesis explores several dimensions of uncertainty that together shape NGO operations within the wider socio-political context of contemporary Vietnam. Ultimately, the aim of this research is to identify ways to improve collaboration and coordination between NGOs and the governments of emerging economies.

I assume throughout the dissertation that NGOs should be supported and, in turn, can benefit society. But I have also learned that there is some controversy regarding the impacts that NGOs make on society. For example, while several scholars note that NGOs' relief actions contribute

to improving community well-being through delivering health and social projects (Beyene, 2010, Rondi, Sorlini, & Collivignarelli, 2015), other scholars provide criticisms of effectiveness and efficiency of NGO delivery, arguing that NGO projects do not respond to community needs (Pfeiffer, 2003, Galway, Corbett, & Zeng, 2012). The orientation of the thesis is based on my experiences in NGOs in Vietnam, and my commitment to the idea that NGOs can and should provide important social benefits. They deserve supports to strengthen their capacity to do so.

From a social determinants of health perspective, a broad range of personal, social, economic and political factors influence populations' health status. For example, personal choices of nutrition and lifestyle have an important determination on individuals' health. Broadly, social inequality and social justice may greatly influence communities' health. This thesis is about promotion and protection of populations' health through organization of broad societal sectors to generate collective actions for health. This thesis is, therefore, principally about health governance in its broadest terms.

Among NGOs involved in this thesis, some are health-specific organizations, and the remaining NGOs target other sectors such as children's welfare, environment, and community development. These NGOs all aim for improving the well-being of populations. From a broader social determinants of health perspective, all these NGOs participate in the promotion and protection of communities' health, and their programs contribute to improving individuals' and populations' health. In this thesis, when I discuss examples of these NGOs' activities and citations from representatives of these NGOs, I believe that these activities and citations relate to actions, means, and environment that promotes and protects individuals' and populations' health.

This research applied qualitative methods to explore several factors influential to NGO operations in the Vietnamese context. Semi-structured interviews and document reviews were applied to fully capture data and triangulate data from different sources. This qualitative approach allowed me to explore the connections of several structures and processes involved in NGO practices and relationships.

The thesis is organized into eight chapters. The first chapter – Introduction and Overview - introduces the main features of socio-economic and political contexts of the developing country of Vietnam. In chapter 2 – Literature Review – I present, summarize, and evaluate the current literature on NGOs’ roles and mandates in the intersection of public and private sectors in developing countries. This chapter also summarizes key elements of what are described as healthy partnerships. Chapter 3 – Research Setting – describes the past and current situation of foreign health-focused NGOs in Vietnam. Chapter 4 – Research Design, and Methods – describes the qualitative approach to data collection and analysis.

The findings are organized into three chapters. In the first – Chapter 5 – I examine factors external to NGOs that affect both their mandate as well as their operations. These factors include government-led economic development programs, donor funding, regulatory constraints, policy gaps, labour market factors, issues arising from relationships with local partners, field-based challenges, the wider political environment, and government sensitivity about faith-based organizations. In the second findings chapter - Chapter 6 – I examine factors internal to how NGOs operate in the context of external constraints. These factors include uncertain funding and

financing, headquarters' top-down and short-range directives, NGOs' accountability, and NGOs' alignment with government. In the third chapter - Chapter 7 – I present and discuss high level and cross-cutting themes. Here I discuss one of the central problems faced by NGOs in Vietnam and its consequences for how NGOs operate: lack of official social or political standing.

In Chapter 8, I summarize the main findings of the research, and discuss strengths and limitations of the study. I take up several threads identified in my findings that point to uncertainty as a critical principle to offer a conceptual model of how of uncertainty affects NGO operations. I conclude by recommending several areas for future research, e.g., preferable modes of NGO operations, methods for strengthening NGO capacity, mechanisms for donor engagement, and the development of local NGOs.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE ROLE OF NGOs IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Today's institutions of global governance for health include states, intergovernmental organizations, non-state actors, and public-private partnerships (Fidler, 2010, Lee, Koivusalo, Ollila, et. al., 2009). This grouping represents a significant shift compared to earlier periods of health development that were dominated largely by bilateral and intergovernmental organizations. Of particular note, non-state actors such as multinational corporations, civil society groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and philanthropic foundations currently enjoy higher profiles in global health governance than previously (Fidler, 2010). Questions remain, however, about the roles these newly emergent non-state actors play in global governance, particularly as these affect or influence health development in low- and middle-income countries.

There is no agreed-upon definition of NGOs among scholars and practitioners. Ahmed and Potter (2006) simply define NGOs as not-government and not-for-profit organizations. Watkins, Swidler and Hannan (2012) include in this designation all not-for-profit schools, universities, hospitals, social clubs, professional associations, social welfare agencies, religious groups and cultural institutions. This lack of agreement creates challenges for research on NGOs insofar as the subjects of research or evaluation may be wrongly grouped or categorized. In this paper, I define NGOs to be self-governing private, not-for-profit social organizations that are formally constituted to promote human rights, improve health and well-being, foster economic development, and/or support environmental protections, usually in a context where they seek to provide support to vulnerable or marginalized populations (Atkinson & Scurrah, 2009, Anheier

& Salamon, 1998). This definition also includes religious organizations. When religious-based NGOs register their operations in a developing country, they serve both religious and non-religious populations, and in some cases, they may give up their core values that relate to religion. For example, World Vision had to give up their first value in Vietnam (that they are a Christian organization that ascribes to Christian values). So, while World Vision has six core¹ values globally, World Vision Vietnam has only five core values². The definition includes both organizational and programmatic objectives, as well as the day-to-day operation of NGOs, and also captures the long-term effects of NGO ventures on local populations.

The NGO sector in global health and development has grown substantially over the past several decades, occupying a governance “gap” created by structural adjustment, and the related inability of governments to meet the social, health and welfare needs of local communities as a result of challenges to fiscal capacity (Mussa, Pfeiffer, Gloyd, et. al., 2013). The governance gap also results from the preferences of a new generation of donors who wish to channel funding through private organizations deemed to be more effective and responsible, and less prone to corruption (Mussa, Pfeiffer, Gloyd, et. al., 2013). By moving into a space where NGOs are seen as reliable advocates for local communities, while at the same time perceived as being more accountable for the distribution of health aid, NGOs have come to occupy a dominant role in global health programs and research. In addition to representing and providing services to disadvantaged and vulnerable populations, NGOs also target global health policy development and engage in high-

¹ We are Christian; We are committed to the poor; We value people; We are stewards; We are partners; We are responsive.

² World Vision in Vietnam does not have the first value (We are Christian).

level consultations. As noted by Anheier and Salamon (1998), in this capacity NGOs contribute significantly to global development by virtue of being flexible, establishing and maintaining “grassroots” relationships, and affording access to human and other resources. They are also institutional “shape-shifters,” able to move with ease through multiple contexts, from being respected community advocates to high-level policy consultants. But this successful behavioural repertoire, based as it is on humanitarian action, volunteerism, and the ability to respond flexibly to shifts in health funding priorities and fads, may also undermine the potential for NGOs to pursue long-term policy goals or sustainable social change. NGOs may risk diluting their efforts and resources to ensure achieving strategic long-term objectives. The question remains as to whether NGOs can sustain their role as an effective part of the ‘unruly mélange’ of global health governance (Buse & Walt, 1997).

Currently, the writing on the efficacy of NGOs centres on the interventions that NGOs deliver to populations and the methods that NGOs employ to deliver these interventions. For example, Lewis and Kanji (2009), in reviewing NGOs as social organizations, organize NGO goals and activities into three categories of activities: delivering service, catalysing change, and building local partnerships. In this latter context, NGOs may occupy a particularly important role in building capacity and potentially empowering local communities (Banks & Hulme, 2012). Understanding these different roles is important, as each reflects a differing position vis-à-vis governance. It is also useful for understanding and evaluating NGO practices across different contexts.

The purpose of this part of the thesis is to unpack and discuss these different roles in order to provide a critical analysis of the roles NGOs occupy in the infrastructure of today's global health development landscape. This discussion will permit some consideration of an appropriate role for NGOs, paying particular attention to the interplay of public and private sectors as well as to principles of equity. It will also provide a more general context for considering the specific dimensions of NGO involvement in Vietnam.

In reviewing the literature on the roles of NGOs within civil society, seven major themes emerged. The first theme addressed the service-delivery role of NGOs in a context of humanitarian relief. The authors have examined several specific projects implemented by NGOs and the shortfalls of those projects, and debated the impact of funding uncertainty on NGO projects' breadth, intensity and sustainability. The second theme was about the participatory methods NGOs applied in project delivery, including capacity building, community participation and empowerment, and the piloting of novel programming. The third theme analyzed the advocacy role played by NGOs. The authors focused on examining the methods NGOs employed to engage in advocacy projects, the specific advocacy projects NGOs deployed, the power NGOs possessed to change policy, and concerns over NGOs' technical capacity to influence or affect policy. The fourth theme identified, addressed and analyzed the "monitoring" role played by NGOs in some contexts. The fifth theme addressed the strengths and weaknesses of NGOs in conducting research. The sixth theme was the key elements of healthy government-NGO partnerships. Lastly, I present several influences internal and external to NGO operations in developing countries.

2.1. Service delivery as a relief intervention

Among other projects that NGOs implement (such as lobbying, research), NGOs may offer basic primary health care, social, and financial services that contribute to improving community well-being. This is facilitated by their closeness to a community and flexible innovations in implementation methods (Lewis & Kanji, 2009). Their projects might cover aspects of elderly care (Ball, 1992), primary care (Jennings, 2015, Adams & Halvorsen, 2014, Dalil, Newbrander, Loevinsohn, et. al., 2014, Amirghanian, Kelly, Benotsch, et. al., 2004, Barlow & Beeh, 1995, Dadian, 1989), surgical care (Ng-Kamstra, Riesel, Arya, et. al., 2016), agriculture (Beyene, 2010), disaster mitigation (Benson, Myers, & Twigg, 2001), economic development (Humphreys, 1999, Arrossi, Bombarolo, Hardoy, et. al., 1994), and water and sanitation (Rondi, Sorlini, & Collivignarelli, 2015, Carrard, Pedi, Willetts, et. al., 2009), among others.

However, scholars have also noted several shortcomings to NGO service delivery. Criticisms of the effectiveness and sustainability of their relief actions have been raised (Watkins, Swidler, & Hannan, 2012, ISSEE, 2010). For example, Abramowitz (2015) described the technical, health care, and managerial gaps left after Medecins Sans Frontieres withdrew from their medical emergency assistance in post-conflict Liberia. Pfeiffer (2003) took many of these criticisms further, noting that many relief actions, intended for good, are in fact “harmful practices” (pp. 734) because they have “fragmented the local health system, undermined local control of health programs, and contributed to growing local social inequality” (pp. 725). Further, vertical, short-term funding channelled through NGOs to support local health activities in developing countries challenges local government authorities to coordinate funding, leads to service imbalances within

the health system and a loss of key personnel from the public sector due to salary disparities (Mussa, Pfeiffer, Gloyd, et. al., 2013).

A program may not even respond to the distribution of needs across a region, nation, or community. For example, Galway, Corbett and Zeng (2012), using multiple regression analyses, found no association between the geographic distribution of NGOs and community health needs identified by morbidity and mortality indicators. Similarly, NGOs have been noted to contribute to geographic inequalities, with some locations enjoying better support than others (Mussa, Pfeiffer, Gloyd, et. al., 2013). However, in one study of NGOs in Vietnam, the Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (2010) provided a counter argument, finding that that NGOs' efforts are in general responsive to identified community or population needs. In this research, we will see in the following chapters that although several respondents reported that NGOs greatly contributed to the country's development, their contribution has not been measured properly. As a result, the assumption that NGOs are invariably effective can be challenged. Also, these different findings suggest that NGOs' effects depend on several factors both from inside and outside the organizations.

A third sub-theme addresses the impact of funding uncertainty on program breadth, intensity, and sustainability. For example, in one qualitative study of collaboration between NGOs and public sector services in Ecuador, Biermann and colleagues found that because NGOs face financial uncertainties, they may be able to deliver only short-term interventions (Biermann, Eckhardt, Carlford, et. al., 2016). A study of NGOs in Guatemala discovered that heavy dependency on foreign, short-term, medically-focused, single-objective funding programs may

reduce implementation of preventive measures, limit opportunities for health education, and in the long run increase the risk of iatrogenic consequences (due to lack of proper health education on the use of a chemical – an insecticide named Lindane - which is used to treat lice) (Berry, 2014). Even when taking a community-partnership approach, NGOs' roles may remain restricted to a local implementation level and not have broader impact (Lewis & Opoku-Mensah, 2006). Tensions may exist between long- and short-term objectives (Adams & Halvorsen, 2014).

Funding uncertainties may affect NGOs' grassroots mandates. When NGOs sign contracts and grant agreements with funding agencies (e.g., governments and donors), they are by necessity moving closer to the donors in terms of addressing their priorities rather than those of the communities they intend to serve (Lewis & Opoku-Mensah, 2006). Amplifying this concern, Jennings argues that donors are likely to fund NGOs' projects directly, bypassing local government and their priorities (if identified) (Jennings, 2015). Despite this criticism, Jennings also recognizes the shortcomings of the public sector in many developing-country contexts, and admits to the "perceived slowness of bureaucracies and the malign impact of corruption" (p. 5) in local government administrations (Jennings, 2015).

In short, NGOs' relief actions contribute to improving community well-being through delivering health and social projects. However, criticisms of effectiveness and efficiency of NGO delivery exist because NGOs may not respond to community needs. NGOs are heavily dependent on short-term foreign, vertical, single-objective funding streams, and this reliance may result in their prioritizing accountability to donors over grassroots communities.

2.2. NGOs' methods of service delivery

Kajese (1987) argues that human resource development and institutional capacity building are important roles of NGOs in developing countries. NGOs' capacity-building projects introduce a wide variety of public health interventions, including behaviour change communication, awareness raising campaigns, and knowledge-exchange initiatives, in contexts that range from HIV/AIDS prevention to the development of economic opportunities (Odhiambo, Amoroso, Barebwanuwe, et. al., 2017, Freed, Dujon, Granek, et. al., 2016, Roy, 2010, Ahmed, 2009, Bhatia, 1999, Joinet & Nkini, 1996, Allebeck, 1990). Capacity building initiatives may be developed to meet macro-level objectives such as democracy, gender equity, and global citizenship (Suleiman, 2013, Humphries, Gomez, & Hartwig, 2011, Witteborn, 2010, Mayoux, 1993). NGOs may help to build institutional capacity in developing countries as a means of responsive regulation for sustainable development (Braithwaite, 2006). Likewise, some NGO activities have been shown to promote "corporate social responsibility" among businesses, prodding them to engage in more locally beneficial behaviours (Ghalib & Agupusi, 2014).

Many of the papers addressing community capacity building suggested that NGOs have generally performed well in promoting community participation in several development projects, including environmental protection, public health, and land reform (Hoque, Clarke, & Huang, 2016, Ghimire, 1998, Cincotta, 1994). Indeed, community participation and hence grassroots empowerment are values that many NGOs support.

The participation of communities greatly enhances the social capital of local populations in NGO projects' locations. Continuing this concern with capacity development, Islam, Siti Hajar, and Haris (2013) argue that local participation in designing, managing and evaluating initiatives is a key to success. Pillai and colleagues' quasi-experimental study found that social capital in communities working with the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) in four Latin American countries was higher than that of other communities (Pillai, Wei, & Maleku, 2013). The authors argue that ADRA projects increased communities' social capital because they promoted the interests and needs of the poorest and stimulated community engagement in providing social services through which significant positive socio-economic impacts were generated.

In addition, NGOs may pilot care and governance project designs that include sustainable development concepts. For instance, the Bangladeshi Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), piloted a comprehensive community development model rooted in close partnership agreements among several sectors to target the root cause of urban poverty (Chowdhury, Jahan, & Rahman, 2017, Chowdhury, Alam, & Ahmed, 2006). In the context of primary health care, the models also provide recommendations for public-private partnership agreements in terms of supplementing the efforts of the local public health sector (Craplet, 1997), satisfying clients and joining government efforts (Donaldson & Cernada, 1992), facilitating access by communities to local services and resources (Enahoro & Nwaobia, 2012, Levin & Kaddar, 2011, Lukaszczyk & Williamson, 2010, Kapur, 1996), engaging sectoral partners in coordination (Marozzi, 1998), fitting local situations and implementing innovations (Röper, 2000, Vivian, 1994), and enabling mechanisms and institutions (Aldashev, Marini, & Verdier, 2015).

2.3. Policy advocacy

Coupled with their direct development work, NGOs also advocate changes to international and local policies that relate to models of community organizing, public education, and ideal or ethical partnership agreements (Ohemeng, 2015, Ahmed & Potter, 2006). They may “change the policies and practices of governments, corporations and institutions that negatively impact...development” (Atkinson & Scurrah, 2009, pp. 6-7). During the past few decades, with the building of effective international networks and collaboration with top-level policymakers (Youde, 2012), NGOs have increasingly targeted global issues. They seek to represent the poor’s voice in advocating poverty-reduction strategies (Thacker, 1997, Ticehurst, 1996, Agbola, 1994, Bratton, 1990). They have also advocated successfully for environmental protection and education policies (Cook, Wright, & Andersson, 2017, Foo, 2013, Arts & Mack, 2003). Further, they may lobby and provide information to affect governments’ foreign aid policies in other countries (Stalling & Kim, 2017). Novogrodsky (2010) describes the role of NGOs in successfully reducing drug prices, thereby facilitating access to life-saving, essential drugs among millions of the poorest people in many developing countries. In particular, NGOs may link several sectors in national health research systems strengthening (Palmer, Anya, & Bloch, 2009), immunization (Poore, 1992), HIV/AIDS prevention and care (Rau, 1996), pharmaceutical policy (Reich, 1994), and hypertension prevention (Wilson, 2003). Cook, Wright and Andersson (2017) explain that NGOs endeavour to influence governments’ policy development processes for sustained changes.

At a wider level, NGOs' policy projects promote rights as a basic element of citizenship. Berlin and Berlin (2004) noted that by using the press and the internet to elevate and publicize their information campaigns, NGOs and their allies worked collaboratively to raise the autonomy of local Indigenous communities in Mexico. Moreover, the NGO-supported campaigns educated the public about their rights to participate in national elections (Chakanika & Chuma, 1999). Chapman and Fisher (2000) state that NGOs' successful human rights promotion results from collaborative actions and grassroots participation, and lays foundations for advancing rights on a global level.

Ahmed and Potter (2006) note that NGOs successfully influence global political dialogues because they have the power to persuade. This power comes from their capacity to communicate influential messages in international negotiations (Dany, 2013) and to build capacity (Banks & Hulme, 2012). The power also results from their reputation in delivering concrete and positive outcomes to communities and thus gaining trust and legitimacy as development actors (Youde, 2012, Haque, 2002).

NGOs may engage in advocacy as one component of a multiple-component project. For example, in Honduras, development policy advocacy by NGOs was part of a comprehensive community development program that improved livelihoods and levels of community participation (Brehm, 2000). In the Philippines, NGOs advocated for community organizations in a multiple-component adolescent reproductive health program (Divinagracia, 1998).

Despite such advocacy wins, because they may lack carefully positioned and sound arguments backed by quality evidence NGOs may not be recognized as official parties to decision-making processes (Atkinson & Scurrah, 2009). Some observers have even suggested that NGOs may distort data (images and messages) to achieve their objectives, compromising their legitimacy to conduct advocacy campaigns (Dany, 2013). As a result, Cumper (1986) notes that NGOs should exercise considerable care in crafting policy briefs and statements, ensuring that they rely on relevant scientific evidence.

Atkinson and Scurrah (2009, pp. 46-49) used the term “political responsibility” to discuss the various stakeholders to whom NGOs are accountable in project implementation. In the context of trans-national NGO advocacy campaigns, they note that the stakeholders include beneficiaries, funders, NGO missions, other active groups in the campaigns, and NGOs ‘alliance members. Political responsibility is described as the approach NGOs employ to balance the interests, power dynamics among stakeholders, as well as their principles and values when involved in transnational advocacy. Van Tuijl & Jordan (1999) regard political responsibility as a way NGOs employ to improve their legitimacy in a global governance landscape. NGOs may play multiple roles with several stakeholders at a time. For instance, when NGOs receive funding and sub-grant to several local partners, they concurrently play the roles of grant recipients and donors. How NGOs balance responding to community needs, meeting donors’ requirements, and observing state’s sovereign directions, possibly requires further studies.

In short, NGOs increasingly target numerous global issues, aiming for sustained changes at the policy level. NGO advocacy practices may lead to structural changes in numerous contexts, and

through different means. NGOs' power to persuade explains the success of NGOs' advocacy. The power results from (1) NGOs' capacity to communicate and to build capacity, and from (2) their reputation in delivering positive outcomes and gaining trust. NGOs need to rely on relevant scientific evidence and establish their legitimacy in order to be considered official parties to decision-making.

2.4. “Watchdog” or monitoring role

The recent move toward global public–private partnerships seldom emphasizes civil society partners' role as watchdogs or critical voices in global-level decision-making (Storeng & Puyvallee, 2018). In this role, NGOs may highlight problems associated with development, policy implementation, and compliance with domestic and international agreements and policies (Lewis & Kanji, 2009). For example, NGOs can provide critical insights to governments regarding their performance, particularly in addressing poverty and vulnerability (Lewis & Opoku-Mensah, 2006). In Vietnam, foreign NGOs are members of a Consultative Group that helps strategize the country's development (Stallings & Kim, 2017). The donor-government consultative machinery plays its role of harmonization among donors and supporting Vietnam's institutional reforms through its biannual meetings (Bartholomew & Lister, 2005). The meetings “provide a forum for discussions between the Government of Viet Nam and its development partners on economic policy issues, strategies for reducing poverty, and ODA effectiveness” (Government of Vietnam, 2013). In addition, NGOs play the role of environmental protection watchdogs globally by virtue of their ability to catalyze, propose and realize changes (McDougall, 2006, Holdgate, 1995).

NGOs also keep governments accountable to their constituent communities. For example, they have documented monitoring public water supply projects in the Philippines (Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development, 1997). In Africa, the African Population group (1995) noted the significant involvement of NGOs in conceptualizing, developing, and monitoring population policies and programs. Likewise, Sethi and Rovenpor (2016) reported that NGOs monitored private companies' compliance with locally regulated minimum wages and working conditions.

According to Mitchell (2015), NGOs play the monitoring role because they want to ensure the transparency of their work. Mitchell (2015) argues that when transparency is not maintained, NGOs must consume more resources to deal with unclear or overlapping policy-related matters, and hence compromising their cost-effectiveness and future potential funding opportunities. Mitchell's (2015) concern with transparency is driven by a question of spending.

2.5. Global health research role

NGO engagement in research may benefit decision-makers, scholars, and communities. They may be knowledge creators as well as knowledge brokers insofar as they translate scientific and technical information generated by academic and government researchers into terms understandable to decision-makers, the media, and the public (Mabawonku, 2001). Thanks to their expertise in stewardship (e.g., promoting and advocating research) and resource mobilization (e.g., building trans-disciplinary teams) (Delisle, Roberts, Munro, et. al., 2005), NGOs may produce evidence-based recommendations or initiatives for new or amended laws, regulations, policies, and programs.

However, “perceptive constraint” is among the main challenges related to NGOs’ involvement in global health research (Delisle, Roberts, Munro, et. al., 2005). NGOs consider themselves unfamiliar with how a research is conducted. For example, a traditional view of research might suggest that it is academic, top-down, and non-participative, which may be perceived to run against NGOs’ values and commitment to communities. The lack of strong research mandates in a NGO’s mission may make some NGOs reluctant to engage in research, at least in a major, visible way. These perceptive constraints also come from donors. Many donors also do not regard NGOs as research institutions, and will often proscribe using funds for research purposes unrelated to program evaluation (Delisle, Roberts, Munro, et. al., 2005).

The quality of NGO-led research has also been called into question (Atkinson & Scurrah, 2009). Because much of NGO-conducted research is linked to assessing operations or evaluating local programs, it may not meet global standards for academic rigor (Delisle, Roberts, Munro, et. al., 2005). Also, some NGOs lack the strong links with universities and research institutions that would enable them to access and work with academic colleagues in publishing peer-reviewed research reports (Olivier, Hunt, & Ridde, 2016). And those links, if they exist, may not be strong and established through firm, long-term agreements.

Olivier, Hunt, and Ridde (2016) have advanced a framework for building effective NGO-researcher partnerships characterized by trust, transparency, respect, solidarity, and mutuality. According to their framework, increased frequency of contact between NGOs and research institutions, enhancing the quality of two-way communications, and the development of formal

partnership agreements can be practical and useful for mitigating challenges and conflicts in academic-NGO relationships. Further, periodic evaluations of the partnerships should use structural indicators (e.g., the number and characteristics of links) and process indicators (e.g., learning, trust, fairness, legitimacy, and power) to improve partnership performance. However, how these values and indicators might be practically and effectively measured remains unclear.

2.6. Essential elements of government-NGO partnerships in developing countries

Government-NGO partnerships cannot work without trust and accountability. Batley (2006) notes that factors influential to government-NGO trust include clearly-defined service standards and bilaterally respected policy dialogues. These attributes ensure that NGOs have equal, independent roles in state-NGO ventures within the frame of a service contract signed between the state as donor and the NGOs as service providers. In contrast, mistrust between governments and NGOs often exists in government-NGO partnerships due to discrepancies between generally supportive policies and unsupportive, repressive practices.

Durable public-private partnerships (including NGOs) also require that partners share responsibilities and risks among themselves. For instance, Solana (2014) recommends that risks be mitigated by a most capable party, and responsibilities should be implemented by a most potent partner. Bustreo, Harding, and Axelsson (2003) argue that duty clarifications facilitate smooth service delivery. A partnership agreement with clear terms and conditions, alongside effective methods and clear responsibilities to bridge discrepancies, supports long-term commitment of involved institutions.

Partnerships also need member commitment and willingness. For instance, in a Bangladeshi community development project, the partners were committed to strategizing interventions to improve population health (Ahmed, 1999). Brinkerhoff (1995) notes that strong commitment to cross-sectoral development practices leads to sustainable natural resource management. In addition, Paudel (2013) stresses the significance of governments' willingness in partnerships. Strengthening state-NGO relationships necessitates stakeholder commitment to assigned tasks, shared roles, shared goals, and monitored processes, to ensure goal achievements.

Healthy government-NGO partnerships require meaningful engagements in policy development (Chapuis, Flower, Wirz, et. al., 2000). However, Hannah (2007) was concerned that NGOs still struggled for a formal space when they advocated policy changes in developing countries. This meant that the NGOs could not have meaningful positions in the policy sphere, probably due to different perspectives, goals, policy development processes, and proposed outcomes between the governments and the NGOs. Healthy government-NGO partnerships remained unachieved.

Several factors influence government-NGO partnerships in developing countries (McLoughlin, 2011, Roka & Fernando, 2013). Haque (2002) evaluated local and global factors influencing government-NGO relations. Local factors (increased memberships, strengthened images, enhanced government recognition) contribute to NGO growth in a country's development. Global factors include (1) an emerging neoliberal ideology, which de-emphasizes state roles and stresses non-state actor roles; (2) NGOs' development alternatives, which attract donors' funding and donors' support to engage in a country's development agenda; (3) trans-national NGO alliances, which offer media access, technical expertise, and financial resources to local

advocacy projects; and (4) donors, who may favour financing through NGOs in developing countries.

2.7. Influences internal and external to NGO operations

Current literature thoroughly debates and sketches out NGO practices in international politics and global governance. However, the debates and sketches do not explain how NGOs wield power and influence while occupying a middle ground governance position. In addition, the current literature occasionally makes reference to the effects of social and political uncertainty on NGO operations. Watkins, Swidler, and Hannan (2012) and MacPhail (2010) state that the uncertainty may shape both NGO strategies as well as prospects for long term survival.

Serpell (2014) notes that uncertainty has three related terms: ambiguity, difficulty, and indeterminacy, and may refer to either the object or the cognitive state of the observer.

Uncertainty refers to what has not definitely been known. Serpell (2014, pp. 9) emphasizes gaps in current knowledge about “the object”. Han, Klein, and Arora (2011, pp. 830) mention “a subjective consciousness or awareness of one’s lack of knowledge, without which one could not feel uncertain”. When applying these understandings in the NGO landscape, uncertainty is about the ambiguity or challenges to the several aspects of NGO operations, or unclear steps forward in their operations and strategies, in the perception of the NGOs’ staff as well as the stakeholders (e.g., governments, community groups, donors). Knowing the unknown becomes part of solutions for uncertainty.

The concept of uncertainty has recently been used during economic and political upheavals and public health emergencies to describe conditions that require the adoption of flexible solutions when scientific foundations are unclear (MacPhail, 2010). However, the use of this concept in international development is limited. Watkins and colleagues (2012) offer various descriptions of uncertainty (vague, unpredictable, ambiguous, ineffective, unrealizable, unrealistic, and unknown), and state that uncertainties appear in NGO goals, delivery methods, and operating environment. More practically, MacPhail (2010) addresses the “ubiquitous” (pp. 58) nature of uncertainty in global health, where information gaps exist in particular areas, and when solutions are needed to bridge these knowledge gaps. Both Watkins and colleagues (2012) and MacPhail (2010) admit that many of today’s pressing policy issues require confronting unknown and unknowable gaps, with choices being made only with difficulty, if at all, in the face of scarce or uncertain information.

Cooper and Pratten (2015) note that uncertainty relates to social ties, and cannot stand as an outside, external factor. Picturing an African setting of poverty, oppression, violence, and pain, that cause uncertainty, Cooper and Pratten (2015) argue that how people think of and act against those uncertainties are important. Everyday life embraces risks and unpredictability that generate instability and incoherence. Several concepts are used to express uncertainty (e.g. insecurity, ambiguity, risk, indeterminacy, confusion, doubtfulness); all express feelings that the authors call a component of “lived experience”. These feelings, on one side, refer to a lack of knowledge or inability of predict the outcomes of an event. However, these feelings can also represent a positive source for negotiating insecurity, creating relationships, and imagining the future.

Uncertainty is a product of social and environmental contingencies. Whyte and Siu (2015) note that uncertainty arises when we lack protection from danger, or when our arrangements are too weak to support us. In response to these conditions, we tend to apply tactics to make things more secure. Whyte and Siu (2015) also suggest using the concept of “contingencies”. An event exists depending on several people, institutions, resources, or circumstances, each with different values. Cooper (2015, pp. 55) discusses child sponsorship of a NGO operating in Kenya, where reliance on luck and chance of being sponsored among local children represents their powerlessness to engage in decision making, and populations have to learn to accept this disappointment without protest. In this story, whether a child is sponsored is contingent on several other factors (such as sponsors’ requirements, the NGO’s screening criteria) over which they cannot control. The children cannot apply any tactics to secure sponsorship; they had to rely on luck and chance. Sometimes, we cannot control those contingencies, and this failure makes the occurrence of events contingent on other things.

Kim and Lee (2018) examine uncertainty in medical practices in South Korea. The medical uncertainty that they address results from two sources. First, medical practitioners do not have adequate or complete scientific knowledge or data in their practices. This may be considered probability or risk in Samimidan-Darash’s (2016) study, as medical practitioners may not have confidence in providing a treatment for patients. How to apply classroom knowledge to a real patient may be difficult. Second, doctor-patient relations may be characterized by uncertainty because the doctors have to achieve a balance between “good science” and their patients’ interests. Unfortunately, Kim and Lee (2018) note that medical uncertainty has not been

acknowledged in medical education and practice. This intolerance generates stress among medical practitioners and represents a threat to patient safety. The first step toward addressing medical uncertainty is therefore to create an environment that acknowledges it.

Han, Klein, and Arora (2011) identify three sources of uncertainty in health care: probability, ambiguity and complexity. These three sources are represented by specific percentages of being able to successfully address a health problem. However, how to apply these percentages to a specific individual is not clear. For example, when an individual has a 20% probability of benefitting from a treatment, this represents an indeterminate outcome. There are also likely to be different opinions among experts regarding the health issue, so the treatment course is less than clear. This uncertainty influences several dimensions of health care, ranging from disease-based issues (diagnosis) to person-centered issues (well-being). Han and colleagues conclude that this uncertainty in healthcare needs further examination in order “to understand more precisely what coping with uncertainty entails and how it can be promoted (Han, Klein, & Arora, 2011, pp. 836).

Zeiderman, Kaker, Silver, and Wood (2015) conducted case studies of several urban areas in the global South, and discovered that uncertainty is a theme that cuts across urban living, from civil lives to city design and governance. The scholars note that, “when solutions to uncertainty are found, there is hardly ever a final resolution or fixed point of closure... and uncertainty is rarely, if ever, eradicated from the urban milieu; rather, it is managed, displaced, deferred, reconfigured, or reproduced” (pp. 299). In this sense, uncertainty is generated continuously from actual field-

based conditions, it generates demands for solutions, which, in turn, give rise to new uncertainties.

Samimidan-Darash (2016) separates uncertainty from risk. Risk refers to incidents to which probabilities can be assigned. Samimidan-Darash (2013, pp. 3) also regards “possible uncertainty” as risk, in a sense that the risk can be mitigated through actions associated with knowledge available around the concerned risks. Risk control, therefore, engages measures (e.g., insurance) that convert obstacles to possibilities. In contrast, uncertainty refers to events with unknown, non-measurable risks. Uncertainty is not only about an unknown future, it may also be generated through the actual practices in real life (Samimidan-Darash, 2013, Zeiderman, Kaker, Silver, & Wood, 2015). That is, new problems may arise from the events for which systems need to prepare. Samimidan-Darash (2013) notes that “uncertainty denotes the opening for a variety of possibilities, such that no single possibility constitutes an answer for the question it poses”. Governing uncertainty, therefore, requires preparedness, and “the rationality of preparedness addresses a seemingly inevitable future disaster that can only be managed once it happens” (Samimidan-Darash, 2016, pp. 362). The concept of preparedness is also used by Zeiderman, Kaker, Silver, and Wood (2015) to mean resilience or sustainability in uncertain situations.

In short, uncertainty refers to current vague and unpredictable knowledge about “the object”. At times, uncertainty arises when we lack protection from dangerous life events, or when our arrangements are too weak to support us. Uncertainty generates demands for solutions, which, in turn, give rise to new uncertainties. The following paragraphs examine the operations of NGO

sector, with influencing factors vague and unpredictable in both their own operations and their working environment. We will see that although NGOs' leaders devise many ways to survive and to implement their projects, several dilemmas and problems arise.

Uncertainty can be seen in NGO struggles to fulfil their mission across time and space. Those struggles originate from forces both internal and external to NGO operations, and shape their strategies and survival. Internal factors are comprised of factors or processes within NGOs that impact the success of their operations, such as project design and implementation. To some degree, NGOs have control over these factors. In contrast, external influences may constrain NGO's abilities to achieve their goals and objectives. These factors may range from resources available for project delivery to social and political conditions that constrain or skew NGO operations. These are factors that are typically outside the control of NGOs.

NGOs use several ways to overcome those internal and external factors. For internal factors over which NGOs may have some control, they may, for instance, adjust their program designs and methods of program implementation. However, the success of those adjustments heavily depends on several other factors, such as funding availability, community participation, and governments' policies. In contrast, for external factors (resources availability, local social and political conditions), although NGOs cannot control these, they can use their capacity to influence stakeholders and advocate for changes. However, whether NGOs succeed in influencing stakeholders and advocating for changes may require good program designs and effective program implementation. The above uncertain conditions, and their inter-relations, greatly impact the effectiveness of NGO operations.

2.7.1. Definitional uncertainty

There are no agreed upon definitions of NGOs and this may represent one significant uncertainty. According to Ahmed and Potter (2006), Watkins and colleagues (2012), and Anheier and Salomon (1998), the many ways of defining what constitutes a NGO may challenge local authorities because they may not effectively manage the several NGOs operating in their regions, and may, as a result, impose obstacles to NGO operations or undermine NGO engagements in society. Also, scholars and practitioners may not properly evaluate or research NGO operations because of mistakes in selecting NGOs for their evaluation or research projects.

The study of NGOs crosses borders and disciplines. Ahmed and Potter (2006) offer three different lenses with which to view NGOs. From a public administration angle, NGOs may be considered charity, non-profit organizations. They may represent public interest groups if viewed as a dimension of social movements. From a technical point of view, NGOs may be seen simply as technical advisors or service providers.

Ahmed and Potter (2006) write that few studies have viewed NGOs in the context of mainstream international relations. They highlight two international relations theories that may explain the establishment, operation and development of NGOs. First, the theory of transnationalism views NGOs as part of larger transnational networks that include many not-state actors, including transnational corporations, epistemic communities of scientists and technical specialists, and ethnic diasporas. NGOs may form networks or coalitions across the borders independent of

governments in order to target the global issues in their own way and based on their own interests or values.

Second, the theoretical perspective of constructivism suggests that organizational identities, interests and roles are all socially constructed. The interactions between governments and other social actors underlie the development of international systems, and these in turn influence how states and actors define each other's roles. In this sense, NGOs enjoy power and their capacity to influence through communication media. NGOs often undertake public education, policy advocacy, community empowerment, network building, and monitoring of international agreements. Through these activities, NGOs are able to create a shared understanding of their roles and functions with the key stakeholders. However, because NGOs are subordinate to governments' sovereignty, states' prejudice on NGOs' operations remains.

However, despite NGOs' rapid proliferation and diversification over the last three decades, they remain poorly understood as social and institutional entities (Bernard & Grewal, 2014). NGOs' technical expertise, their operational contexts, their work disciplines and approaches, their communicative influence and power, have been analyzed from different perspectives and not without criticism and controversy. Although poorly understood, NGOs' influence may sometimes be overstated. For instance, D'Errico, Wake, & Wake (2010) found that the "Heal Africa" model in the Eastern Congo might greatly contribute to local emergency health care services, and might be an important component of a peace-keeping mission. However, the ability of this kind of organization to resolve or prevent conflict should not be overstated. The authors argue that NGO roles in conflict prevention and reconstruction are often limited.

Overstating the power and influence of NGOs may lead to unrealistic expectations among the communities where they operate.

2.7.2. Unclear legitimacy and accountability

Some NGOs may claim that they directly represent disadvantaged people because of their commitment to delivering essential services, policy advocacy on behalf of communities, and provision of technical expertise to address problems. However, Hudson (2001) argues that the accountability for their citizens and the authority to mobilize resources for populations' well-being, in this case, falls under governments. Sovereignities do not generally allow for any substitutions of their authority, intention, and trust. In contrast, Atkinson and Scurrah (2009) argue that NGOs do indeed have legitimacy outside of the government sphere because they contribute significantly to democratic debates and actively promote globally-accepted fundamental values (human rights principles).

Legitimacy is, of course, a socially-constructed value (Hudson, 2001). NGOs interact among themselves, with states, donors, and other actors in the international relations landscape. Each of the stakeholders may change their views on NGOs as a category, and on individual NGOs, depending the state of their relationships, and this change may affect their expectations on NGO roles. Therefore, Hudson (2001) suggests that NGOs gain legitimacy by having their values audited by stakeholders. For example, NGOs may build credibility and increase transparency through demonstrating to the public that their operations are consistent with their values.

Institutions need to be accountable to multiple stakeholders. One important area of accountability is to donors. Governments account for decisions and laws that affect their citizens and residents as tax payers. Those governments not elected through democratic processes still have sovereignty according to the United Nations. Companies are generally responsible to their shareholders. In this sense, NGOs are accountable to their funding agencies, which means upward accountability (Atkinson & Scurrah, 2009). Thus, NGOs maintain trust and good-will among donors to ensure funds.

NGOs are also accountable to the people they intend to help. Fox (2000) argues that this level of accountability is particularly weak. High reliance on funds moves NGOs away from this kind of “downward” accountability. Yet this focus on community is often articulated in their mission, vision, and value statements. If NGOs are to be loyal to their mission and vision, they must enhance downward accountability through committing to their mission and vision, ensuring that their values (participation, empowerment, sustainability) are reflected in programs and interventions that they deliver, social auditing and participatory budgeting, because these mechanisms allow for stakeholder participation in financing and operational assessments (Atkinson & Scurrah, 2009, Clark, 2001).

Rigotto (2009) questioned NGOs’ “real” accountability in Brazil when the NGOs there identified industry-associated risks in industrial zones, but undertook no social or political actions to mediate them. Several behind-the-scenes factors likely inhibited NGOs from taking such actions, for example, availability of funding, expertise, and a hostile political climate (Rigotto,

2009). If NGOs are an arm of corporate or industrial groups their missions then represent the interests of these groups, rather than grassroots communities.

The above paragraphs reported on the various publics and stakeholders (donors, states, grassroots communities) to whom NGOs are accountable. Those groups may have quite different and even competing interests. NGOs themselves also have their own capacity to serve those groups, and their own missions, visions, and regulations to obey. How to balance the various interests and values, and educate the stakeholders about NGOs' roles, seems to have the potential to contribute to NGO uncertainty and overall functioning.

2.7.3. Vague strategic plans

The mission and vision statements of development-oriented NGOs often embrace principles of community empowerment, program sustainability and citizen participation. However, in practice these principles might be applied differently by various NGOs (Watkins, Swidler, & Hannan, 2012, Kuhl, 2009). In addition, funding agencies might sometimes impose their own understanding of these principles (Swidler & Watkins, 2009).

Gilson and colleagues (1994) note that the idealistic principles of NGOs may be compromised in a context of resource constraints. For instance, they may become for-profit health service providers and may not observe or adhere to their foundational humanitarian principles (Gilson, et al., 1994). Also, NGOs may cease coordinating activities with governments, thereby leading to concerns about their "true" motives.

Complicating things further, NGOs may sub-contract with intermediary organizations to implement and evaluate activities. These intermediary organizations likely have their own objectives, and this may affect the way that local activities are conducted (Watkins, Swidler, & Hannan, 2012), particularly in cases where NGOs depend on these organizations to deliver contracted services in geographically isolated or culturally different communities. NGO performance, as well as judgments of it, can be skewed by the behaviour of subcontracted organizations.

Problems may emerge in NGO planning and prioritization. Galway, Corbett and Zeng (2012) are concerned about the disjuncture between community health needs as identified by morbidity and mortality indicators and the distribution of NGOs. For example, this study found no statistically meaningful association between NGO activities and populations' general needs or health-specific needs, and between municipal poverty levels and NGO activities in Bolivia. Therefore, the study concluded that the NGO sector did not target the poorest and neediest regions or populations within a nation. In a study of NGOs in Papua New Guinea, Holdsworth and Winkley (1990) discussed how organizations prioritized projects in populous locations rather than in scarcely-populated, distantly-placed islands. NGOs considered their capacity in delivering project activities in, and the accessibility to remote, less-populated areas, versus the potential and the appreciation to serve the higher number of beneficiaries more easily in more densely-populated areas. The authors concluded that although NGOs need to be flexible in implementing projects, they should also be careful to ensure geographic coverage.

2.7.4. Financial insecurity

Material incentives firmly shape NGO behaviours and strategies. Cooley and Ron (2002) show that donor funding is largely disbursed through private groups and NGO agreements. Grants are often short-term and renewable only upon satisfactory assessment of an initial phase of activity. The assessments set strict conditions for competitive grant bidding among NGOs, targeting waste, effectiveness, and quality (Kamat, 2003). NGO funding is always subject to these kinds of performance assessments.

How NGOs in low-middle income countries react to donors when they shift funding priorities has been questioned. Arhin, Kumi and Adam (2018) analysed qualitative data from 65 in-depth interviews with Ghanaian NGOs and learned that NGOs used several tactics to survive fiscal uncertainty. These tactics include what they term: (1) putting “eggs-in-multiple-baskets” when organizations diversify sources of income, (2) cost-cutting, which means that organizations decrease expenses on administration and on other indirect costs as a way to demonstrate an efficient use of resources, (3) credibility-building, which requires special focus on systematic improvements in order to generate trust-worthy images to donors and supporters, and (4) visibility-enhancing, when NGOs apply measures to visualize their outcomes to donors and supporters.

NGOs may change their behaviours to fit the funding environments. For example, NGOs added some departments, which may normally exist in business-oriented enterprises, in their structures (public relations, fund raising, internal audits, accounting) (Cooley & Ron, 2002). NGOs in India, in response to external pressures, shifted their concentration from broad-based consciousness raising, social change and political organizing, to individual-based capacity

building and skills training (Kamat, 2003). In addition, the concepts of empowerment and participation changed from broad-based political education and community organization to technical assessment of need- and competency-based social and economic contributions (Kamat, 2003). Kamat (2003) warns that the shift to managerial and technical approaches may generally disconnect NGOs from the political capability to change society. In contexts where government-NGO relations do not support the NGOs' operations, the lack of political capability may enable the NGOs to operate more freely. However, the disconnect cannot support the fulfilment of NGOs' missions and visions of transforming the lives of or generating lasting impacts for vulnerable populations.

NGOs may satisfy their grant-awarding agencies by not reporting something. For example, donors may, at times, not coordinate activities among themselves, leading to program duplication and overlap, and hence waste of already-scarce resources (Cooley & Ron, 2002). However, NGOs might not dare to publicize such a problem because they are afraid of dissatisfying donors and losing funding (Cooley & Ron, 2002).

Donor expectations have been shown to drive project objectives, project timeline, and implementation processes (Lewis & Opoku-Mensah, 2006). Biermann and colleagues (2016) argue that NGO projects are often unsustainable over the long term because of the short-term nature of funding coupled with changing funding priorities. Narrowness of funding objectives is also an issue. For example, in medical aid NGOs, dependence on foreign short-term, medically-focused, single-objective funds may result in programs that offer few preventive measures, lack of educational instruction of local providers, and create risks for adverse outcomes (Berry, 2014).

Of course, NGOs may simply prioritize organizational survival at any cost at the expense of community needs.

2.7.5. Local conditions

Watkins, Swidler, & Hannan (2012) noted that after being recruited, staff may be found to be dishonest or unable to provide satisfactory performance. Additionally, as happening in many other organizations, miscommunication or corruption might occur. In addition, project progress and quality may be influenced by physical challenges such as long geographic distance, transportation and communication difficulties, and natural and man-made disasters. Benton (2016) examined the everyday practices of global health NGOs in Africa (expatriate staff recruitment, local staff's reception and expectations), and reported a racialized assessment of expatriates in terms of their expertise, mobility and professional success. Watkins, Swidler, & Hannan (2012) are concerned that NGOs may sometimes contract a third-party intermediary to implement several activities in local project sites. In this case, Watkins, Swidler, & Hannan (2012) comment that these local conditions may be exacerbated when information is filtered through third-party intermediaries, who may bias or restrict access to important information.

Normally, volunteers are considered a vital part of NGO operations because they contribute valuable time, technical capacity, money, and energy at little-to-no cost. Examining this issue through the lens of social capital, Jaskyte (2017) argues that the relationship between non-profit organizations and volunteers is mutually beneficial. If NGOs cannot provide the benefits that are expected by volunteers, or if volunteers cannot perform the activities that are required by NGOs, the NGO-volunteer relationship is compromised.

2.7.6. Summary

To summarize, this analysis of the current literature raises a number of questions that require further research and analysis. The first has to do with how NGOs operate under the general umbrella of public-private partnerships. In many ways they occupy a middle-ground between the public not-for-profit and the private for-profit sectors, yet the inherent tensions and conflicts that may characterize this position are not well understood, particularly in contexts where NGOs are responsible for delivering critical services at the community level. While NGOs may endeavour to balance the interests of various stakeholders, a question arises as to how NGOs function when this balance is not achieved or is unachievable. Addressing this question may provide a fuller picture of how NGOs function in governance contexts.

Secondly, the relationship between NGOs and government requires further examination. It remains unclear how NGOs negotiate the scope of their activities with governments, who may not necessarily prioritize community level needs, especially those of communities that are poor or marginal and hence lack political power. Also, how NGOs manage the political risks inherent in monitoring governments' policy implementation has not been fully examined. Research documenting the nuances of these potentially fraught relationships, especially if it includes a focus on wider structures, politics, and socio-economical contexts, would help us understand NGOs' governance roles, as these are potentially shaped by the wider environment (Wadham & Warren, 2014).

Third, further research is needed as to how NGOs are able to survive over time and continue their program commitments at the community level in contexts characterized by funding uncertainties. In addition, evidence of the correlation of funding and program efforts within countries and regions may be needed in order to fully ascertain the effectiveness of NGOs' projects. Clarifying these issues may facilitate the assignment of better and more effective roles for NGOs in advancing equitable global development.

Fourth, NGOs' advocacy in support of global development goals, while promising, requires careful assessment and evaluation. NGOs' power to persuade and engage in social or policy change has not fully been explored. It is also not clear how NGOs can promote and commit to long-term goals given what is typically unstable or changeable funding. The roles that NGOs can or should play in global governance could be better supported or promoted if these areas can be clarified. This is especially important because NGOs often lack management capacity to assume a strong position in official policy processes, actions that build NGOs' management capacity are either not well-understood or only vaguely described. Further work remains to be done in this area.

Finally, factors internal and external to NGO operations do not stand separately. They, instead, interact with each other to complicate NGO operations, particularly under unpredictable circumstances. However, NGOs still act to survive. Unfortunately, the literature has not provided a full analysis of these interactions.

The attainment of sustainable development goals demands effective coordination of multiple stakeholders, including NGOs, and requires engagement with global institutions at many levels. For example, foreign NGOs are key players in the UN as well as other intergovernmental organizations. This engagement highlights the potential of NGOs to help secure commitments to and achievement of sustainable development goals. However, to better understand and support this potential, we require a fuller evaluation of how NGOs balance multiple interests in various social, political, and economic contexts while at the same time dealing with the vagaries of a constantly changing funding landscape. The literature also indicates that little attention has been given to understanding how NGOs wield power and influence in the complex arena of global governance. Assessments that focus on the questions we have posed here may offer a path forward for maximizing the effects that NGOs and their partner organizations might have in promoting the achievement of the sustainable development goals.

CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH SETTING

Vietnam declared its independence from France in 1945. Secours Populaire Francais seems to have been the very first NGO to land in Vietnam, in 1948 (Dang, 2009). Only limited information exists on NGO operations between 1945 and 1954. The end of the French Resistance War in 1954 marked the country's separation: the north became the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and the south became the Republic of Vietnam. During the period of 1954 to the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, 60 foreign NGOs operated in south Vietnam, including Care International, Catholic Relief Services, and the International Rescue Committee, mainly providing relief activities to communities and immigrants from the north (Dang, 2009). When the Vietnam War ended in 1975, Vietnam became a communist country with a centralized economy and with closer diplomatic and economic relationships with Soviet Union and communist block. The political atmosphere and regulations did not allow foreign, western style NGOs to operate in the country. Foreign NGOs therefore terminated their activities and withdrew from the country. The period between 1975 and the period of economic reform that began in 1986 is marked by just a few intermittent and modest humanitarian actions. Both the political control of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the economic embargo of the United States Government prevented non-profit relief activities.

The 1986 Open-Door policy passed by the Communist Party of Vietnam reformed Vietnam's economy and transformed the country from one of the world's poorest into a lower middle-income country (LMIC) with a GDP per capita of US\$1,260 in 2011 (World Bank, 2013). The higher macroeconomic status of Vietnam in the 1980s gave the country an enviable record for economic and infrastructure development among World Bank borrowers on one hand, but on the

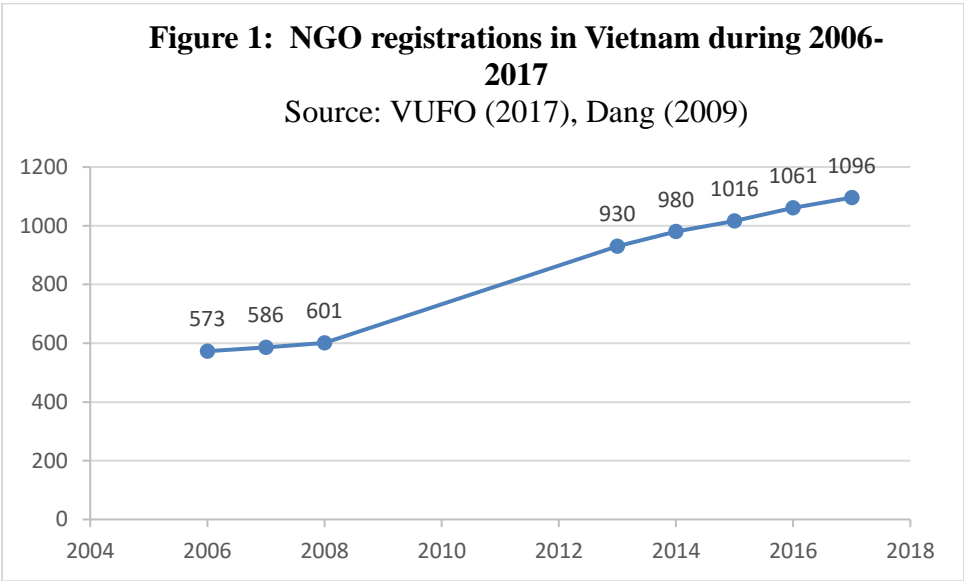
other hand, challenged the country in terms of competitively attracting international development funds. For instance, the Danish development agency (DANIDA) stopped prioritizing Vietnam in 2018, as did the UK (Department For international Development) in 2017. Several other donors reduced or changed the scope of their programs. The EU and Australia have continued their support of Vietnam but shifted their focus to gender issues and women's rights. Many in the non-profit sector, including foreign NGOs, faced budget shortfalls. For instance, one foreign NGO found their budget cut from US \$20-21 million dollars in the 2012-2013 fiscal year to US \$17-18 million currently. Foreign NGOs became seriously concerned about their levels of funding when Vietnam was removed from donors' priority lists.

The 1986 Open-Door policy allowed for the first time the engagement of many foreign organizations in the country's development. This policy was especially meaningful to the country in the context of the collapse of the former Soviet Union and several Eastern European countries. Coopération Internationale pour le Développement et la Solidarité (CIDSE) landed in Vietnam in October 1988, followed by several other foreign NGOs. Today, around a thousand foreign NGOs operate across geographic locations, and across several sectors, ranging from care of the aged to climate change mitigation, contributing approximate US\$300 million annually to the country's development (Vietnam Union for Friendship Organizations (VUFO), 2017).

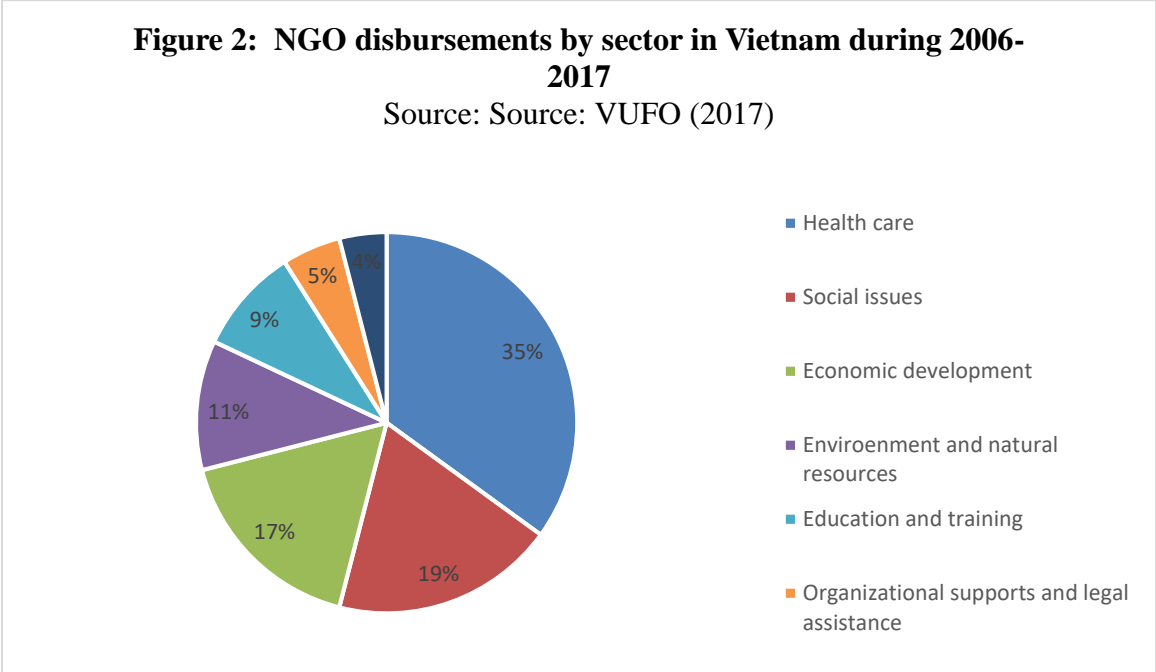
According to Decree No. 12/2012/ND-CP which specifies the registration and management of activities of NGOs in Vietnam, foreign NGOs are organizations or foundations that are established under foreign laws and that carry out development assistance and humanitarian aid activities not for profit or other purposes in Vietnam (Government of Vietnam, 2012). The

Government of Vietnam issues a foreign NGO Operations Certificate of Registration, Project Office Certificate of Registration, or Representative Office Certificate of Registration, depending on how the NGO establishes their operations in the country. This means that a foreign NGO in Vietnam is sponsored by another NGO (that is based overseas) to implement activities in Vietnam.

Increasing numbers of NGOs have registered their operations in Vietnam (VUFO, 2017, Dang, 2009). Figure 1 shows a sharp increase in the total number of foreign NGOs officially registered during the period 2006-2017; the number of registered NGOs nearly doubles in more than 10 years. In absolute terms, over 500 new NGOs registered to operate in Vietnam during the period from 2006-2017. This graph, however, does not show the currently active, function NGOs that are delivering projects. The NGO Resource Center (2018) lists 151 active NGOs up to August 2018.



NGO projects are scattered across sectors in Vietnam (VUFO, 2017). The following pie chart (Figure 2) shows that one-third of NGO funds support the health care sector, and this figure doubles for assistance for economic development. The health and social sectors together account for more than half of total NGO funding for Vietnam. Other sectors receiving NGO aid include environmental and natural resources (11%), education and training (9%), organizational support and legal assistance 5%).



In addition, NGO activities are scattered across geographic locations of the country (Figure 3), with each region generally accounting for 10-17% of NGO funds (VUFO, 2017). While the Red River Delta and North Central provinces receive more NGO funds than other areas, the central highland receives the fewest NGO projects compared with other geographical regions.

Figure 3: NGO disbursements by geography in Vietnam during 2006-2017

Source: VUFO (2017)

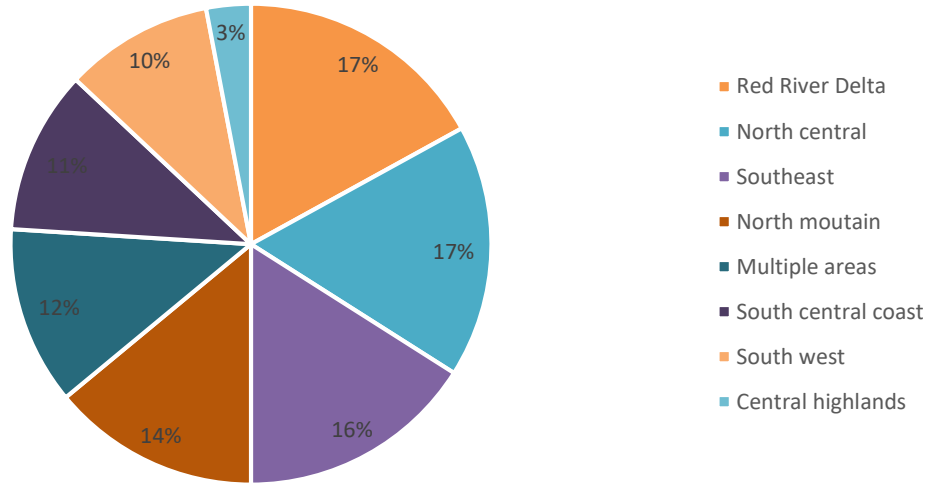
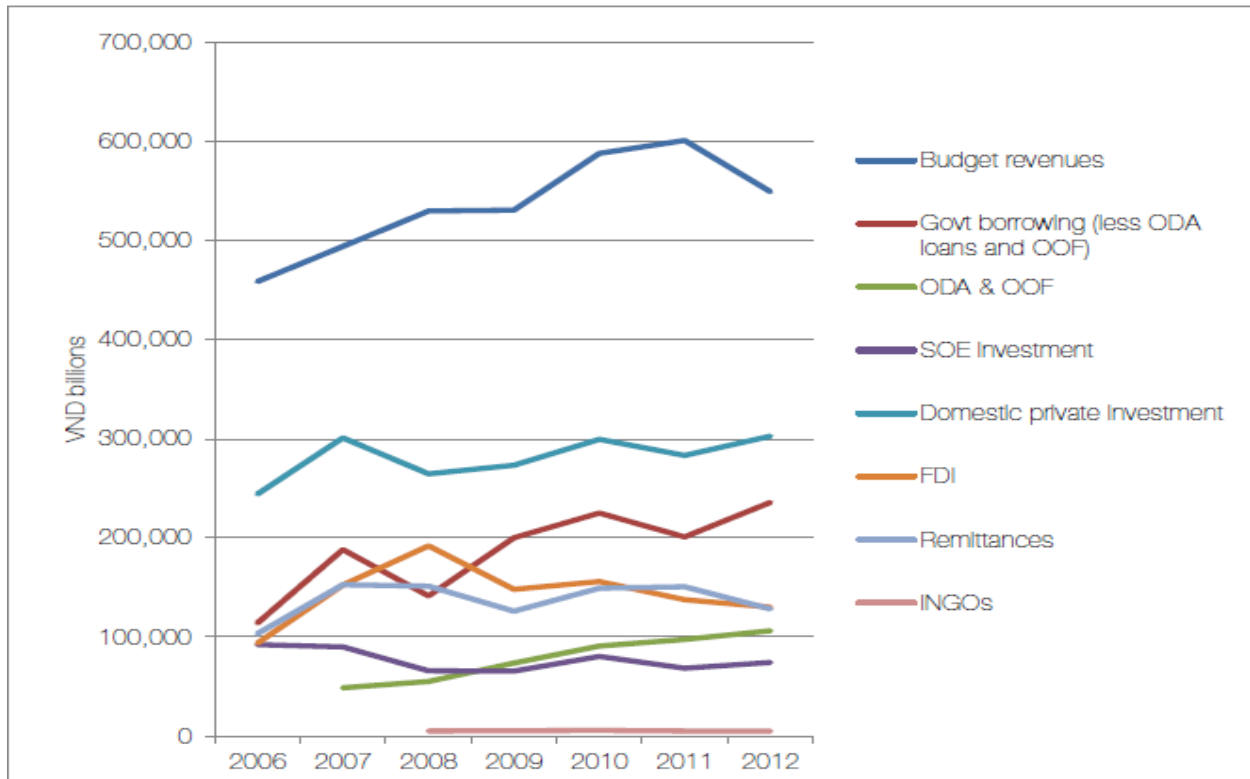


Figure 4: Regions of Vietnam - Source: General Statistics Office of Vietnam (2011)

Figure 5: NGO financial figure relative to other financial resources in Vietnam during 2006-2012

Source: UN Agencies in Vietnam, the Delegation of the EU to Vietnam, & MPI of Vietnam (2014)

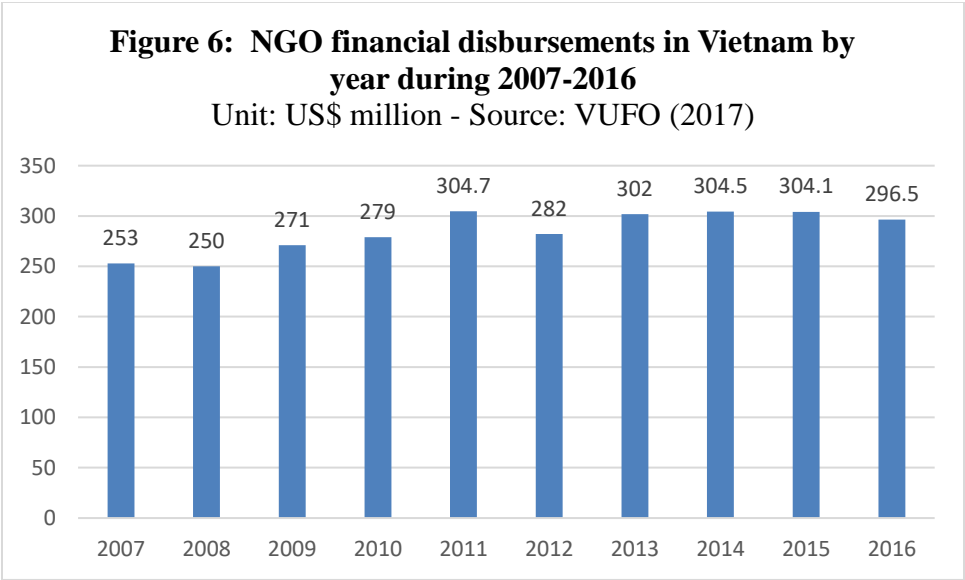


NGO funding represents a portion of the flow of international investment into Vietnam.

According to UN Agencies in Vietnam, the Delegation of the EU to Vietnam, and MPI of Vietnam (2014), Vietnamese development is financed mainly by the public sector (public revenue, government borrowing, Official Development Assistance (ODA)) and non-public sector (lending by the banking sector, foreign direct investment, foreign NGOs, and remittances from overseas Vietnamese). Figure 5 shows that budget revenues constitute the most important financial source of development funding, followed by domestic private investments (UN

Agencies in Vietnam, the Delegation of the EU to Vietnam, & MPI of Vietnam, 2014). Foreign NGOs contribute less than other sources.

Figure 6 shows NGO assistance in Vietnam during the most recent ten years available (VUFO, 2017). Assistance fluctuates between US\$ 250 and US\$ 300 million per year. In absolute terms, NGOs supported Vietnam with US\$ 2.846 billion during 2006-2017. This amount was more than double the total public income of a coastal province in central Vietnam for 2017 (according to official figures in the Decision 166/QD-UBND issued on February 23, 2017). This means that although NGO assistance is modest compared to that of other development sources, their collective contributions may be substantial, particularly if used effectively.



In addition to these financial impacts, foreign NGOs also bring to Vietnam human resources. Expatriate professionals occupy one-fourth of total NGO personnel (Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (ISSEE), 2010). In addition, one out of five expatriate workers in Vietnam assumes leadership positions (executive directors, country representatives,

department heads) (Institute for Labour Sciences and Society (ILSS), 2015). The expatriate staff generally practices facilitative leadership skills in their careers of management and organizational development. For long, Vietnam has lacked access to knowledge and skills in effective management and organizational development. Therefore, this expertise has been significant to Vietnam's social development, especially during the 1990s and early 2000s (ILSS, 2015).

Foreign NGOs largely deliver projects through technical support and capacity building, in fact, 60% of NGOs consider technical support and capacity building their most significant strategy in Vietnam (ISSEE, 2010). For example, several NGOs joined a technical consultative group to share experience in building social work with the Government of Vietnam. Foreign NGOs also offer advice on various development matters in Vietnam, including ethnic minority issues, social protection programs, resilience in the context of climate change, gender equity, and HIV prevention (ISSEE, 2010). When NGO projects end, the assumption is that this technical know-how will remain with the local people. However, whether the knowledge and techniques are relevant and specific to Vietnam context, and whether the application of those knowledge takes place, remain unclear.

NGO operations may engage government policies, and even provide feedback to government when gaps are found to exist between policy development and on-the-ground implementation. For instance, in the past, when policies prevented projects from happening, or when government departments did not effectively coordinate policy enforcement, NGOs have taken the initiative to alert the government, or even propose alternatives. In particular, NGOs may also advocate for

particular policy solutions. However, they seldom target policy changes, but instead focus on sharing experiences with how policies are implemented (ISSEE, 2010). NGOs have in fact had a greater impact on policy implementation than development (ISSEE, 2010).

NGOs have piloted innovative poverty reduction models in response to Decision 40/2013/QĐ-TTg, issued by the Prime Minister. This Decision requests NGO assistance in poverty-alleviation. Several models have been shared, ranging from workplace-based HIV prevention models to child-centered community development approaches. Moreover, those models have the potential to serve as a reference point for minimizing loss and waste in state-invested projects (UN Agencies in Vietnam, Delegation of EU to Vietnam, MPI of Vietnam, 2014).

In addition, foreign NGOs have partnered with institutions to conduct research studies (e.g., base-line surveys, mid-term progress reports, end-line evaluations), mostly to meet donor requirements rather than population needs. Although NGOs normally share research results as a project activity with local governments, they have not been able to ensure that local governments use or act on the findings.

The significance of NGO assistance to the country remains largely unrecognized. To date, they have financed numerous development projects throughout the country. However, there has been no official evaluation of the impact of NGO-led external investment since the 1986 Open Door policy came into effect. Although officially the government welcomes and indicates appreciation of NGO assistance (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2015, Committee for Foreign Non-Government Organizations Affairs (COMINGO), 2013), the 2011-2020 Socio-Economic

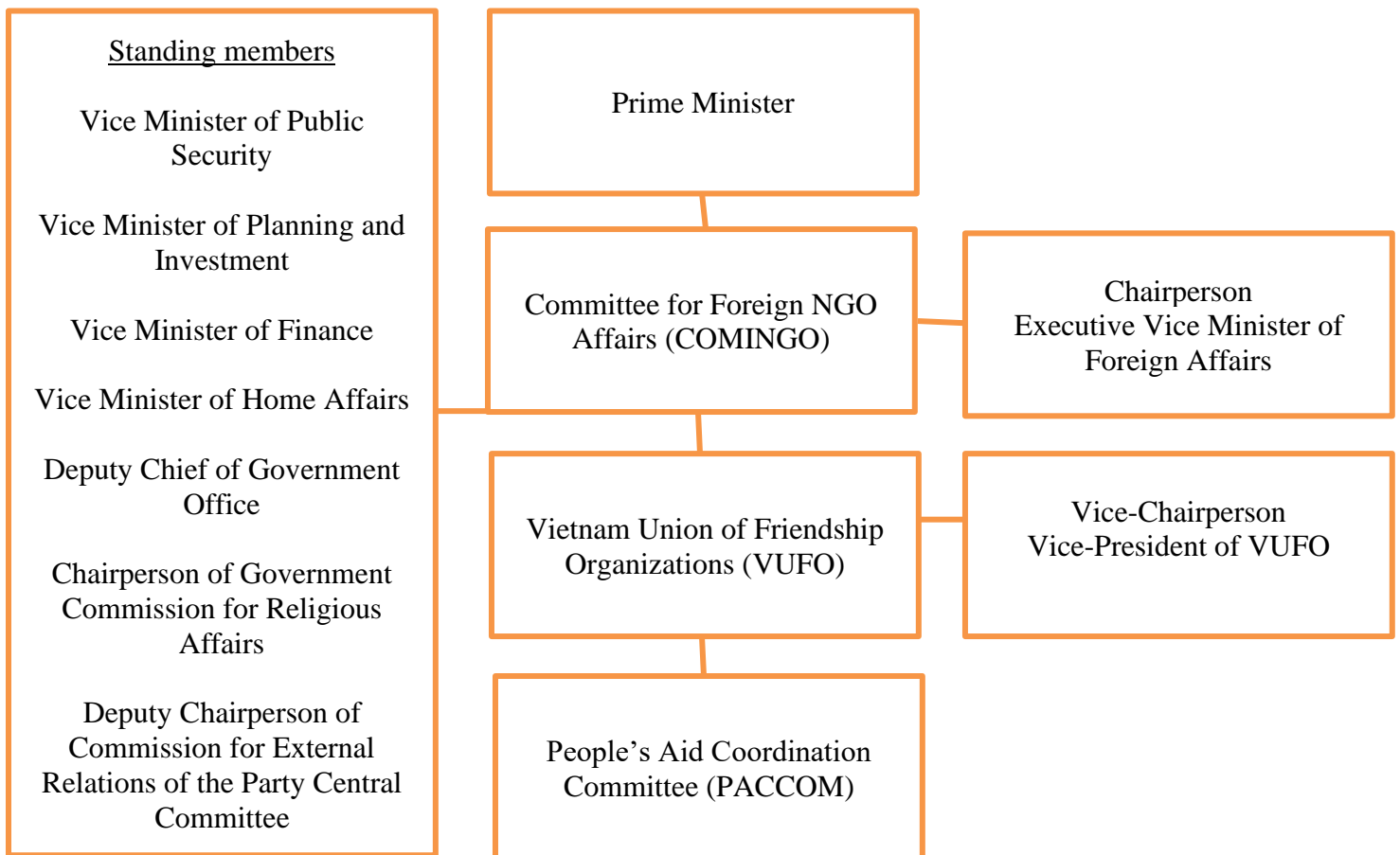
Development Strategy approved by the Communist Party of Vietnam (issued on February 16, 2011) does not specifically address civil society as a significant resource or contributor to the country's development.

Foreign NGOs operate under the direct guidance of the People's Aid Coordination Committee (PACCOM) of the Committee for Foreign NGO Affairs (COMINGO), which in turn is part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Figure 7 outlines the relationships between these organizations and several other government agencies (COMINGO, 2013). Although the Prime Minister directs COMINGO through PACCOM, representatives of several different sectors are consulted regarding NGO operations, such as the Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of Planning and Investment, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government Office, Government Commission for Religious Affairs, Commission for External Relations of the Party Central Committee. In addition, based on specific professional standards and requirements, other ministries (e.g., the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and Training) may impose their own policies on NGO projects. Moreover, province-, district- and commune-level governments may promulgate their location-specified regulations. NGO operations are thus closely controlled by the central government, local governments, and state-owned agencies. Several departments may impose requirements on NGO operations, some requirements may differ from another.

Foreign NGO operations are circumscribed by several legal documents. Decree 12/2012/ND-CP issued in 2012 (regarding registration and management of foreign NGOs in Vietnam) and Decree 93/2009/ND-CP issued in 2009 (regarding management and utilization of foreign NGOs funds) define foreign NGOs in Vietnam as funding agencies, and the funds must be transferred to state

departments or local governments for disbursement. The fund recipients and NGOs then co-produce project documents, which set out the terms and conditions for using the funds, for local authority approval before actual project implementation. Although fund recipients are responsible for implementing projects, many other agencies may monitor project progress and outcomes. Significantly, no formal decrees address NGO engagement in project coordination once funds have been released; thus, NGOs may learn the results of project implementation only through reports submitted to them and government by fund recipients.

Figure 7: Organization of the Committee for Foreign NGO Affairs



In addition, Decree 75/2014/ND-CP stipulates that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Ministry of Labours and their affiliates possess the authority to recruit and manage the staff of international organizations, including NGOs. The lack of clear rules or guidelines regarding recruitent of NGO personnel, coupled with complicated recruitment processes, may prevent NGOs from properly staffing their operations.

Figure 8 shows that foreign NGOs in Vietnam have relations with several other entities in the country. As organizations registered under the nation's law, they have to follow the current regulations in terms of operations, priorities, and reporting. Each government department may have specific requirements on NGO operations, e.g., the Ministry of Home Affairs may require NGOs to strictly follow national security requirements; local governments may prefer NGOs to seriously obtain permits prior to project implementation. The relations between NGOs and donors are mostly one-way, in which donors provide NGOs with grants with specific terms and conditions, and NGOs should satisfy the donors by fully responding to the agreed terms and conditions. NGOs receive grants from various donors, such as United Nations agencies (e.g., WHO), multinational donors (e.g., European Union), government donors (e.g., USAID, Irish Aid), foundations (e.g., the Ford Foundation), business corporates (e.g., Prudential Financial Inc.). Some foreign NGOs (e.g., VNHelp) without field offices in Vietnam may also grant funding to in-country foreign NGOs for projects. Foreign NGOs generally keep close relations with their regional offices (normally based in a different country in the region, such as Thailand) or headquarter offices for operational guidelines, technical supports, and fundraising directions. The regional or headquarter offices may also provide their field offices with seed funds or non-

restrictive funds annually. Foreign NGOs also have relations with peer foreign NGOs in the country mainly to create networks that facilitate raising funds (e.g., two NGOs co-submit a proposal for grant funding), sharing field-based experience, updating progress (through NGO Resource Centre), and co-voicing opinions to the government. Foreign NGOs may sub-grant local NGOs to implement some specific activities of a larger project that the formers receive from donors, in this case the local NGOs work as consultancy service providers. However, more donors now tend to work with local NGOs. Foreign NGOs' staff cannot work directly with local communities. Rather, they work with local governments to arrange for grassroots populations' participation. In this case, the local government may impose local requirements (project permits, official announcement, a police officer's presence).

Recently, local NGOs are able to register their operations in Vietnam. However, they cannot register as separate organizations, instead they have to identify themselves as being a branch of an umbrella technical association (e.g., Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations – VUSTA). The VUSTA's operational regulations were recently approved by the Prime Minister at Decision No. 1795/QĐ-TTg dated October 21, 2015. The Decision states that the VUSTA is a member of the National Fatherland Front, and is among the 28 “special” associations recognized by government, alongside other associations such as Blind Association, Red Cross, Friendship Association. The government established, directed, and funded the staffing and the activities of these associations. Local NGOs can apply directly to foreign NGOs and donors for grant funds to implement community development projects, or to conduct technical consultancy projects (e.g., a baseline survey, a training module). In this situation, they

have to follow the terms and conditions of grants. Also, their operations largely rely on the requirements and directives of the umbrella technical associations under which they stand.

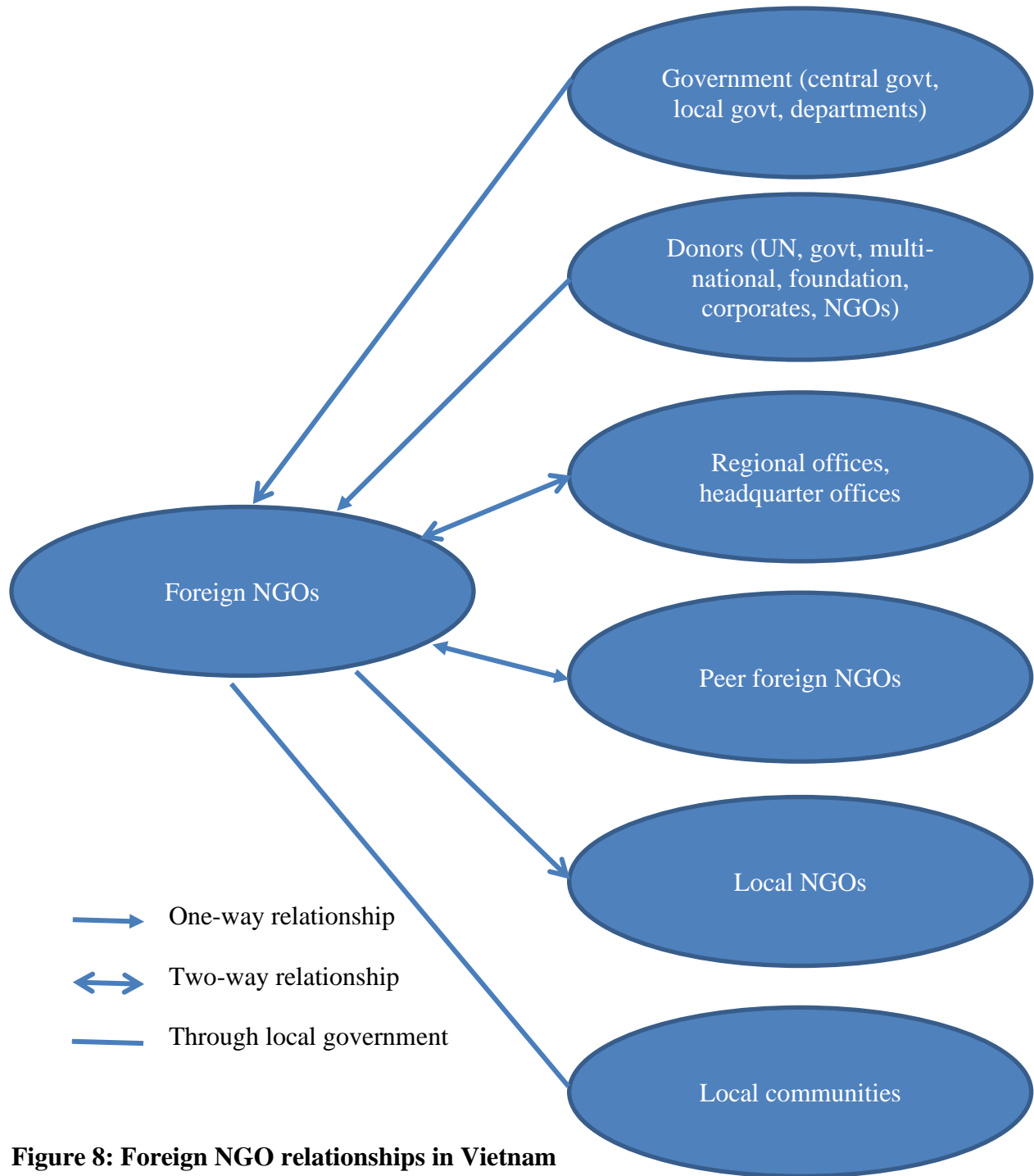


Figure 8: Foreign NGO relationships in Vietnam

Foreign NGOs may be needed for Vietnam's development. Although they do not bring great financial resources to the country's development, they introduce values such as participation and empowerment, which the country has lacked for several decades. They sometimes offer criticisms of government policies. The Decree number 55/NQ-UBTVQH10 issued by the Parliament's Standing Committee on August 30, 1998 guides the implementation of democratic operations in organizations in Vietnam. Several NGO projects may be considered a response to, as well as a model for, the application of this Decree in actual conditions. However, whether NGO operations provide the best means of development in Vietnam remains unsure.

In short, despite NGOs' increased prominence in, and contributions to, the country's development, the assistance is minimal compared with other foreign assistance to the nation. The operations of NGOs are rigidly controlled by several regulatory policies that give government the ability to intervene in program operations, implementations processes, and evaluation. Moreover, several different government departments, each with their own concerns and objectives, control NGO operations, leading to considerable confusion and uncertainty. Finally, though welcoming NGOs, the Communist Party avoids addressing or promoting civil society. The path ahead for this sector, therefore, remains unclear.

CHAPTER 4 - RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

To restate, this thesis identifies the many uncertainties that NGOs face in Vietnam and explores how these shape their operations within the wider socio-political context. The ultimate goal of this work is to identify ways to improve collaboration and coordination between NGOs and government, both in Vietnam, as well as potentially in other middle-income countries where NGOs face similar uncertainties. Specifically, the research addresses the following questions:

- What are the uncertainties that foreign NGOs face?
- What roles or modes of operation do foreign NGOs undertake as a consequence of these uncertainties?
- How do the objectives of foreign NGOs align with Vietnam's national development agenda?
- What modes of coordination do research respondents recommend for foreign NGOs and the government departments in Vietnam, and what lessons are there for other emerging economies?

4.1. Qualitative research approach

Lewis (1999) argues that qualitative research methods are best at exploring bureaucracy, development, and policy issues relating to NGO operations. Devault (2006) notes that qualitative data best describe connections among individuals, and organizational structures, processes and practices. The literature presents several specific examples of how scholars have successfully applied qualitative methods to examine NGO operations at local and global levels (Porter, 2013, Basilico, Kerry, Messac, et al., 2013, Adato, Roopnaraine, & Becker, 2011, Bell, Reinert, Cent, et al., 2011, Markowitz, 2001, Brown, Kenny, Turner, et al., 2000). The examples

illustrate how qualitative methods can be successfully used to explore several aspects internal and external to NGOs. The researchers were able to reveal in-depth processes, and complex connections between structures and operational processes. Importantly, many of these researchers had previous experience working in NGOs, or working on NGO-related topics, and in their research they spent additional time to gain explore NGOs at greater depth. In so doing, they were able to combine the meanings that participants held about research topics with their own experience working in the NGO sector. This added significantly to the depth of their analysis.

In this research, semi-structured interviews and document reviews were employed. Combining these sources of data afforded opportunities to triangulate evidence and to therefore enhance the quality of my interpretation. For example, for each point that I learned from interviewees, I searched in the literature to see whether and how the point had been addressed, and I reported both interviewees' points and the scholastic finding in my dissertation.

As with many of the researchers cited in this thesis, I too come to this topic from many years of work in the NGO sector. I started my career with NGOs in 2002 as a Project Manager with Care International. To date, I have had approximate 15 years of experience working for several NGOs (Save the Children International, East Meets West Foundation, and Plan International) in roles of implementation coordination as well as strategic building and fund raising. This experience has helped me interpret the results gained through the formal elements of data collection described here.

4.2. Semi-structured interviews

4.2.1. The sample

Generating and justifying the sample size for qualitative interview studies can be a challenge. Franklin and Roberts (2006) recommend that researchers limit interviews to around twenty so that they can still, “keep a sense of the flow of the conversation, the speaker, and the setting in mind, as well as its literal content (pp. 90).” Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) suggest that data saturation occurs within the first twelve interviews, and exceeding the limits prevents researchers from fully using collected data. Ideas about the ideal number of interviews aside, the approach that most researchers take is to interview until they reach a saturation point where no new information is learned and there are adequate data for analysis and interpretation.

To be included in my research, NGOs had to meet the following selection criteria:

- Are registered officially with the Government of Vietnam;
- Have established an official country representative or field office with a staff structure, a version of an operational and procedural field book, and strategic operation or implementation plans; and
- Have operated in Vietnam for at least five years consecutively so that they had experienced and could comment on their organization’s alignment with the national five-year planning cycles that first began in 1986 and have continued to the present.

Foreign NGOs that met these selection criteria were identified through the International NGO Directory in Vietnam. The Directory includes quite a bit of useful information; for example, a listing of primary projects and interventions, geographical location(s), key staff members,

contact addresses, and official websites. From this Directory I identified 63 NGOs that met my selection criteria.

I sent recruitment emails to all 63 organizations, briefly introducing the research project, myself and my supervisor, and requesting their participation in the project. An information letter was enclosed with the recruitment email outlining the research purposes, measures undertaken to ensure confidentiality of involved organizations, and my contact address for any needed clarifications. Organizations were asked to let me know whether they would be willing to participate in the research.

Thirteen foreign NGOs agreed to participate. All of the NGOs who participated in the research had been working in Vietnam for twenty years or more, had field operation protocols, and had multiple-year operational strategic plans (Table 1). Although they all worked across different sectors and had had multiple mandates (relief actions, policy advocacy, monitoring), each possessed its own particular focus: four specialised in child-rights, four focused on community development, four concentrated on health-specific issues, including treatment for diseases, and one focused on conservation and environmental issues (Table 1). The organizations applied multiple interventions, ranging from capacity building to health promotion, to social marketing.

Table 1: Basic information about participating NGOs				
Organizations	Target projects			
	Children	Health	Environment	Community development
N1	✓			

N2		✓		
N3	✓			
N4		✓		
N5			✓	
N6				✓
N7				✓
N8	✓			
N9		✓		
N10				✓
N11	✓			
N12		✓		
N13				✓

After NGOs agreed to participate in the research project, they invited their staff to contact me for in-depth interviews. Although foreign NGOs participating in this research project had been through at least one five-year national planning cycle, representatives who were invited for interviews had not necessarily served the organizations for an entire national planning cycle. Preferably, they served in senior managerial positions so that they could comment on policy processes and policy impacts. I assumed that knowledge of organizational processes was transmitted, and least in part, through generations of leadership, so that current management could comment on historical events and processes.

If a staff member was willing to participate, he/she would forward me an acceptance email. Email transactions between the staff and me were used to identify and agree upon the venue and timing for face-to-face interviews. In summary, I received thirteen acceptance emails from individual representatives from each of the selected NGOs. These participants were all in directorship positions within their respective organizations.

As discussed, NGOs must work with and get approval from government departments in order to implement their projects. These government departments determine what is expected of NGOs and are presumed to have an understanding of the role and operation of foreign NGOs in Vietnam. In order to understand how government staff viewed, and worked with, foreign NGOs, I interviewed seven staff of several government departments.

Two levels within government were considered for participation. First, staff from central-level “coordinating” departments that enforce policies governing NGO activities were contacted. The People’s Aid Coordinating Committee (PACCOM) (under the Committee for Foreign NGO Affairs (COMINGO), which is part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA)), promulgated policies regarding international NGO operations, and also promoted the implementation of humanitarian and development assistance. In particular, the PACCOM played focal roles connecting foreign NGOs and other government departments, and coordinated aid activity country-wide. In fact, the PACCOM recommended where and on what projects NGOs should deliver across the country. The PACCOM supported understanding how NGOs dealt with major administrative procedures (registration, field office permits, major-event approval). Overall,

discussion with central-level department staff revealed the policy-making processes and the dynamic relations between the public and NGO sectors.

Second, as described in Chapter 3, all NGOs are required to work through public sector agencies/agents in order to implement their projects. I describe these agencies as departmental “beneficiaries.” There are two levels of beneficiaries: first, Ministry-level “beneficiary” departments normally promulgate policies relating to their specific areas of concern: e.g., health, education, agriculture. These regulations focused on programmatic details, such as program priorities and enforcement of professional standards. While the central-level PACCOM described above generally coordinates the administration of the NGO sector, the Ministry-level “beneficiary” departments specify particular cooperative priorities and methods for implementing projects.

The second level of beneficiary includes provincial departments who actually implement NGO-directed and funded projects in communities. Implementation is constrained by central-level policies (by the PACCOM and Ministry-level departments). Occupying a position that straddles policy directives at the central level and NGO priorities at the local level poses significant challenges. At issue is the problem of how NGO-funded programs are coordinated at the local level.

I identified several “beneficiary” government departments at either the central level, and who were responsible for implementing policy, and at the local level, who partnered with NGOs to implement field-based projects. I engaged two Ministry-level beneficiary departments: the

Department of Finance (under the Ministry of Health), and the Global Health Department (under the Vietnam Union for Science and Technology Association), and four province-level beneficiary departments: the Departments of Agriculture, of Health, of Planning and Investment, and of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs in Quang Ngai Province. Staff from these departments provided descriptions of the implementation of projects and their perspectives on the impact of projects on communities. Moreover, they offered a valuable perspective on actual government-NGO relationships.

The inclusion criteria for those from government departments were slightly different than those applied to NGOs. As for ministry-level coordinating departments, I recruited staff who were directly engaged in determining or directing policy-making processes, ensuring that I interviewed only those with direct policy experience, not just with general administrative affairs. As for local beneficiary government departments, I recruited those who had experience partnering with NGOs.

I recruited participants from government departments largely through networking, relying on my personal contacts to recruit participants from government departments. Participants included one high-ranking government officer from the PACCOM, two staff from ministry-level beneficiary departments, and four staff from province-level beneficiary departments. All are high-ranking officers who have directly engaged with several NGO-funded projects in Vietnam.

4.2.2. The conduct of interviews

Qualitative researchers normally interview participants face-to-face or by telephone using unstructured or semi-structured open-ended questions. Sometimes researchers conduct group interviews (Creswell, 2014). Interviewing is best suited for discovering views and opinions, and event history, coupled with personal anecdotes and stories. In addition, during interviews, both interviewers and interviewees may employ open-ended spaces for conversations that afford interviewees opportunities to express other thoughts or offer their own interpretation of events. In this research, I used face-to-face semi-structured interviews to collect personal opinions and stories that contributed to understanding NGO operations. Through these stories I was able to capture how NGOs adjusted their strategies as they negotiated their relationships with government departments and other stakeholders.

Interviews were conducted according to interview guides that consisted of open-ended questions, each accompanied by several verbal probes. Probes were intended to prompt respondents to elaborate on answers and add more details. The open-ended questions provided room for probing interviewees' thoughts and created flexibility to adjust questions during interviews. Some interview questions repeated part of another question, and few questions received the same answers. Some questions might not require probes, while others might need additional probes to leverage participant insights. Timely adjustments allowed for gathering quality data.

In total, twenty interviews were completed as planned (Table 2). Of these, four interviews were conducted via Skype for logistical reasons. Whether undertaken face-to-face or through Skype, the interviews were conducted according to the same procedures.

Table 2: Interviews by organization, mode of interviewing, and mode of recording data**(n = 20)**

Organization	
Foreign NGO	13
Government	
Central-level coordinating departments	1
Ministry-level beneficiary departments	2
Province-level beneficiary departments	4
Mode of interviewing	
In person	16
Via Skype	4
Mode of recording data	
Both note-taking and digital recording	20
Only digital recording	18
Only note-taking	2

Of the twenty interviews, eighteen were recorded by digital audio-recording instrument, and two were not recorded in accordance with the interviewees' stated preference. I took notes during interviews to avoid missing information due to technical errors or noise distractions. The notes supported timely probing and following up of matters that emerged over the course of the interviews. In addition, for the two interviewees who did not approve the use of electronic voice recording, taking notes was the only way to record data.

Interviews were conducted in either English or Vietnamese, depending on interviewees' preferred language. Normally, both languages were used in an interview, and hence in the transcriptions. I also took notes using both languages. The bilingual transcriptions and notes were used in data analysis to minimize information loss or mistakes through translation. Bilingual interviews also benefited the research project as both interviewer and interviewee could shift to the language that best captured or represented jargon. For instance, "NGO role" could mean "NGO mandate" when translated into the Vietnamese language. Therefore, interviewees and I determined to use English to clearly address each concept. Conversely, the word "sensitiveness", if used in Vietnamese translation, would reflect the ambiguous political position of civil society in the country. Therefore, we used the Vietnamese translation of this word.

4.3. Ethics approvals

Because the research methods largely dealt with human participants through in-depth interviews, I was obliged to maintain interviewee confidentiality. The confidentiality was promoted through obtaining ethical clearances: one from the University of Waterloo in Canada and another from the Hanoi School of Public Health in Vietnam. I submitted separate applications for ethics clearance to the two ethics committees for review and approval. The University of Waterloo Office of Research Ethics clarified research ethics through delegated review on December 22, 2017 (ORE File # 22730). The Hanoi School of Public Health Ethical Review Board for Biomedical Research granted ethics approval on January 12, 2018 (004/2018/YTCC-HD3) through expedited review. The approvals allowed me to undertake further implementation steps (field arrangements, data collection and analyses, reporting) until completion, and ensured that

this research did not have any anticipated health implications on participants, and that participation³ was voluntary.

4.4. Document reviews

Public (official reports, meeting minutes) and private documents (personal writings and transactions) offer important information or “facts” that help understand organizational history and official practices (Creswell, 2014). Information about organizational development that may be noted in official documents may be of particular value. However, some information may be inaccurate, or even unavailable for public access (Creswell, 2014). Overall, if carefully used, documents offer good sources of data that may complement or illuminate information gained from interviews. For example, interviews may not be able to provide concrete numbers on the implementation of outcomes of development projects (e.g., number of beneficiaries, project budgets). In addition, interviewees’ information may be considered unofficial and skewed by personal position, experience, or perspectives. Combining interviews and documents offers a fuller set of data for research purposes.

I collected several types of public documents, including official decisions, proposals, and reports published by participating NGOs and government departments. NGOs provided me with their updated strategy documents and annual progress reports, including their financial statements. I

³ Those participants involved might decline to answer any interview questions if they wished, or might decide to withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences, just by advising the researcher. In accordance with their permissions, interviews would or would not be audio-recorded. During the course of a debriefing workshop, participants might add or clarify any points as they wished.

was also offered numerous communication materials (brochures, leaflets) about organizational facts and development history, meeting minutes, and a cross-NGO Policy Positioning Paper that presented official NGO perspective on Decree 93/2009/ND-CP (management and utilization of foreign non-governmental aid). These documents captured NGO strategies and practices, including their dynamic relations with government departments and with beneficiary communities. In addition, government departments shared officially-issued Decisions, Regulations, Decrees, Five-Year Socio-Economic Development Plans, including for finances (SEDP), and periodical bulletins on government-NGO cooperation. These documents provided official government viewpoints on and expectations of NGOs (Table 3).

Table 3: Documents retrieved by source and type

NGOs

Strategy documents

Annual progress reports (including finance)

Communication materials (brochures, leaflets)

NGO meeting minutes

NGO Policy Positioning Paper

Government departments

Legal documents (Decisions, Regulations, Decrees)

Five-Year Socio-Economic Development Plans

Periodical bulletins on government-NGO cooperation

4.5. Data analysis and interpretation

The data analysis process began when I arrived in the study setting and began interviews. For the purposes of this thesis I started my initial data analysis when the first interview was recorded, and the first notes taken. I reviewed all interviews, notes and documents on the same day, which helped me to discover major trends or patterns and to adjust my data-collection procedures as necessary to take up new areas of inquiry.

The outcome of this initial process included development of major themes and sub-themes (Table 4). For example, under the major theme of “external factors to NGO operations,” I identified several sub-themes, such as Vietnam’s economic development, changes to donors’ demands, Vietnam’s restrictive regulations, NGO interactions with newly-emergent institutions, field-based challenges, and the country’s wider political environment. Additionally, under each sub-theme, several sub-subthemes were identified. For instance, under the sub-theme of donors’ higher demands, I identified the sub-subthemes of shifted programs, increased demands, imposed timeframes, and imposed financing styles and flows.

Table 4: Themes and sub-themes

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Sub-theme</u>
Uncertainty caused by external influences	Vietnam becomes a middle-income country
	Greater donor demands
	Restrictive regulations
	Policy implementation gaps
	Labour market

	Local partners, populations, and field-based challenges
	Wider political environment
Uncertainty caused by internal influences	Uncertain NGO awareness and relationships
	Uncertain funding and financing
	Uncertain implementation and effectiveness
	Headquarters top-down policies
	Uncertain staff management
Implications for NGO operations	Adjusted roles
	Adjusted accountability
	Adjusted delivery strategies
NGO alignment with government	N/A
NGO responses for improvements	Educate stakeholders
	Increase effectiveness
	Collaborate among themselves
	Learn government knowledge
	Headquarter supports
NGO responses for improvements	N/A
Donor responses for improvements	N/A

Informed by the results of the above initial analysis process, I then coded the data from both gathered documents and recorded interviews. The data were recorded in an Excel computer spreadsheet document, with each sheet representing responses from one organization or

department. Data (including from interviews and documents) were grouped in concrete pieces of data that addresses a specific content point, with each piece showing the participant (coded NGOs or government departments), narrative contents (summarised main ideas spoken or written), and direct quotes (if spoken and written ideas were significant). If spoken direct quotes were used, the specific timeframe was indicated. If written direct quotes were used, specific documents and pages were introduced.

By the end of this phase, data from all sources were grouped into numerous concrete pieces. For instance, with the organization labeled N3, and for content piece A1, I had an Excel cell for spoken main ideas, and another Excel cell for a direct quote (see Figure 9). However, not all data pieces had both narrative content and direct quotes; several had either narrative content or a direct quote.

N3	III	6	A1	<p>Absolutely NGOs MUST serve government development objectives and support government. Luckily, what we do are inline with government objective. Globally we have SDG. Chung ta co govt priorities in certain point in time. We work in partnership with govt departments at levels. Take it positively, we work together for changes, we add on government efforts for poverty alleviation. We always discuss with govt partners all things we are delivering. This helps to achieve sustainability. Of course there are bureaucracy but we, from the beginning, try to take advantages of those systems</p>	<p>Moi nguoi hay nham lan la sometimes we think that we are "non-governmental" means that we do not have or serve any government so that we do not need to follow anyone. We are operating trong lanh tho cua mot dat nuoc Chung ta commit la chung ta phai tuan thu theo luat phap cua nuoc chu nha. Chung ta khong the nao lam dieu gi khac neu khong thi chung ta tro thanh out of scale. Nhung o day, MUST... should be thought of positively va tu MUST co nghia la alignment, in line with. O day chung ta phai hieu la chung ta khong phai la NGOs den de thay doi cai no cai kia ma chung ta chi la mot factor de support cho su thay doi cua Vietnam</p>	37:02	38:20
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Figure 9: Data organized in concrete pieces

Next, all data pieces were allocated to relevant themes and sub-themes (or even sub-subthemes). Although this phase involved simple procedures, it can create confusion when a piece of data could fit two themes (or sub-themes), especially when both themes (and sub-themes) had content that might be associated with the other. For instance, a piece of data on government policy

might be allocated under the sub-theme of restrictive regulations, or under the sub-theme of policy gaps. I determined that this confusion was created by unclearly-defined themes (or sub-themes). Therefore, I decided to firmly define themes and sub-themes. In detail, restrictive regulations were used to examine the development of key regulations that seriously impacted NGO operations. In contrast, policy gaps described the question of how regulations were implemented at a local level. Clear definitions supported correct allocation of pieces of data into themes and sub-themes. Eventually, each theme or sub-theme was fully evidenced by data pieces.

Writing the full content of themes and sub-themes (and sub-subthemes) completed the data analyses and interpretations. I also struggled to finish this phase. First, I had to navigate between themes and sub-themes to ensure consistency among sessions. The previously-defined themes and sub-themes became very helpful because I could easily review session content. Secondly, following Creswell's (2014) recommendation, I returned to literature review for strengthening points. Thanks to this technique, I was able to identify specific contributions that this research project made to the scholarship. Thirdly, I also revisited my professional experience in the NGO sector as another point in triangulation and to make the analyses and interpretations more practical.

4.6. Accuracy and reliability

Information tends to be filtered through interviewees before reaching interviewers, hence creating biases. Therefore, Creswell (2014) recommends using a "member-checking" approach to enhancing the accuracy of qualitative data collection. According to this approach, researchers

present theme descriptions or major findings to informants and offer them an opportunity to reflect or comment on findings. Following this recommendation, I organized one debriefing workshop for all representatives (of NGOs and government departments), where I presented the major results of the research.

In Vietnam, the workshop required making legal agreements, logistics arrangements, and facilitation. The legal agreement requires that those holding the workshop are part of an officially-established organization that has an organizational structure, according to the Civil Law 2015. I thus contracted a field-based organization which I selected through my network. The organization possessed the requisite legal status to legally carry out research activities. The contracted partner also had the capability to ensure the organizational and logistical arrangements for the debriefing workshops (venue, reception, audio-visual equipment, catering).

The workshop was facilitated to trigger discussions around themes and subthemes of data analyses. For those representatives who had missed the workshop, I prompted the discussions by forwarding the PowerPoint slides, coupled with specific explanations. They would thus also have an opportunity to provide commentary regarding the presentation through emails. Participants concentrated their ideas around the key issues that affect NGO operations in Vietnam. This initiative offered another chance to validate research findings.

The constant comparison of emerging themes, their consistency, their anomalies, and their relationships within the data sets adds to the validity of data analyses (Creswell, 2014). I triangulated data sources (gathered documents, recorded interviews, literature, and informant

perspectives), which led to further development of themes. This time-consuming but useful process added to my confidence in the validity of my analyses.

Creswell (2014) recommends developing a codebook to enhance consistency during data-analyzing processes. For this project, I clearly defined themes and sub-themes, and constantly compared data pieces with the themes and sub-themes. For example, the theme of NGO implementation would center around specific NGO deliveries, and their impacts on communities. In contrast, the theme of delivery strategy focused on how NGOs delivered their interventions. Therefore, consistency and coherence throughout the data analyses was ensured, thereby enhancing the reliability of this qualitative research.

CHAPTER 5 -- RESULTS -- EXTERNAL INFLUENCES ON NGO OPERATIONS

NGO operations and survival are influenced by several factors internal and external to organizations. How NGOs develop and how these factors relate to NGO evolution remain unanswered. This study incorporates the reporting from NGO directors and high-ranking government officers, the review of several documents published by NGOs and government, and the professional experience in NGO sector of the research author. The core finding of this study is the matter of uncertainties in dealing with factors that constrain or otherwise influence NGO operations, and strategies NGOs employ to deal with them. Conceptualizing uncertainties in terms of internal and external factors helps make sense of how NGOs develop and carry out programs. While changes in external factors may be identified, they are not under the control of NGOs. On the other hand, most internal factors are subject to organizational decisions and actions.

The following two chapters illustrate several influences internal and external to NGO operations. Internal factors are comprised of factors within the organizations that impact the success and approach of operations. I consider them “internal” in the sense that the organizations have some control over these factors as they develop strategic plans and implement programs. Internal factors include uncertainties related to program implementation and effectiveness, top-down directives from headquarters, uncertainties related to staffing, and implications for NGO operations; e.g., changing mandates, changes to avenues of accountability, changes to delivery methods, and NGO alignment with government. In contrast, external influences are those over which organizations have little control, but can have a significant impact on organizations’ abilities to achieve goals and objectives. External factors include how NGOs are defined and

perceived by government; Vietnam's development as a middle-income country which, determines funding eligibility and priorities; issues of funding more generally; regulatory constraints, policy gaps or ambiguities, labour market factors; issues arising in relations with local partners; the needs and responses of local communities; field-based challenges to project implementation; and political sensitivities regarding the operation of faith-based organizations. In the following pages, I describe the experience of the NGOs included in my study as reported by NGO representatives interviewed, Government Officers at an implementation level (provincial level), and Government Officers at a central level.

5.1. Case example

In order to appreciate how these many uncertainties affect NGO operations, it is useful to consider a case example. "Equity International" (not the real name; known hereafter as "EI") established its first projects in Vietnam more than 60 years ago to support families affected by the war in the south. Withdrawing their activities from the country around 1975 when the Vietnam War ended, EI came back to the country in 1993 to work with the most marginalised and poorest ethnic groups in Vietnam's northern and central regions. EI works with vulnerable ethnic groups, especially girls and children, to provide them with opportunities to develop and succeed.

EI developed rapidly during their first years of returning to Vietnam after the war. It initiated three major programs (each lasting for five years), and funding increased with each successive period. More staff were recruited every year, with a peak of approximate 300 in-country staff by 2010. EI established 10 program units, one in each of 10 selected provinces in Vietnam, and

each unit had up to 35 staff who managed a sizeable budget. EI proposed to expand their programs to several other provinces in Vietnam.

However, EI's senior staff soon realized that Vietnam's rapid economic growth would greatly reduce their ability to attract international funders. EI's country office in Vietnam began to find it harder to raise funds due to donors' shifting focus to low-income countries. At the same time, it faced increasing pressure to demonstrate program effectiveness. These two constraints began to change how EI operated in Vietnam.

First, senior management decided to reorganize their staff complement. They reduced the number of administrative and program implementation staff. From 2014 to 2017, the number of staff decreased by almost half (from 300 to 160 employees). Each staff member is now required to assume multiple responsibilities in order to continue EI's programs. Management admits that this personnel cut has been painful, it increased workloads considerably, but it had to be done.

Realizing that changes to international funding priorities threatened the sustainability of their existing programs, EI also developed and proposed several new programmatic initiatives, including programs that focus on currently "in favour" topics such as civil society development and advancement of human rights. Although EI understands that these project initiatives are potentially controversial and risky given their political sensitivity, the organization's leaders nonetheless hoped to obtain funding to launch such programs. In addition, they also accepted funding for programs that lie outside of their specific area of expertise. For example, EI has historically focused on child development and protection, but agreed to implement a project to

improve road safety. The NGO representative argued that the organization just focused on the safety for children, which meant that they still remained operating in their child protection-related program framework. Similarly, EI is experienced in providing vocational training for the disabled, but has accepted new funding to work with street children.

EI's methods for implementing projects have also changed. Previously, EI tended to implement programs in communities without being overly concerned with monitoring and evaluation focused on project effectiveness. Now, they are required to design programs that they can clearly demonstrate are responsive to specific community needs, and which are explicitly linked to values of community participation, empowerment, and transparency, which the organization has recently promoted and strengthened.

EI's human resources (HR) department has also revised its methods of staff performance appraisal. Previously, HR staff applied a task-oriented scale to evaluate staff performance based on what tasks they conduct during the appraisal period. HR has recently introduced a new set of global values and behaviour assessment frameworks that are focused less on task accomplishment and more on results produced. The organization's human resource department is working on specific indicators to appraise each individual staff's performance based on these values and frameworks.

EI's management has also considered hiring Vietnamese nationals for key leadership positions and revising organizational costing policies to decrease operational costs (due to decreased salary

and staff benefits expenditures, decreased administrative procedures). This, however, requires careful legal consultation as no such precedents exist in Vietnam.

One of the great concerns that EI now faces is how to balance accountability “upward” to donors while at the same time ensuring accountability “downward” to local communities. Although still struggling to maintain this balance, EI realizes it is now significant to their survival. Donors are paying for results, and communities likewise expect them.

The above case example is characteristic of how foreign NGOs in Vietnam have had to change in the face of external conditions. EI tried in several ways to survive funding challenges and changing priorities, including downsizing and restructuring staffing, changing and expanding its programming, struggling to balance donor demands with government policy and community needs. It is not yet clear whether all these changes will be successful. But the pressures, in the context of the organization’s accountability to its donors and to its beneficiaries, place a considerable burden on EI’s management.

In the following pages, the experiences of the NGOs included in my research project are explored further, illustrating in greater depth and detail the factors that emerged in my case example. In this exposition, several factors external to NGO operations are presented, including the issues of defining NGOs in the Vietnamese context, Vietnam’s accession to middle-income country status, issues of funding, regulatory constraints, policy gaps and ambiguities, labour market factors, working with local partners, local communities, field-based challenges, and sensitivities about faith-based organizations.

5.2. The issues of defining NGOs

Among those interviewed, nearly half of foreign NGOs' representatives and two (out of three) central-level government officers reported their concerns over several aspects (e.g., language issues, modes of operations, the "sensitive" issues) of how NGO are defined in the Vietnamese context. These include issues of language (translation), modes of operation with regard to government, and engagement of NGOs with politically sensitive issues. The language used to describe NGOs may have specific, negative connotations for government or local communities. A NGO senior policy advisor tried to explain the term NGO in the Vietnamese language, as follows:

If possible, we might change the name in Vietnamese to international social organizations or some other sorts of name, but we should not say we are non-governmental organizations. Because when you say you are non-governmental, Vietnamese people may understand that you are not well-structured by the language. Non means Not. You are non-governmental means you are anarchist, you are without government, and you operate for miscellaneous things and not in a particular direction.

Not surprisingly, local populations often misunderstood the community-facilitating, grassroots activities that NGOs strive to implement. The local populations might be inadequately educated to understand what NGOs would implement, or they might not have the previous experience working with NGOs. Moreover, the term "non-government organizations" sometimes sounded like organizations that fights against the government, like rebels. Attempts to introduce the NGO concept in the Vietnamese language and political context could easily create a negative first

impressions in local communities. I myself experienced being denied access to a community by a commune leader who indicated that the community would not cooperate with any “anti-government organizations”. To gain access, we (the NGO) had to convince the leader by providing an official operation permit, evidence of activities we conducted in another community, and an official introductory letter from a higher level of authority.

NGO staff offered several counter-arguments on a variety of social concerns. One NGO director explained that differing viewpoints existed between the Government and NGOs, and when NGOs provided their opinions, even with evidence and good will, they became “social critics”. Tandon (1989) and Fisher (2003) discuss the one-way, regulatory nature of government-NGO relations in Asia but they do not specifically address issues around the “counter-arguments” that NGOs offer to governments. In communist Vietnam, social criticisms are evaluated for their potential to destabilize society. The Vietnamese communists favour top-down social order and social stabilization, any feedbacks from a lower level to a higher level of the social order may be considered playing against the communists’ favour and will. Therefore, NGO operations were labelled “sensitive” because they offered problematic input, and NGOs are inherently potentially destabilizing.

In reality, I have learned that NGOs, through their community development projects, are often trying to support the government to fulfil its responsibility to citizens. For example, they support building schools and health centres, and educating villagers about safe motherhood and hygienic issues. However, providing counter-arguments is a different story. When NGOs provide counter-arguments for the government, they believe that they are aiming to improve the current

situations, and in this sense, they are acting as a stabilizing force on behalf of the state. The problem is that the counter-arguments that NGOs provide may not be in the government's interests or priorities, or may exceed the current managerial and financial capacity of government. In this sense, NGOs create controversy, and the communist government may consider this controversy a destabilizing factor.

Civil society groups that deal with matters around ethnic minorities are also viewed by the government as potentially destabilizing, and thus "sensitive". One NGO director commented that:

These are issues that are quite sensitive in the eyes of Government... We know that the voice of ethnic minority populations is very much limited. The Parliament also cares about raising voices of the minorities, but the care is sometimes more in formality than in essence. Therefore, when CSOs operate in this area, they want to have practical, effective solutions and recommendations. And this is normally considered sensitive.

Clearly, working with ethnic communities was seen as a sensitive issue in Vietnam. Foreign NGOs who have rights and equity central to their missions, were normally concerned about the treatment and the living standards of disadvantaged ethnic populations in Vietnam and many developed programs to improve access to public services and to empower communities. The "sensitive" label led the government to closely monitor and control NGO operations where they concerned minority groups.

NGO operations were also “sensitive” because their implementation involved local communities. In the view of a government official, neither communities nor NGOs were “sensitive”, but how NGOs implemented projects could be seen in such a light:

They [NGOs] intervene too deeply in community life, and awareness about religion among populations is still limited. Therefore, they [government] are very careful, despite their wish for aid to the populations. They always feel they need to carefully consider... that they [NGOs] do not have much money, but they deliver projects that the government has not implemented, and this is very good... The populations in remote geographical locations are disadvantaged... and foreign NGOs want to enter those locations to solve the problems. However, their approach to problems has not met the government’s expectations, therefore they meet with difficulties.

Islam, Siti Hajar, and Haris (2013), and Akukwe (1998) report that NGOs are strong at promoting and applying horizontal, bottom-up approaches to community development and the use of local knowledge. In my research, many of the NGOs I studied also promoted and applied horizontal, bottom-up approaches to community development. NGO staff tended to directly ask community members about the information related to their projects (for example, needs assessment, modes of implementation, mid-term review, evaluation). Some NGOs preferred to apply participatory rural appraisal tools in program development, implementation, and evaluation. Participatory rural appraisal is an approach that allows community people to share their knowledge and opinions in the planning, monitoring and evaluation of development projects and programs (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Several community groups (men, women, children, farmers, teachers) are normally invited to participate for the purpose of

projects. Some other NGOs prefer to establish “interest groups” (e.g., interest group for saving and credit, interest group for pig raising, interest group for making toys for children). All these activities require the significant participation of community members. Yet these gatherings of people may worry the government. The above interviewee illustrated that the NGO approach to community development always concerned the government, because empowerment and participation were often mottos when NGOs organized community lives. As the above government official reported, the Government expected a different approach to communities than the empowering and participatory one. The official did not mention clearly about the approach that the government expected. From my experience, the government may prefer a top-down approach and communities are not consulted or empowered to raise their voices. Government-NGO disagreements over delivery tactics have the potential to adversely affect NGO operations.

The “sensitive” label was also applied to NGOs engagements with state policy processes and advocacy of human rights. In these activities, NGOs might be considered political organizations. However, as noted by one NGO director, while admitting the political nature of their organization’s work, argued that they were “non-political”. S/he explained that they did not join any specific political party, and therefore really did not represent any political position. This explanation was intended to allow room for flexibility so that NGOs could engage in policy dialogue without being charged with political intent or advocacy of a particular political position.

The term “advocacy” is difficult to express in the Vietnamese language. Policy advocacy might be labelled “sensitive” because it addresses political systems. One NGO director confirmed that their organization tried to avoid the “sensitiveness” associated with advocacy. S/he explained

that they used proper Vietnamese language to address the “should-be” issues, not the should-be NGO actions. For example, instead of stating that the organization would advocate policy, s/he preferred to state that the issue should go in this or that direction, for the sake of community well-being. The nature of the action remained the same, but the language used to convey the message was softened.

However, in a single-party communist country, a top-down approach to policy making prevents public participation in the policy sphere. According to one NGO representative, when NGOs operate in Vietnam:

A large part of NGO operations is advocacy. We know that advocacy means fight for something that is true, which the government has not recognized yet. Therefore, we need advocacy. This means at the time the advocacy is happening, there are gaps between CSOs’ viewpoints and the government’s viewpoints. The missions of NGOs are to bridge the gaps.

NGO advocacy practices may lead to changes in policies that govern numerous arenas. Cook, Wright, & Andersson (2017) note that NGOs increasingly target numerous global issues and they aim for sustained changes. According to Dany (2013) and Banks & Hulme (2012), NGOs have the power to persuade and this power explains the success of NGOs’ advocacy. In Vietnam, when foreign NGOs engage in policy advocacy, they encounter a political monopoly, and their advocacy could be interpreted as threat to public security. NGOs offered counter-arguments that might deviate from the government’s views on certain policies and intrude on the policy sphere, and this is considered threatening to the current government. Clearly, NGOs are placed in a dilemmas when they have to decide whether to proceed with the advocacy. They may select to

use a proper language (as mentioned above), or adjust their methods of conducting the advocacy (such as sharing their messages at conference, collaborating with a government department). These methods may not result in strong impacts, but may help NGOs send messages without injuring their relations with the government.

The various topics or areas of work deemed sensitive by government officials constrain NGO operations. NGO's engagement with sensitive issues (ethnic minorities, religion, community organization, and policy advocacy) might restrict local state-owned agencies from receiving NGO funds (note that all NGOs operating in Vietnam have to have a local, state-approved implementing partner). This means that NGO projects cannot happen.

Although most ministries clearly recognized the contribution of NGOs to the country's development, the Ministry of Public Security stood out as being most concerned with their engagement with sensitive issues or work in ethnic minority regions. Similarly, Dupuy, Ron and Prakash (2016) argue that although LMIC governments may regard international assistance as an important resource for development, governments may at the same time consider NGOs to be a threat to the state's political control and may impose restrictive regulations on NGO operations.

The literature addresses the position of NGOs in society (Buse & Walt, 1997). Bernard and Grewal (2014) suggest that NGOs need to make NGO operations clear to the public so as to gain a better standing in a particular social and political context. In this research project, it was clear that the position of NGOs within Vietnam was ill-defined and that they did not fit neatly within any formal state structure. They did not occupy a position like that of other state-sponsored

social organizations, for example, the Women's Union, Farmers' Associations, or the Youth Union. Trade Unions are governed by Law number 12/2012/QH13, which says that trade unions are a component part of the political system of Vietnam and operate under the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam. Also, foreign NGOs were not considered to be one of the 28 "special" associations recognized by government (e.g., Blind Association, Red Cross, Friendship Association). Government established, directed, and funded the staffing and the activities of these associations.

There are no formal definitions of NGOs in state policy documents. One respondent commented that many government officials (apart from those staff working in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and many at the community level could not define or describe what a NGO is or what it does, reporting that, "the definition of NGOs is unclearly understood in Vietnam". As a consequence, although NGOs were approved to operate in the country, they occupied an ambiguous position within the social-political structure of the state. Their non-governmental status was a novel and poorly understood concept in a nation where government owns and controls all social organizations and permits minimal activity in what might be called "civil society".

This lack of understanding had an important effect on government-NGO relationships. One government official was concerned that, "their [NGOs] operations will face certain barriers. For example, like you and me and we see clearly each other's role, we just need to meet each other and start working together. If we do not understand each other, we must take time to understand

first”. As a result of their ambiguous social status, NGOs often had trouble establishing effective relationships with government.

In many cases, NGO directors contrasted their organization’s operations with that of the private sector. One NGO director commented on NGOs’ entrepreneurial capabilities:

My viewpoint is that NGOs should operate like a business--their structures, their organizations, everything is the same. The only difference is their missions; on one side, it means to develop the economy, and on the other side, it develops society and support”.

The literature provides a similar perspective. In Romania, for example, NGOs diversify their financial portfolio through developing business-oriented models (Topor & Boroiu, 2011). In Vietnam, NGO directors admired the business-oriented aspects (e.g., commercialized advertisements, evidence-based results). The interviewees considered that these aspects might consolidate NGO effectiveness and facilitate their financial survival. However, the informants might have ignored Kamat’s (2003) cautions that the shift to an entrepreneurial approach may disconnect NGOs from the political possibilities of changing society. For example, one NGO director commented:

Development organizations always lack a business orientation and people generally misunderstand that NGOs are not a business. NGOs are actually special businesses. You see clearly that it is a business. If we cannot earn money, how can we have money to spend? The way that we sell through producing project proposals and development, and we sell through results and changes, we do with the purpose that we earn money to keep operating. This is also a form of fund raising and so we are business, aren’t we? But to

whom do we bring the benefits, and why do we call NGOs special businesses? NGOs lack a business-orientated mindset, as I have been saying for a long time”.

5.3. Accountability of NGOs

Interviewees also discussed NGO accountability in the Vietnam context. One respondent noted that although NGOs conducted projects intended to benefit Vietnamese communities, they took the stance that this was mainly the government’s responsibility. This denial offered NGOs flexibility in delivering their field activities. If NGO activities are evaluated (for instance, by donors, by governments, by consultants) as good for communities, NGOs may claim their effort to benefit the communities. If the activities are evaluated as not good for communities, the NGOs may claim that the ultimate responsibilities for the communities lie with the governments. Ironically, despite NGOs’ grassroots-oriented missions and visions, NGOs reported that they did not take responsibility for the long-term well being of the populations that they served.

In contrast, another NGO director related accountability to their delivery effectiveness, as follows:

Accountability should be improved significantly for both donors and beneficiaries. Previously, accountability was not stressed, and we assumed that when we did this project, we would have accountability. This was an assumption... And now, accountability must be counted in specific ways. If you want to say you are accountable, you must achieve this or that. It is not that you can produce 1, 2, 3, 4 things today, and the next day you say you get sick and you cannot produce anything. This is your job.

Accountability means the result on which you are accountable for the funds that donors trusted and transferred to us.

More importantly, NGOs had to clarify to whom they were accountable. The current literature shows that despite NGOs' clearly-defined accountability to donors, NGOs' downward accountability to communities is comparatively weak (Atkinson & Scurrah, 2009, Clark, 2001, Fox, 2000). The findings of this research suggest that NGOs seemed to weigh donor's trust over that of beneficiaries. The above interviewee clearly stated that "accountability means the result on which you are accountable for the funds that donors trusted and transferred to us", clearly articulating the prioritization of accountability to donors over other stakeholders.

Although different NGOs targeted different beneficiary groups, they tried to balance upward-downward accountability when differences existed between donors' priorities and community needs. For example, a NGO director reported that although their organization supported decreasing traffic accidents in Vietnam through supporting the development of alcohol consumption policies, donors focused on drivers' behaviours. Although donors always oriented NGOs towards their priorities and NGOs had to follow the rules of the game, NGOs needed, at least, to convey true community needs to donors. The director confirmed that donors would flexibly adjust their objectives to fit with NGO-proposed concepts, if NGOs insisted convincingly and used solid evidence to articulate community needs.

NGO's efforts to balance upward-downward accountability involved "bridging" or brokering relations between beneficiaries' and donors' wishes. A NGO director commented on the NGO bridging role, as follows:

This is our key role and responsibility. If we cannot do that, why are we here? In all cases, donors and beneficiaries can work together, so why us? NGOs are intermediaries, we are middle-men. We do not work for free. We are middle-men. We are brokers. We get salaried by donors; we use the money donors pay us to cover operation costs so that we take the responsibilities. We are bridges between those who want to do, and those who deserve to enjoy the benefits... We stand in-between and we must balance it. We are salaried to do it... However, sometimes we do not perceive it; therefore, we misunderstand, or we have the illusion that we bring this or that benefit to communities. No, no, we are just doing our bridging role.

The NGO director considered that a bridging role was the right role that NGOs took in delivering their projects because it facilitated balancing upward and downward accountability. NGOs accounted downward to communities when investigating their needs, and upward to donors when completing funds' requirements. My data does not allow for concluding whether this is a common view of the role of NGOs. However, this bridging role may not be enough for NGOs to fully develop and transform communities.

5.4. Vietnam as a “middle income” country

Vietnam became a low middle-income country in 2011 (World Bank, 2013). Vietnam's economic development is a significant matter relating to NGO operations in the country. All interviewees expressed this immediately when asked about factors influencing NGO operations in Vietnam. Vietnam's increasing prosperity in recent decades is a serious challenge to the NGO sector because its re-labeled economic status puts in question its fit with donors' criteria for fundability. Decreased levels of funding have, of course, a serious impact on NGO operations,

and in some cases the survival of foreign NGOs was an expressed concern. For example, one NGO respondent made the following comment: “We do not have enough money for operations. Many NGOs have withdrawn from Vietnam... The utmost reason is Vietnam’s announcement of being an middle income country”. Supporting this assertion, a high-ranking government official noted that although the number of NGOs registered in Vietnam increased, the number of functioning NGOs decreased sharply from about 1,000 registered in 1991 to 487 in May 2018.

Uncertainties in future donor funding have forced NGOs to develop alternate rationales for continuing operations. One NGO director stated that:

When Vietnam becomes a middle-income country, why do NGOs stay here? It is precarious. We see that the middle-income status is just a trap; just a certain proportion of the population is middle-income, and a large vulnerable population still exists. For example, the middle-income populations only inhabit urban areas, and some rural populations may reach a certain point of income, but they are surely far from being middle-income. This means that NGO programs are still necessary in these areas, but if we view the entire country’s situation, we are not allowed to attract all those things. That is an uncertainty... There are so many things foreign NGOs can contribute and do for poor populations, but those things are not attractive to funding bodies.

This perspective is stated clearly in the organization’s strategy document:

Although Vietnam has made significant achievements in implementing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), ... ethnic minority communities severely lag behind national trends... The remaining poor still predominately reside in rural areas and their

livelihoods depend on agriculture and related activities. Despite being in the minority, poverty rates among people from ethnic minorities account for almost half of the country's poor households. They have difficulty accessing basic services, such as healthcare, clean water and education. The child mortality rate among minority groups is double that of the majority Kinh people, and the malnutrition rate of ethnic minority babies (33%) is more than double the national average (15%).

This passage represents the real picture of contemporary middle-income Vietnam, where some groups and those in rural areas have unequal and often inadequate access to basic health and social services. The country's significant economic achievements have not been evenly distributed, and this fact continues to provide justification for the continued work of those NGOs which are concerned with addressing poverty and the consequences of poverty. Yet, Vietnam's official accession to middle income status works against this important priority.

5.5. Shifts in funding priorities

Nearly all respondents (10 NGOs, 1 central-level government officer, and 2 implementation-level government officers) expressed concern about the impacts that the shifts in funding priorities and allocations may have on NGO operations in Vietnam. The respondents showed strong interest in how NGO projects are funded and financed, and how NGOs are able to survive financial matters in Vietnamese context.

Despite the expressed concerns with poverty remediation and worries about long-term funding, respondents did note that Vietnam had in fact made significant progress on a number of health issues. For example, as one respondent noted, it has achieved good results in nutritional

education and high levels of vitamin A coverage compared with other countries at the same income level. World Bank's (2019) statistics also supports this comparison, indicating that Vietnam's coverage of vitamin A among children of 6-59 months is much higher in 2015 (97%) compared with several other countries at the same income level (for example, the Philippines 72%, India 53%, Papua New Guinea 15%, Laos PDR 88%, and Egypt 68%). Moreover, the national health insurance scheme also covers eye diseases such as cataracts, and the country intends to eradicate trachoma. As one respondent noted, because of these achievements, nutrition and eye health have not remained public health priorities among NGOs in Vietnam.

Parallel with decisions to eliminate or downgrade Vietnam as a priority country, donors have also shifted their program priorities. Many will no longer fund traditional public health programs (nutrition, maternal and child health, HIV prevention, trachoma), nor infrastructure projects such as school and road construction. One NGO respondent commented that,

Donors will not fund 'regular' issues anymore because they suppose that those issues have been solved. They just attend to funding newly-emerged issues such as environmental problems and non-communicable diseases. They still fund infectious diseases, but they focus on diseases causing dangerous problems and possibly international pandemics, or with the risk of trans-national communication, for example flu A-H5N.

Another NGO director added that even newly-emerging problems would not be funded if they differed from donors' new priorities:

We consider that alcohol drinking is a big issue in Vietnam, and the health and social consequences of alcohol abuse are big. Importantly, the consumption is rapidly increasing due to lack of effective policies to control the consumption, especially in youth... If young individuals consume alcohol at an early stage in their life without control measures, consequences may happen just a few minutes after the use. My organization considers this an issue of concern, but our budget is limited because of current international funding sources.

This comment is consistent with research reporting that funding uncertainties may impact program breadth, intensity, and sustainability (Biermann, Eckhardt, Carljford, Falk, & Forsberg (2016), Jennings (2015), Mussa, Pfeiffer, Gloyd, & Sherr, 2013). In Vietnam, current NGO projects are driven by this new environment of donor funding, shifting them away from many of their more traditional activities to a focus on new kinds of projects. For example, one NGO has shifted its traditional focus (charity activities, emergency responses) to access by the public of information (for instance, master plan for local development), community ownership of forest land, and environmental protection.

However, there are NGOs that seek to maintain their traditional commitments report facing a more-competitive funding environment. One foreign NGO with a long history of work in Vietnam decided to continue its ongoing projects in nutrition and blindness prevention despite limitations on external funding for these issues and realizing that this might jeopardize future funding. The representative of this NGO explained that they were proud of their more than 100-year history of work on these issues internationally and were afraid that any change to their

traditional scope of work would have negative reputational consequences internationally.

Management was also skeptical about embracing new programs. No data available exist to prove any mismatch between emerging donor priorities and the country's health issues. I think that the country's health sector, donors and NGOs have their own measuring systems to determine their priorities.

Donors have become more demanding, preferring to fund projects that promise long-term impacts over short-term outputs. Moreover, they look increasingly for project sustainability in funded programs. As is reported in the literature, NGOs may use different methods to achieve sustainability (Biermann, Eckhardt, Carlford, Falk, & Forsberg, 2016, Berry, 2014, Mosley, Maronick, & Katz, 2012, Sarriot et. al., 2004, Gellert, 1996). For instance, in several cases reported in the literature, NGO fixed-term interventions necessitated exit strategies to ensure smooth transition to local governments (Abramowitz, 2015, Ejaz, Shaikh, & Rizvi, 2011).

However, the expectations for greater accountability in terms of documenting program impact and sustainability were sometimes not clearly specified by donors. My respondents indicate that there was often a great deal of confusion over what, exactly, donors wanted. In order to cope with this confusion, NGOs simply developed their own accountability measures. One NGO director argued that sustainable development meant, to their organization, an unfinished agenda that embraced transparency and accountability, good governance and civil society, and public-private partnerships. The uncertainty surrounding understandings of these terms allowed for some flexibility in local interpretations of different dimensions of program impact -- e.g., what constitutes poverty reduction, which NGOs then used to their advantage in negotiating with donors.

Donors were also said to sometimes pull back from fully financing projects by cutting operational costs and requiring NGOs to provide matching funds. For example, a donor may cover only direct costs related to core project staff and project activities, but would not pay indirect costs for support staff (e.g., administration, finance, management) or operations. There were even donors who requested fund matching in activity lines, meaning that the donors would allocate funds for only part of interventions proposed by NGOs, which meant that NGOs had to seek additional sources of funds to sponsor project activities. In this new funding environment, NGOs also reported facing increased competition for funding, and were often forced to reduce spending in some areas.

At times, and in a departure from past practices, although donors were wanting to invest in the long-term sustainability of projects, they imposed short timeframes for implementation. For example, NGOs were asked to complete projects within one year, whether they were installing water filtering systems for kindergartens or building a primary school. A NGO director reported that, “[Name of organization] gives us ten water filtering systems... We must complete within one year. When we ask whether the funds are available for next year, they say they do not know, they are not sure.” In this case, the donors themselves were unsure about their own financial prospects. NGOs, in turn, had to rush to fulfil contracts regardless of any challenges or any higher priority needs that might arise in the field.

As well as imposing controls on the use of funds, some donors also dictated fund flows without involving the Government of Vietnam. This bypassing of local government and their priorities

(if identified) generated concerns over accountability and transparency. A high-ranking government official complained that donors might bypass government to finance development projects (survey research, technical support, community development, and emergency measures) through foreign NGOs. Unfortunately, funding details were miscommunicated to government, which therefore could not determine the total picture of international investments, coordinate and monitor fund disbursements, and evaluate the effectiveness of such investments. The government official cited above went on to cite an example of this problem:

Donors are committed to spending an amount of money for Vietnam, but they select to partner with NGOs in the implementation. The government does not care about that, but the ways donors spend the money they never let the government know... For example, this is a poverty alleviation project, in which there is an amount of about several million dollars to be allocated for a research activity to support the project objectives. The donor selects an organization to conduct the research. When this organization receives the funds, they are not informed of the framed agreement the donor signed with the government. The organization is also not provided with relevant documents and permits. ... Supposing the Ministry of Health is a project recipient ... then the Ministry of Health does not know the role of the organization because the former does not receive the announcement from the donor. When the NGO completes the research activity, they send the results to the Ministry of Health as per the grant's terms... The Ministry of Health cannot approve the research results because it was not officially involved.

So, according to this respondent, proper donor-government-NGO communication would have ensured official acknowledgement and recognition of program effectiveness. When miscommunication happened, NGOs suffered the most because they were blamed for not

working effectively. Their attempts to fulfil grant contracts were not recognized by the government and donors. They faced a reputational risk with both donors and government. Some observers note that donor bypassing of government is a problem and NGOs are unfortunately responsible for any inconveniences this bypassing may cause (Jennings 2015).

In Vietnam, both NGOs and government voiced concerns over NGOs' financial status. NGOs have never had substantial financial power compared with governments' funds, nor those of several other multi- and bi-lateral financial institutions (e.g., the World Bank or Asian Development Bank). A senior staff member in one NGO admitted that NGOs provided the country with the fewest financial contributions compared with other financial institutions. Clearly, while governments have expected that NGOs would provide communities with funds, their financial status made NGOs less powerful than other potential donors in the country. This matters because the government is under less pressure to provide favourable conditions for NGO operations, and the government may therefore be less interested in NGO efforts at policy advocacy.

The shortage of funds was further complicated by several other financial constraints uncovered during this research. A provincial-level senior government official stated that NGOs only financed small-scale, short-term projects, and did so unpredictably. Moreover, this official also noted that NGOs normally made use of different financial reporting styles, depending on their donors which made it difficult for government to track funding flows. Another government official noted that NGOs did not submit full reports with detailed budgets to local governments, compromising transparency and NGO relationships with their state partners.

Budget constraints compromised long-term planning and sustainable partnerships with government. The current literature highlights several aspects around government-NGO partnership frameworks, such as commitment and willingness (Solana, 2014, Haque, 2002). In this research one NGO respondent said that NGOs were unlikely to propose long-term plans due to short, fixed-term grants and anxiety over the shortage of funds. One NGO director commented that:

A NGO needs to have its country operation plan, then its people plan, if it wants to develop sustainably in the longer term. If funding is unstable, how can we do that? ... Now we make one-year budget plans, and programs and staff plans are built just for the one-year period.

The uncertainty created when NGOs are not able to build long-term operation plans challenged their effectiveness as development partners. More seriously, as one government respondent claimed, this uncertainty in long-term funding led to poor planning of government-NGO partnerships.

As is reported in the literature, under such circumstances, NGOs apply several tactics to achieve financial self-reliance (e.g., Mosley, Maronick, & Katz, 2012), ranging from building staff capacity to actively seeking funding alternatives. In Vietnam, in the past, NGOs focused more on program development and proposal writing, and less on active salesmanship. Donors might send an invitation to NGOs to declare funds availability. Now, fundraising has been elevated as a priority, for example employing and training staff in communications and organizational development. Another NGO conceptualized diversifying its funding sources by,

.. diversifying [the organization's] funding base and continually improving its donor reporting and information sharing system to make it compact, fast and interactive. We will test different, diverse and innovative fundraising products to construct lasting partnerships with new donors.

The literature suggests that NGOs often leverage funds from the private sector to navigate periods of financial vulnerability (Arhin, Kumi, & Adam, 2018, Besel, Williams, & Klak, 2011, Aldaba et al., 2000). In Vietnam, one NGO noted in their 2015 Annual Report, that they aimed to raise funds in all three sectors: the public, corporate, and individual. Such tactics indicated that NGOs were doing their best to overcome funding uncertainties and shifts to donor priorities. Clearly, staff capacity building and fund diversification needed to be converted from principles laid out in official documents (strategy documents, progress reports) into concrete actions. The words were noted down in official documents echoed NGOs' strong commitment to their finances so that they could survive and address poverty in Vietnam.

One question may arise around the existence of NGOs in Vietnam. I did not ask NGO respondents why they chose to remain in Vietnam given the difficult circumstances and burden of uncertainties in which they operate, but based on my experience I believe that the NGOs have their own missions and visions to accomplish. Because NGOs are generally committed to working with underserved communities, they find Vietnam still fitting in their scope of work. Despite the country's rapid economic growth, several populations lag behind, and new social issues emerge. These situations offer NGOs reasons to stay in Vietnam despite unfavourable

social and political circumstances. However, NGOs' leaders have to ensure that their programs effectively target disadvantaged communities.

In Vietnam, NGOs are not likely to attract domestic corporate donors. One NGO director complained that "Domestic individuals and corporations do not fully understand charity, and generally when contributing to charity, they would prefer direct giving, without going through any individuals or organizations, and they would never think of the fact that there should be 10% or 15% for operating costs." In addition, "bricks and mortar" material project outcomes (e.g., school construction) always dominated over "softer" outcomes – health promotion, knowledge translation/exchange.

While domestic corporations were reluctant to cooperate with NGOs on development projects, internationally-based companies were seen to be less so. Although NGO directors admitted that they had rarely received funds from internationally-based companies, they believed that strong networking might change this. One NGO director said that his organization did enjoy excellent corporate funding because they had a wide-ranging and active network with the corporate sector. The Annual Report 2016 of one NGO highlighted their successful partnerships with enterprises such as Coca Cola, HSBC, and the International Investment Bank. The report confirmed that partnering with the private sector "advanced the country's sustainable finance scheme," and that the organization made private corporations the target of fundraising initiatives to support the achievement of country-wide program objectives. Several NGOs reported exploring the potential to engage corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs for funding purposes. NGOs

can be funded by international companies (that is a company headquartered outside Vietnam that has a representative office in Vietnam).

5.6. Regulatory constraints

More than half of interviewed NGO respondents, and all interviewed central-level government officers, reported problems stemming from current regulations of NGO operations in Vietnam. While the central-level government officers explained current policies and asserted that foreign NGOs had to follow the policies, NGO representatives provided several critical comments on the development and enforcement of these regulations.

Governments continually impose regulations intended to govern NGO operations even if NGOs offer great support to state development (Murtaza & Austin, 2011). In Vietnam, the three main policy documents are Decree 12/2012/ND-CP, Decision 76/2010/QD-TTg., and Decree 93/2009/ND-CP. In particular, Decree 12/2012/ND-CP guides the registration and management of foreign NGOs' humanitarian activities. The decree regulates all administrative procedures within NGOs, including reporting and monitoring of NGO deliverables, and income tax on foreign workers. Organizations must be issued representative office permits, field office permits, and single project permits. This requirement sometimes represented barriers to the effective implementation of projects in the field.

Several government departments are tasked with managing NGO operations, e.g., the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Committee for Foreign Non-Governmental Organization Affairs, agencies with representatives who are members of the Committee for Foreign Non-Governmental Organization

Affairs, ministries, ministerial-level agencies, government-attached agencies and central agencies, provincial-level People's Committees, and Vietnamese partners. Many authorities are thus able, and likely, to scrutinize NGO activities.

Consequently, many NGO organization described suffering from “paperwork pressure”. Two organizations expressed their concerns over the applications for extension of representative office permits that involved project locations. Although the applications would eventually be approved, requirements imposed on NGOs to develop applications, and the time to process applications, often led to delays in project implementation.

NGO operations are also affected when international staff needed approval prior to entering the field. The approval process normally required paperwork submissions one to two weeks in advance. However, despite NGOs’ efforts at compliance, some visits were cancelled due to short notice and for several other reasons described as “sensitive” by government. One NGO director noted ironically that whereas foreign tourists could go anywhere in the country with their visitor visas, foreign NGO workers could not access field sites without prior permission.

The literature shows that NGO staff qualifications can be affected by resource constraints (Gilson, Sen, Mohammed, et. al., 1994), and by the poor-settings of NGO activities and associated physical and infrastructural challenges (Watkins, Swidler, & Hannan, 2012). This research found that the country’s regulations even targeted local staff who were working with foreign NGOs. One director reported that national policies closely tightened labour recruitment and management in foreign sectors (e.g., foreign NGOs). The involvement of a state department

in the recruiting processes, coupled with the requirement that all must undergo a “police check”, was likely to erode local people’s willingness to work in this sector. In addition, several NGO directors were concerned about unstable staffing due to changes in policies regarding retirement, salary and income tax. Clearly, the interventions of government departments in recruiting and managing labour in foreign sectors, alongside uncertain policy directions, greatly affected NGO operations.

In summary, Decree 12/2012/ND-CP stipulated several procedures pertaining to the administration of foreign NGOs. Multi-department engagement, time-consuming paperwork, and bureaucratic interventions in human resources introduced considerable uncertainty in NGO operations. Additionally, NGOs expressed insecurity about how and in what directions regulations might change.

Decision 76/2010/QD-TTg regulates the organization of events engaging “foreign factors”. The regulation aims to review content, agendas, and procedures before, during and after sponsored events take place. Fisher (2003) stresses that NGO policies may sometimes be “schizophrenic” and may actually “conceal co-optation” (pp. 22). NGOs must obtain a permit before such events, meaning that apart from obtaining an operation permit, NGOs had to obtain several small permits for certain categories of activities, such as events that gathered many people (e.g., conferences, workshops, communication activities). Even minor adjustments in presenters’ profiles, participants, or content topics had to be approved beforehand. The need for both “umbrella permits” and “small permits” illustrates the degree to which government attempted to closely control NGO operations.

Although introducing several terms describing regulated “events” (workshops, conferences, foreign factors), the Decision 76/2010/QĐ-TTg does not clearly define what activities these include, and this has been confusing to applicants. For example, foreign “factors” might mean foreign partners, foreign participants, foreign sources of funds, or foreign organizers. NGO directors were concerned that conferences and workshops might also comprise roundtable discussions, meetings, and many other events that gathered participants, such as communication activities, all of which might separate need permits. The blurred definitions meant that organizations have had to make tremendous efforts to obtain permits and to report the numerous “workshops” likely to occur nearly every day in a NGO’s projects.

Applications of this policy were often a significant nuisance for NGO directors. For instance, one director complained that a police officer always accompanied communication activities, so that the activities could not happen naturally. Event agendas were also not allowed to touch on any “sensitive” matters (e.g., politics, religion). According to one NGO director,

There was an event of some nature, the [name of organization] was a co-organizer with a series of other agencies (British Ambassador from EU, foreign NGOs, along with the People Participation Working Group (PPWG)). The event was about access to information associated with anti-corruption activities. In the last minute when participants were all seated in the meeting hall, the event was cancelled, and they [government officials] referred to Decision 76. You know, the British Ambassador came, EU Ambassador came. And the content of the event was already sponsored by the already-issued Law on Access to Information.

In the above example, issues around access to information and corruption might be considered “sensitive” subjects; therefore, the event was labelled “sensitive” and was cancelled at the last minute. Even though the Law on Access to Information had been passed, Decision 76/2010/QD-TTg remained as a legal tool used by officials to control NGO activities.

Decision 76/2010/QD-TTg presented a more political than professional approach to controlling NGO operations. The Decision seemed to deploy numerous barriers, ranging from time-consuming administrative procedures to content censoring the operations of foreign NGOs. A NGO director said this about the Decision:

Such provisions are very ominous. The situation speaks to the fact that government officials in charge of constructing the policies really stay away from real life. And the policies should not be passed, and I think the policies should gain much improvement before being passed. In fact, the policies really become great barriers against the operations of CSOs and NGO.

Clearly the focus on administrative approvals, even of minor events, could draw NGOs’ efforts and resources away from the delivery of interventions or other initiatives that benefit communities.

The legal document that was most discussed and criticized by NGOs was Decree 93/2009/ND-CP, which regulates the management and utilization of foreign NGO aid in Vietnam. Foreign NGOs are considered funding agencies or donors. No individuals or community groups were to become fund recipients, and the funds had to be transferred to official public sector organizations

regulated by the government. The funds were not to negatively affect political security, social order and safety, or the interests of the nation, and the rights and legitimate interests of Vietnamese organizations and individuals. After NGOs transfer the funds to Vietnamese agencies, the fund recipients became de facto fund owners and they could then direct the implementation according to their interests or priorities. NGOs in Vietnam cannot therefore engage in direct implementation. The language and the content expressed in the Decree are clear.

This Decree strongly framed NGO operations, stating that foreign NGOs had to keep their “international status” in Vietnam and undergo the stricter “control path” for foreign organizations. If foreign NGOs were localized (meaning they registered as Vietnamese NGOs), they could possibly coordinate directly with communities without partnering with government-owned agencies. A high-ranking government official noted that:

On the State’s administration side, and legally, we do not acknowledge or have not acknowledged the Vietnamization [of NGOs]. This has many reasons, but concurrently, international communities want to transfer their models of operations to Vietnam.

As is revealed by this comment, government has not been ready to allow for the Vietnamizing of foreign NGOs. They want to control the international status of foreign NGOs, and they impose administrative measures that are designed to tighten this control. By the issuance of the Decree, the Government has confirmed their intention to tightly control foreign NGOs.

Recently, the Decree was reviewed to simplify regulations and to serve the purpose of promoting and encouraging more effective aid for Vietnam’s development. A NGO Task Force was invited by the government to engage in the review processes. The Task Force included representatives

from foreign NGOs and from the Embassy of Canada, the Embassy of Australia, an EU Delegation, and USAID. One NGO director expressed that their organization had served on a Task Force for ten years to promote an open-ended Decree to facilitate NGO operations. Respondents were concerned about the review because although the processes were undertaken seriously, no one can predict the end-result. The Task Force produced four or five updated versions of the Decree, each devised with great effort to convey messages to government agencies and authorities. Ultimately, however, the latest version that officially came out of the mission was considered by NGO participants to be disappointing. No Task Force suggestions were acknowledged or adopted by the authorities. One NGO director complained that:

Decree 93, which will finally be approved, may be better or worse than the current draft, and this remains unknown. The current draft has in itself several limitations, but the coming draft may have even more limitations. This is a challenge for international NGOs... And this clearly represents that the reality is more controlling than enabling.

Thus, through several rounds of revision, the regulations became even more restrictive, rather than enabling, of NGO operations. Representatives of development partners and foreign NGOs released a position document dated October 29, 2016, in which they noted that:

Overall the Draft Decree has not yet addressed the existing shortcomings of Decree 93 (both in written content and actual implementation). The spirit of the Draft Decree still fundamentally demonstrates a lengthy, complex, and multi-window process of project approval. It does not create favourable conditions for mobilizing, receiving, managing and using foreign non-governmental assistance.

The representatives concluded that:

Development partners and foreign NGOs present in Vietnam urge the Vietnamese Government to streamline the current complexities in the regulatory framework for foreign non-governmental aid by clarifying the intention of the Draft Decree and bringing it into alignment with existing laws and decrees that shape the enabling environment for foreign non-governmental assistance, including the Civil Code, Decree 16, Decree 12, and the framework of business regulations.

Although participatory stakeholder consultations took place, the voices were apparently not heard. The state's efforts at political control were argued by NGOs to be extreme. This experience is a good example of how the uncertainty of policy and political engagements in Vietnam affects NGOs.

These events also represent the top-down approach to social programs in Vietnam, which require adherence to policy stipulations with little room for adjustment or feedback. Outside Vietnam, scholars note that government-NGO relationships are characterized by unequal power, in which NGOs must obey state priorities and frameworks (Anku-Tsede, 2014, Mercer, Thompson, & Araujo, 2014, McLoughlin, 2011, Fisher, 2003, Gary, 1996, Lubin, 1987). In Vietnam, and as reported by one government respondent, it is clear that NGOs are expected by regulation to recognize and align with the government's procedural processes, including the bureaucratic tasks of filing proper paperwork, permit issuances, partnering, geographic locations, and reporting. Conversely, NGOs are not expected to resist or complain. No official mechanisms exist by which NGOs can express complaints, opinions, or grievances.

Within this controlling policy environment, NGOs' self-censorship is visible. They make efforts to skillfully maneuver within this policy environment (e.g. interpreting the laws in a way beneficial to their operations or narrowing down their interventions and initiatives). One NGO director commented that:

Tightening regulations is inevitable and is a big concern to organizations like [name of organization]. More importantly, we will implement the decree, which means it will make individuals and organizations censor themselves. The self-censorship deserves greater worries... In Vietnam, even though laws existed, there was always room for manoeuvring... Operations, in real life, mean trying ways to maneuver. Now with the tightened policies, each individual organization will be more careful, and they may self-censor before pushing a matter. This is a big concern.

The complicated processes of transferring funds to state-owned agencies, expressed through bureaucratic, time-consuming procedures and paper submissions, seriously affected Vietnam's funding landscape. A NGO representative admitted that, "The organization must follow administrative procedures and sometimes misses funding opportunities from overseas... Sometimes funds come due and we must return the funds". One government official admitted that when foreign NGOs missed funding opportunities, they also failed to commit funds to Vietnamese fund receivers (state-owned agencies, local NGOs). The bureaucracy therefore affected the delivery of services to needy communities.

In a nutshell, Decree 93/2009/ND-CP addressed the management and utilization of foreign NGO aid. It provided necessary steps and procedures for transferring funds from foreign NGOs (as

international donors) to government-controlled agencies (as fund receivers). The transactions were marked by reams of bureaucratic, time-consuming paperwork. A recent review of the Decree illustrated that the voices of foreign NGOs and several other donors had not been heard by the government. As a result, the latest version of the Decree became even more controlling than previous ones, potentially damaging the state-wide funding landscape and pushing NGOs to “maneuver”. The top-down approach to social processes, coupled with extreme policy and political engagement, represented the uncertainty of regulations development and implementation.

NGOs were also concerned about the uncertain progress of a long-gestating Law on Associations. During its 20 years of development, the law evolved with some progressive drafts with several ideas supporting the operations of NGOs. The Law is supported by NGOs because it offers favourable conditions for NGO operations. However, the final version that was presented before parliament seemed to appear, in one NGO respondent terms, as "from the sky." Progressive language introduced during the Law’s development was withdrawn by government. A government official provided an example that indicated that NGOs were not included in the latest version of the Law:

People mention that the scope of regulation just involves associations and not subjects such as international and local NGOs and community organizations. This is what I think it is time they should have the understandings of foreign NGOs, and once we call it the Law on Associations, this means the right of the people to form their associations. This right must also represent all organizations operating here.

The long history of development of the Law suggested the existence of significant barriers to its passage. A NGO director said that,

There seems to exist something that makes it difficult for the Government to pass the Law on Association, and I understand if the law is passed, civil society organizations may enjoy more advantages. The Law has been worked on through so many periods, for dozens of years... but we cannot have it because of very different barriers and opinions, in which I understand that here is a very big concern. If civil society grows strongly, it can lead to insecurity for political institutions.

The “sensitive” area of associations was linked with unstable society and politics. Without the passing of the Law, an operational framework for NGOs would be impossible, leaving NGOs open to restrictions posed by the Decrees cited above. This is clearly a source of great uncertainty.

Given this uncertainty, NGO respondents worried that legal measures might be implemented to sanction NGOs’ and other international institutions’ failures to obey regulations. NGO directors warned that they expected a soon-to-be-issued legal document that would place further burdens on NGOs and, again, hinder NGOs’ abilities to implement new or innovative projects.

Several NGO directors discussed differences between what government said and what it did. For instance, although the government needed NGO support, they created several “excuses” to control NGOs’ project deliveries, and they, “call those excuses support.” As reported by one NGO respondent, there are clearly differences between language and action:

This is a big absurdity. In language, it is support. But in real life, all policies clearly aim to control. You tie our hands and legs. Clearly, it has been very hard for us to raise funds, but how can we attract additional funds with such controlling policies?

Whether the government actually supports NGO operations in Vietnam is, in fact, unclear. On one side, a senior government official confirmed that the Government of Vietnam appreciated and respected NGO interventions over time, and they wanted to increase this collaboration. This official also stressed that Vietnam promulgated consistent policies to facilitate NGO operations. However, NGO directors presented a different perspective: that the government undoubtedly aimed to tightly control NGO operations. The different viewpoints between the state cadre and NGO representatives echoed uncertainties over policy directions.

Last but not least, differences existed between the government's verbal confirmation that Vietnam always endeavours to create an enabling environment for NGO operations, and political directives that demonstrate a different perspective. One NGO director shared that,

The politics in Vietnam may be a black box; you cannot know what is happening in the top-notch Ministry of Politics with different schools of thoughts... and different interest groups.... There are some "open periods" and some "closed periods" in policy drafts... It is the command of the Party... I am not sure if it is a Regulation... but Regulation 102... limits some activities, or the Party members will be penalized for publicly supporting civil society organization".

Within a political monopoly, the ruling party's directive represents absolute power over all dimensions of the country's development. Regulation 102-QD/TW stated that political party

members would be expelled from the party if addressing or discussing support for civil society (Chapter II, Article 7, Point 3b). With this regulation, government could not issue any legal documents that would facilitate NGO operations. The party's directive seriously compromised any official effort to facilitate NGOs' operations, and certainly constrains the development of policies that might facilitate or be conducive to NGOs' operations.

5.7. Policy gaps

The implementation of policies certainly challenged the NGO directorship. While no government officers at both central level and implementation level addressed this issue, more than half of interviewed NGO representatives were greatly concerned about the implementation of government policies, which they considered to have the potential to negatively affect their organizations' operations. Yet, interestingly, no one could predict whether or not the policies would be implemented, or how they would be implemented. One NGO director commented that,

Decree 76 has actually existed for ten years or longer. ... It is ridiculous to implement it, and generally it cannot be implemented. It means everyone has just left it there....

However, 76 has been used more frequently in the last two years, meaning that when I [a government official] need it I will use it, and when I do not need it, I will not use it"

Policy implementation was arbitrary. As the director cited above noted, the government applied these rulings when they needed or wanted to. The implementation of policies likely occurs either when a NGO's practices are seen as so problematic that intervention is needed, or when a government representative decides they want to do something. For example, newly registered NGOs, or NGOs that operate with "sensitive" areas may be targeted by government representatives. The use was uncertain, and no one knew when the government would apply or

implement the Decree. NGOs were thus placed in rather precarious situations, characterized by considerable uncertainty, with staff having to decide whether or not to follow regulations, and not knowing of the outcome of these decisions.

The flexibility of policy implementation depended on specific NGOs. One NGO senior policy advisor disclosed that paperwork requirements seemed to rest more heavily on newly-landed organizations in Vietnam, and on organizations with US-based headquarters. Different treatment of different audiences again revealed uncertainty in policy implementation.

Sometimes, NGOs were allowed to escape regulations. One NGO director admitted that,

There was a time we had an opportunity to work in Nam Dinh province. The Nam Dinh people knew this, and PACCOM also allowed the local people to work with [name of organization]. This means they turned on the green light despite no approved permit extension.

Organizations are supposed to obtain permits before they could access the field, though in this case this requirement was inexplicably waived.

Also, current policies require that NGOs must transfer funds to relevant state-owned partners for implementation at the local level. However, a few NGOs might be exempted from this requirement. For instance, [name of organization] did not follow the regulation, reasoning that the regulations were not consistent with the organization's financial management and requesting that it be able to manage the money flows. The NGO director disclosed that,

Provinces accept the [name of organization]'s current financial management, meaning that [name of organization] remains a fund owner. No big problems so far, but I am not sure what happens in two or three years; they may be more controlling, and things may be different. This is an uncertainty.

In this case, while other NGOs followed the rules regarding the transfer of funds to local partners, this NGO did not. However, as admitted by the director, the long-term viability of exemption is uncertain.

Policy implementation might depend on the relationship between NGOs and state-owned agencies (partners), or personal relationships between individual officers in charge of the implementation. One NGO director admitted that personal relations determined how quickly project documents were approved at the ministry level:

They [ministry staff] are fine if not working on NGOs' documents... However, they are affected by personal relationships; for instance, when they meet with NGOs' staff who are not easy-going, they do not like them, then they do not work. Sometimes it is personal relationships, not rules.

In reality, despite tight government regulations, NGOs have often found room for flexibility and "manoeuvring" when personal relations might supersede the observance of rules. The personalization of regulations means that NGOs remained challenged by the unpredictability of implementation.

NGO directors asserted that the government did not have the capacity to fully implement its controls, and they just targeted policies "where needed" and focused on a few organizations of

concern. Unfortunately, no one could predict whether and when their organizations would be targeted.

In summary, NGO operations are vulnerable to the uncertainty of whether and to what degree governing policies are enforced. In this research project, policy implementation was arbitrary, with different treatments given different organizations, and by unexplained exemptions. This uncertainty in policy implementation was linked both to personal relationships between NGO staff and government partners, as well as the government's managerial capacity.

Even where policies are implemented, the implementation was neither consistent nor proper. Government-stipulated processing time standards might be ignored by authorities, with no explanation. NGOs sometimes waited hopelessly for signed papers:

We depend on time; we never know when we will get things back... We just submit [papers] to them; they process them but they also need information from other agencies... We are very passive. Sometimes there is an issue after they have signed it, but we have waited so long to receive it... We do not know what the difficulties are. When we ask, they say they are submitting for signature.

This NGO director noted here that their organization became "passive", meaning that they did not undertake any efforts to speed the process, and even when they did, they were stymied.

Occasionally, incomplete instructions and inconsistent feedback were provided. For instance, the websites of relevant authorities were not updated to include updated requirements. Also, when government officers explained the full procedures, delivery of their instructions may be

divided amongst several communications, which created time delays, and as this respondent notes, a great deal of annoyance:

They should list what we miss from the submission, such as 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7; then we can go home to prepare all those 7 documents for a second submission. However, here when they find that we miss a document, they tell us to fix it. When we have fixed, they tell us about another missed document. They are not professional therefore they generate waste of time and efforts from both sides... We never know because they always say their website has everything, but we do not receive good instructions.

This example illustrates the difficult experience of working with government agencies. NGO staff might not be able to predict the information gaps that they should have prepared for. The “matrix of administrative procedures” in one respondent’s terms, became a real burden on NGO operations.

As above, respondents reported that bureaucracy in policy implementation had a negative impact on NGO operations due to the time-consuming issuance of several permits for each single project. One NGO found itself six to seven months behind schedule in a nutritional intervention. The organization’s director also noted the risk of losing funds due to their inability to disburse funds granted for the project.

Poor coordination among levels of authority concerned NGO directors. For instance, they had to submit several reports to several different authorities. One NGO director reported that their organization directly submitted annual reports to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and PACCOM, but also to the Department of Diplomatic Corporations, local governments, and even the

Department of Public Security, each of which had their own requirements and formats.

Although NGO staff had to allocate adequate time for reporting, they were still sometimes confused by the several levels of authorities and their various requirements. This confusion was exacerbated when NGO projects were implemented in several locales. Each locale would be represented by one fund recipient, and NGOs would transfer funds to each of the recipients for implementation and disbursement. Whether the recipients could receive the funds and implement their components depended on prior approvals by competent authorities. NGO staff had to ensure proper approvals in each location. One NGO director noted, “It takes much time for procedures.” Poor cross-agency coordination generated confusion and hints at the consequent heavy workloads to meet bureaucratic requirements that foreign NGOs suffered in Vietnam. Poor coordination was also marked by the issuance of several different policies on the same matter. For instance, different legal documents regulate the taxes levied on expatriate staff working in Vietnam. A few NGOs had closed their offices due in part to a tax levied back in 2012.

Poor coordination at times caused delays in responding to government requests. For instance, One NGO’s late submission of tax information might be caused by delayed office operation permits. Unfortunately, it was the NGOs who were penalized for this problem. Other NGOs were also penalized for delayed extension permits. In the words of one NGO director,

When we receive a permit with changes in information or expiry date, we provide an update to a competent authority... however, we are penalized for providing late information. Other organizations may also meet with this situation. ... We show them

that we have just received the permit extension, but even with a receipt, they say they do not know.

As a result, NGOs are held accountable for delays that they did not cause.

To summarize, poor coordination across government agencies severely hampered NGO operations. NGOs were often confused by the requirements of various authorities, each with their own reporting requirements and formats, and regulations. NGOs were also held accountable for repeating several procedures for each project location. NGOs could also be penalized for delays caused by the government offices' poor coordination.

Policy development and implementation created considerable uncertainty. The arbitrary enforcement of regulations, improper policy implementation, and poor cross-agency coordination were among the policy-associated factors that create uncertainty for NGOs. This situation contributed to the unpredictable success of NGO-led programs, and challenged their financial survival. NGO directors were often uncertain as to how to proceed due to the inconsistency and confusion related to legislation governing their organizational operations.

5.8. Labour market factors

The literature reports that the qualifications of staff are affected by resource constraints (Gilson, Sen, Mohammed, et. al., 1994), and by the poor-settings of NGO activities and associated physical and infrastructural challenges (Watkins, Swidler, & Hannan, 2012). In Vietnam, as reported by several respondents (including 5 NGO representatives and 1 central-level government officer) characteristics of the labour market affected NGOs' ability to recruit

sufficient numbers of qualified staff. These characteristics are as follows: First, wealthy for-profit enterprises often offer attractive benefit packages (commissions, extra-salary income) bundled with a dynamic work environment, and opportunities for promotion and career advancement. Second, NGOs might also compete with one another for staff through offering more competitive benefit packages, leading staff to move to NGOs with the better options. Third, government donors might re-prioritize their funding to favour a newly-emerging local NGO that can then attract qualified labour from the non-profit sector. Fourth, working with NGOs is not perceived in Vietnam to be “fashionable” as compared to several other employment opportunities. Fifth, the trans-millennium generation (born in the 1990s) tend to actively explore opportunities to meet individual goals, and they might not possess strong commitment and loyalty to specific organizations as compared to earlier generations. For all these reasons, NGOs’ directors are seriously concerned about local staffing issues in the current Vietnam context. NGOs are sometimes driven to take risks through inadequately staffing their operations or employing un- or marginally-qualified staff.

5.9. Local partners, local populations, and field-based challenges

From my knowledge of managing NGO projects in Vietnam, the implementation of NGO projects in local geographic areas requires a combination of local government, NGOs, and community participation. In these contexts, local governments receive financial resources transferred by NGOs to carry out project activities; they are the local partners. This means that local partners are not part of broader civil society in Vietnam. They are government’s agencies. Local NGOs may also be involved in field-based implementation. They receive money from foreign NGOs to carry out some or all of the funded field activities. Then, they also need to

cooperate with local government to arrange permits for all field-based activities. Grassroots populations are involved as project beneficiaries. Sometimes, communities are consulted for assistance in developing or designing methods for implementing projects or for monitoring and evaluation purposes. In these situations, NGOs do not work directly with the local groups, they instead request the local governments' arrangements for local involvement.

Issues with field-based project implementation were reported by nearly half of the interviewed NGO representatives, all interviewed implementation-level government officers, and two (out of three) interviewed central-level government officers. One particular concern was with overhead costs. Even when neither NGOs nor local partners had sufficient resources, local partners often expected that the NGOs would cover their overhead costs such as administrative expenses and staff costs (on the local partners side). Yet donors assumed that the costs should be covered by the local partners. This confusion over responsibility had the potential to negatively affect local agency-NGO partnerships. According to one NGO director, the organization's partners once warned that they might not cooperate without receiving overhead payments.

NGO-funded projects normally require matching funds. For example, [name of organization] required up to a 50% match for constructing home-based biogas plants. This organization also required a "symbolic" contribution to compensate for charges associated with project quality assurance. For instance, the delivery of eyeglasses might include the eyeglass cost plus professional consultation on eyeglass quality. The NGO director stated, "Our approach is that [name of organization] can only contribute in part... and recipients must contribute something,

possibly in cash, or by labour, or in kind, but nothing is ever free.” In addition, local partners might be asked to earmark a budget line for specific matching funds expenditures.

However, matching funds are rarely awarded by government. Even when awarded, local partners might earmark matching funds for different purposes than overhead. A local government official explained this as follows:

Of course, government commits funds to match NGO projects; it is clear how much is covered by the government, how much is covered by foreign organizations. Yes, there should be matching funds, but it is difficult for central government or provincial government to allocate or to disburse the funds due to their own shortage of funds. Most of the funds go to investment in infrastructure... and seldom to a community project.

Consequently, local communities and implementation partners generally did not expect to cover matching funds. If a matching fund was compulsory in NGO-funded projects, it had to be prioritized for certain activities (such as infrastructure construction) upon prior agreement or negotiation. This dilemma might require further communications among parties, and the process tended to consume time and certainly influenced project progress.

Whether foreign NGOs responded to local priorities or expectations was political insofar as differences existed between the priorities of communities and those local governments. This disjuncture has been described elsewhere. Pfeiffer (2003) and Galway, Corbett, and Zeng (2012) provide criticisms of effectiveness and efficiency of NGO delivery, and found that the NGO projects may not respond to community needs. In Vietnam, while local populations expected “soft” projects from which they could receive higher amounts of money (e.g., per-diems) when

attending meetings or training workshops, local governments might prefer infrastructure construction projects. More practically, differences also existed between NGOs and government agencies over project priorities and locations. As reported by one government official, this disjuncture had the potential to result in failure to implement projects, and as one NGO director commented, communities might be disappointed when NGOs failed to respond to local needs. This might lead to an erosion of trust between NGOs and their beneficiary communities.

Respondents noted that NGOs were vulnerable to problems created by changes to local leadership. Newly nominated local leaders might claim no knowledge of signed partnership agreements, and hence request a whole new round of negotiations. This consumed time and was apt to erode patience on both sides. According to one NGO director,

The handover between old and new leadership is not properly conducted... We signed a five-year Memorandum of Understandings (MOU), and halfway through, they changed the chairman of the project management board. So, the in-coming chairman had to learn everything from the beginning, and he asked questions all the way through.

Because NGOs were held accountable for the funded projects, they needed to ensure that the new partner leadership attained adequate knowledge to deliver the project effectively. However, local partner leadership was nominated and decided by the government, and NGOs could by no means interfere with this nomination.

Whether local partners were willing to collaborate with foreign NGOs and be honest in doing so (Watkins, Swidler, & Hannan, 2012) was another matter of concern. A province-level government official admitted that local governments did not seriously collaborate with NGOs:

Let's take the work of planning as an example. We should have sent a staff member who had full knowledge. But in real life, we sent whatever guy was available. That guy participated just for fun, and the partners' participation and partnership agreement were just a name, but the truth was it was not effective... Collaboration among the parties is not really taken seriously.

Several respondents noted that local partners were often not in favour of seconding staff to NGO-funded projects.

A number of reasons were offered by respondents to explain this reluctance, including that NGO aid was normally non-refundable and small so that local partners might not be held accountable for it. On the partners' side, government staffs were tightly scheduled, with numerous political priorities. In addition, a NGO director reported that local governments seemed more willing to collaborate with NGOs with a longer history of local partnerships. Newly-arriving organizations were rarely able to establish effective partner relationships right away. Commitment and willingness from parties involved in partnerships is significant. This is consistent with the literature; for example, Paudel (2013) stresses the strong willingness of political leaders and senior administrators in those partnerships. NGOs needed to consider all these reasons when selecting their partners in the field.

NGOs also have to concern themselves with fraud involving their partners. A NGO director noted that "There were some schools we provided with eyeglasses, and the principals asked us where the commissions were. ... From north to south, this happens all the time although this number is not great." This director also reported that a local agricultural promotion center used

to provide products that were beyond their shelf-life. The director also cautioned that any engagement with local partners had to be closely monitored. Some NGOs reported a lack of trust with their local partners.

As has been reported in the literature, NGOs often find it problematic to disseminate their research findings (Delisle, Roberts, Munro, Jones, & Gyorkos, 2005) or to develop effective relationships with researchers (Olivier, Hunt, & Ridde, 2016). In Vietnam, NGO staff reported receiving warnings from local governments if they reported worse-than-expected development outcomes. Government might even question or ignore any NGO research activity. NGO directors worried that local governments "made up" indicators, and reported unreal indicators that might not reflect actual conditions. This dishonesty had the potential to compromise future funding opportunities because donors would be confused about the actual communities needs. Consequently, reporting field implementations and results became an area of uncertainty. Faithfully reporting local conditions might facilitate NGOs credibility to donors, but also has the potential to damage their relationships with local governments.

It was reported that NGOs were often accused by government of confusing or unclear communication. Government officials commented that NGO staff used hard-to-understand jargon when communicating with local cadres and populations. Several terms common to the development sector were not translated smoothly into the Vietnamese language. For example, non-government organizations and advocacy are among those hard-to-translate terms. Other examples include empowerment and promotion. These terms are either new to Vietnamese populations, or their Vietnamese translations may mean something "sensitive" to the

government. A province-level senior director commented that despite several years of experience working with NGO-funded projects, they still found it difficult to understand their jargon. They were also concerned about how to transfer knowledge to lay populations in the field.

Other challenges sometimes arose in the field. Commuting between villages might be difficult because of the quality of roads and transportation. In addition, awareness and literary levels in mountainous areas and among ethnic minorities were limited. NGO projects generally conveyed positive messages about development to beneficiary communities, but the meaning of the messages were often too complicated for community members to understand, or the community members were simply more interested in tangible support (such as money, food). An implementation-level government senior official stated that,

Vietnamese people are poor, and they are not aware about the benefits NGOs bring about. They [NGOs] care about awareness, they [NGOs] bring about benefits. They [local people] just think about coming to the place to listen, and receive money, and go home, and they are not fully aware what they listen to is for practice, for self-help.

5.10. Wider political environment

One interviewed central-level government officer, and one NGO representative reported concerns with how the global political economy influences several aspects of NGO operations in Vietnam. At a macro level, funding to Vietnam is greatly influenced by globalization. A high-ranking government official was concerned that globalization made messages quickly shared and disseminated, meaning that funding to Vietnam might be easily or unpredictably re-scheduled

and promptly shifted to another region experiencing a natural disaster. This government official warned that although no evidence existed, Vietnam could not survive situations when, for instance, the USAID- or State Department-sponsored international development program decided to shift funds to different purposes. The official also worried that even policy changes in China and South Korea impacted funding to Vietnam. Again, the global politics of funding represented an uncertainty in NGO operations, at least from the perspective of government.

Secondly, fluctuations in the bilateral diplomatic relations between Vietnam and another donor country might affect funding to NGOs. For example, recently in German-Vietnam diplomatic relations the two governments disagreed with each other about a high-ranking official based in Germany. Vietnam stated that the official had voluntarily returned to Vietnam, but Germany announced that the official had been illegally kidnapped within German territory. A NGO director confirmed that the diplomatic conflict suspended German funding to their organization in Vietnam. This story illustrates the politics of NGO funding, the possibility of unpredictable situations, and an area of uncertainty in NGO programming.

5.11. Sensitivity about faith-based organizations

One interviewed central-level government officer and one NGO representative reported their concerns over religious issues, although in Vietnam, religious issues are considered "sensitive", and the government was greatly concerned with the potential proselytizing of faith-based organizations. This sensitivity is likely linked to a history where political upheavals led by religious leaders sought to challenge government authority. Religion-associated activities likely worried government due to its orientation to the tenets of Marxism and Leninism, which

comprises the blue-print theory for the country's development. This sensitivity has been described amongst NGOs in China. There, faith-based NGOs employed several strategies to maintain their presences in China: cooperation with government, collaboration, and resource sharing (Tam & Hasmath, 2015). In Vietnam, events or services organized by religious organizations (e.g., churches) engage several community members, which may result in collective actions that the government cannot control. Despite this, the fact is that many currently operating NGOs in Vietnam are faith-based organizations. Because religion-based implementation is considered a threat to public security, it therefore attracted close government scrutiny.

Engaging communities in project implementation was rarely possible with faith-based organizations (FBO). Although religious groups were argued by one NGO respondent to have the potential to contribute to international development projects, NGOs' abilities to do so in Vietnam were severely constrained:

Faith-based organizations in other countries... can connect with Catholic churches, Catholic youth, Young Man Christian Association groups, Catholic Scouts to implement activities. But it is very, very hard in a Vietnamese context. There seem to be no connections between [name of organization] and churches or Christian associations in this context to use youth, young individuals, churches, and religious believers.

Cooley and Ron (2002) note that faith-based organizations such as Catholic Relief Services, Lutheran World Services, World Vision, and the Middle East Council of Churches access alternative funds from Catholic dioceses in the developed nation, and this access has allowed

them to reject western governments' funds if their projects were found to be in poor alignment with government preferences. In contrast, faith-based organizations in Vietnam may find themselves in dilemmas about whether, how, and up to what level they should enhance their funding. One NGO director offered as an example funding for faith-based organizations in Cambodia. In that country, child-focused sponsorship was the core funding source of an organization, accounting for sixty to seventy percent of the organization's funding in the country. In this case, Cambodia was very sensitive to activities in China, and China firmly controlled the operations of faith-based organizations. Child sponsorship was likely to be considered a potentially uncontrollable channel for transmitting religious messages. As a result, the Government of Cambodia decided to cut in half the organization's sponsorship funding from \$8 million to \$4 million because of the fear that religious messages were being integrated into child sponsorship activities. Because Vietnam also relied on China economically and politically, the above NGO director was concerned that the Cambodian story would certainly be repeated in Vietnam as well, and similarly affect foreign NGO operations:

So, you will see that the uncertainty is when the government is concerned about everything, they are ready to collapse it, and [name of organization]'s budget is just few millions per year, it's very small... If they feel they cannot control us, they will close our door promptly.

5.12. Summary

In this chapter, I have presented numerous factors external to NGOs' abilities to achieve strategic goals and objectives in Vietnam. I have reported several matters considered "sensitive" by current government regulations and thus are subject to control of operations: information

transparency, advocacy, association, and religion. NGOs were labelled “sensitive” (meaning problematic or worrying) and “a threat” to national security. Restrictive regulations and political will shaped the understandings of NGOs. Current regulations did not offer NGOs an official definition, so NGOs lacked an official position in the local social structure.

My work experience agrees with the above finding. NGO projects seem to always worry government departments. For example, NGO staff always meet with local villagers to discuss aspects of project implementation. In particular, in order to implement a project of building a school in the local area, NGO staffs involve local villagers in designing, hiring construction company, monitoring progress and quality of the construction, and reporting any abuses to NGO staffs. However, the involvement of local villagers in the project implementation may be seen as threatening. Government may worry that it cannot control the gathering of several villagers in one place at one time. Also, the government may worry because its staff can not control the content of communication between NGO staffs and the local villagers. The government considers an association between villagers’ participation in project implementation and “social insecurity”. Because NGOs facilitate the villagers’ participation, they are “sensitive”.

Language use comprised a special problem in field implementation when NGOs introduced new terms without proper translation into Vietnamese. Moreover, the Vietnamese translation of “non-government organization” and “policy advocacy” was sometimes confusing and misunderstood. Through the translation, “non-government organizations” became outlawed “social evils”, and advocacy became “sensitive” social criticisms. This miscommunication led government departments and local groups to fear working with NGOs. In my experience, a

government department denied cooperation agreements with NGOs in a mid-course phase because, as the department's representative confirmed, they did not want to cooperate with outlawed "social evils".

Of particular note, NGOs refused to assume responsibility for local communities, making their accountability and grass-roots mandates vulnerable to being blurring in society. To further complicate matters, some NGOs even considered shifting to an entrepreneurial role or becoming professional associations so as to enhance their effectiveness and increase their likelihood of survival.

The nation's wealthier status in international economic terms has affected NGOs' ability to secure long-term funding to address poverty-related issues amongst marginal and/or vulnerable populations. An economy-oriented development strategy transformed Vietnam from one of the poorest countries in the world to a lower middle-income country with the GDP per capita of US\$1,260 in 2011 (World Bank, 2011). However, segments of the population who were lagging behind this new standard, and newly-emerging social issues, offered NGOs reasons to stay in Vietnam. However, the country was de-listed (no longer a central priority) in donors' lists, which unpredictably influenced its financing of development projects. The survival of foreign NGOs was challenged. Coupled with economic progress, Vietnam's major public health improvements (for example, national vitamin A supplementation coverage rate), donors' shifted priorities, and donors' heightened grant requirements all influenced NGO operations. NGOs had to familiarize themselves with new priorities and demands (a shortened timeframe, an insistence on tangible results, shrunken funds, and dictated fund-flows) that were not their traditions and

strengths. NGOs' coping strategies to donors' control showed their flexibility as well as vulnerability to survival.

Based on my experience, the country's wealthier status greatly influenced NGOs' funding status and survival. In an organization I was working with, its annual budget was decreased from approximate \$21 million to about \$5 million, and most donors committed funds on an annual basis instead of their previous multiple year basis. In addition, the number of staffs was decreased from more than 100 to 30. The organization's leaders decided to access several sources of fund which sponsored programs (HIV treatment, health services delivery) that were not consistent with their past program objectives.

I have also highlighted the country's controlling regulations and policy gaps that challenge NGO values and delivery effectiveness, and that have eroded NGOs' commitment to long-term objectives and community development initiatives. Many other Asian governments have always regulated NGO operations (Fisher, 2003, Tandon & Rajesh, 1989). The Government of Vietnam issued the Decree 12/2012/ND-CP, Decision 76/2010/QD-TTg., and Decree 93/2009/ND-CP, which all imposed restrictions on NGO administration, personnel, finance, and projects. Any activities, as small as a two-hour workshop, or as large as a multiple-year project, needed the authorities' approval before being implemented. To further complicate the policy landscape, the Law on Associations had still not been promulgated after a twenty-year development. Most seriously, Regulation 102-QD/TW allowed the expulsion of any Communist Party member who "addressed" civil society (Chapter II, Article 7, Point 3b). With this regulation, the mono-partisan government would not promulgate any legal documents that might facilitate NGO

operations. The political imposition meant that how and in what directions the regulation might change remained uncertain.

I experienced a programmatic uncertainty as a result of the policy that requested that any NGO-sponsored activities, as small as a two-hour workshop, or as large as a construction project, needed the authorities' approval before being implemented. The organization that I worked with applied a capacity building approach to programming, which normally resulted in a workplan with several training events. If the organization adhered to this capacity building approach, the annual workplan might not be completed because the staff did not have enough time to spend on obtaining permits. In case the organization's leaders approved any activities that supported spending (for example, a construction project may support spending of several times as great as a training activities, and need only one permit), the organization strayed afar from their traditional programming approach.

Policy development processes were vague and their implementation was typically arbitrary. Different NGOs might be treated differently depending on the relationships between a NGO and state-owned agencies (partners). In addition, policy implementation was completed only intermittently, often confusing instructions were provided, and formal standards were not observed by officers-in-charge. Coordination amongst departments was poor, with each department imposing their own reporting requirements and formats, and even their own policies. Uncertain policy development and implementation contributed to the uneven progress of programs, and even endangered NGOs' financial survival. NGO directors were often uncertain about how and in what directions to proceed with organizational operations.

Based on my experience, at times there were even no authorities able or willing to approve a NGO-sponsored project. For example, I managed a construction project that aimed to build few classrooms for children in a remote village. The regulation indicated that the project had to be approved by the provincial Department of Foreign Affairs before implementation. However, the department's representative refused to accept our application for approval and forwarded the application to the provincial Department of Construction. This Department of Construction, in turn, refused to receive the application because they did not have the authority to deal with NGO-sponsored projects. The lack of inter-department coordination resulted in wasting the time and effort of NGOs' staffs.

Several factors in the labour market affected NGO personnel. Newly emerged business enterprises offered competitive compensation packages and dynamic work environments. International funds sometimes favoured local organizations. NGOs also had to compete against each other for personnel. As a result, staffing issues were a serious concern to NGO directors. My professional experience is consistent with the finding that the applicants to NGO staff positions would compare the benefit packages offered by different NGOs, and by business-oriented enterprises. In most cases, they chose to work with the business sector or with a NGO with more competitive benefit packages.

Local partners represented several challenges to NGO operations. They might fail to complete their responsibilities in the partnerships (e.g., providing matching funds, sharing agendas), and they sometimes changed leadership without a proper hand-over. Even fraud poisoned some

relationships. Partnering became uncertain because of the limitations in the choice of partners in the field. In addition, NGOs might be unwelcome if they disseminated research findings that were different from those in local government reports. Although NGOs managed to respond to local needs, differences might exist between local populations and local governments. Local priorities or expectations became politically charged, and NGOs risked losing the trust of local communities, and donors.

Based on my experience, I would add that any partnership with a government agency may be a negative experience. Because NGOs must cooperate with a government department or a local government to implement projects, they do not have options from which to select. For example, if a NGO wants to implement a health project, it can select to partner with a local health department, or a local government. Either option can be difficult because when the NGO cooperates with one partner (for example, with the local health department), the other partner's leaders may feel insulted, not because they fail the opportunity to implement the project, but because they fail the opportunity to show their power to control the project. This partner may refuse any further cooperation with the NGO.

The wider political environment has also affected NGO operations. Vietnam's emerging economy has made it vulnerable to policy changes in other donor countries like the United States, the Europe Union, China and South Korea. Fluctuations in bilateral diplomatic relations between Vietnam and other donor countries can impact funding to NGOs. Moreover, because Vietnam also relies on China economically and politically, it might choose to copy China's

restrictive regulations on faith-based organizations. In what dimensions these challenges will evolve remains unforeseen when politics are involved.

Because religion-based implementation is considered a threat to public security, it therefore attracted close government scrutiny. Faith-based organizations in Vietnam may find themselves in dilemmas about whether, how, and up to what level they should enhance their funding or enhance their profiles.

CHAPTER 6 - FACTORS INTERNAL TO NGO OPERATIONS

In the previous chapter, I reported the several influences external to NGO operations. In this chapter, I present factors internal to NGO operations. These are things that NGOs have some control over. In the context of this thesis, these may be thought of as the adaptive strategies that NGOs employ to respond to, and survive, the uncertainties that characterize the Vietnam context.

6.1 Case example

Bido International (not a real name, known hereafter as Bido) has operated in Vietnam for nearly 30 years. Their main country office was in Hanoi and it also had several program offices established throughout the country. Bido coordinated a number of community development programs in Vietnam. Its Health and Social section provided health, social and economic supports for people with disabilities, supplies medical equipment for hospitals, and supports development of clean water and sanitation facilities for poor communities. The Health and Social section also maintained a health clinic that provided clinic care free of charge for children of poor families in different provinces. Bido's education section offered scholarship opportunities for poor students at primary, secondary and tertiary education levels. Its Infrastructure section led several construction projects, both small (e.g., one classroom primary schools in rural areas) and large (e.g., general hospitals in urban areas). At one time the organization had an annual budget of more than twenty million US dollars and a staff of more than 100 members.

Its multiple project foci and wide geographic coverage required the organization to continually update or renew its operation and project permits. An organization's representative reported that

they have faced considerable uncertainties over when operation permits would be issued. When they asked government for progress processing permits, government staff often answered that it is coordinating feedbacks from related authorities. Sometimes, they have been told that it “takes time” for the director to review and sign the permit. Once signed, it may take another 1-2 months for the final, signed and stamped permit, to reach the organization’s head office.

Once the organization’s in-charge staff receives the operation permits, they had to file a copy of the permit with the tax authority. The tax authority has complained about late submission of the renewed permit, even though the delay was caused by government, and has been penalized for the late submission of the permits to the tax authority. On occasion, funding to the organization has been cancelled as a result of these delays. For example, in one province, the funding for constructing water towers was cancelled.

As a condition of donor funding, the organization is sometimes required to hire advisors or consultants from outside of Vietnam to evaluate program quality. The administrative procedures for applying for a foreign worker work permit are both ambiguous as well as constantly changing. The government’s staff in charge of reviewing the work permit application did not provide full, responsive instructions, and has instead made several recommendations for improving an application, but only one at a time, thereby prolonging the permitting process. Once, a foreign advisor had to work from abroad (outside of Vietnam) as a result of these cumbersome and lengthy permitting procedures. Of course, evaluation work done from abroad may not be of the same quality or thoroughness as that done locally.

Because of the permitting delays, Bido risks losing control over their projects' progress and staffing, which might in turn result in a reputational risk with donors. The organization's management decided to enter into a contracting relationship with private contractors with specific projects' milestones and deadlines. The organization's director believed that private contractors were able to assume the risks regarding project progress, financial disbursement to local workers, maintenance, and quality assurance -- in implementing the contracted projects. Payment was made to contractors based on project outcomes (e.g., the number of villagers who are connected to the built water tower). This method of project management allowed for a significant decrease in the number of staff required to direct projects, though some staff are still required to ensure that contracted outcomes are met. For example, the water and sanitation program used to have up to forty staff in charge of project coordination, engineering, and financial matters. Now, and with reduced funding, the program had just one project officer managing contractors and financial disbursements and accounting.

This example shows how a foreign NGO's implementation was influenced by the current regulations that created uncertainties and delays. With current bureaucratic regulations requiring a permit for each NGO, and within the NGO, a permit for each newly-funded project, and with substantial time needed for each element of the permitting process, the delays, with consequences in terms of project funding and implementation, could be considerable. These delays were exacerbated by ineffective coordination between government departments. NGO staff ended up wasting quite a bit of time and effort simply trying to follow regulations.

This example also illustrated how the organization worked to overcome these obstacles. Their shift to a contracting approach to program implementation transferred many of the management risks to private contractors. However, this arms-length approach, while shifting bureaucratic risks to a third party, might raise a question of whether, and how, the NGO ensured adherence to its key values of community empowerment and participation. In addition, this approach involved a shift in responsibility for the NGO – it simply occupied a position where it “bridged” the donors and local contractors, with a minimal role in project or program implementation. This brought up questions of who in fact was accountable, either “upwards” to the donor, or “downwards” to the community.

Building on this example, in the following paragraphs I report on several influences internal to NGO operations. These factors include those affecting NGO program implementation and effectiveness, top-down directives from headquarters, and uncertainties related to staffing. I then examine the implications that these factors have for NGO operations, such as changing mandates, changes to avenues of accountability, changes in delivery strategies, and NGO alignment with government. At the end of the chapter I present several of the recommendations for improving NGO-government-donor relations made to me by respondents.

6.2. Factors affecting program implementation and effectiveness

NGO interviewees were interested in reporting their experience implementing programs and the programs’ effectiveness in the context of the many external challenges I presented in the preceding chapter. All of NGOs’ representatives, two of four implementation-level government

officers, and two of three central government officers responded to the issues with NGO program implementation and effectiveness.

At the implementation level, NGOs might want to introduce "new concepts" to local populations (such as community empowerment). These new concepts ranged from direct supports (e.g., community members were involved in monitoring the progress and quality of school construction projects) to capacity building (e.g., communities were invited to raise their ideas about local development projects), and from general "new values" (such as communities were project owners) to specific "low-resource appropriateness" (such as climate change and adaptation projects that fit local settings and conditions). The introduction of these concepts are coupled with multi-component programming designed to contain several components (direct support, capacity building, communication and advocacy, and partnership). The introduction of the new concepts may be preferred by donors. One NGO director commented that, "If we cannot devise anything new, we cannot attract donors".

Although NGOs devised initiatives based on their already existing strengths, they might deviate gradually from their older priorities of focusing narrowly on a particular area of expertise (building water systems) to incorporate newer foci. However, given an uncertain political atmosphere, local communities' literacy levels, and funding, the successful implementation of any new programs might be uncertain.

The NGO representatives I interviewed reported that they often included several aspects of community development in their programs. One director reported that although their

organization focused mainly on child-benefitting programs, they also engaged with gender equity initiatives and, more generally, the promotion of grassroots democracy. Even the director could not explain how grassroots democracy directly related to the organization's child-centered approach.

Some NGOs implement projects focused on securing rights (empowerment, democracy), rather than on what would be considered more "traditional" service projects such as charity or provision of health services. One director commented that NGOs should not keep offering charity projects, but instead work to strengthen the government's accountability to its citizens, especially in the context of Vietnam's economic development. The literature provides some insights about the consequences of such a shift. Ghere (2013) defines rights-oriented NGOs as focusing on promoting human rights and empowerment among states, corporate entities and community with the goal of changing their administrative behaviours and actions accordingly. Lewis and Opoku-Mensah (2006) suggest that such a shift in NGOs' operational conceptual framework, such as to a rights-based approach, could improve what has become a somewhat "tarnished" image. So, as one NGO director observed in the context of Vietnam, instead of implementing rural poverty alleviation projects, a NGO might work on the rights for and access to social protection among the poorest populations in urban areas. This director explained that urban-based mobile populations were deserving given their limited access to basic health, social, and administrative services. However, although NGO directors might be motivated to promote such rights-based programs, the implementation of such programs will certainly be considered "sensitive" by government.

Because issues around human rights are sensitive in the Vietnam context, the government can create difficulties for these NGO projects. Yet, although NGOs experienced difficulties in rights-based approaches, they accepted the difficulties to engage in issues such as human rights, civil society, and ethnic populations. For example, one director observed that “many people, especially ethnic minority people, women, youth, people with disabilities and disadvantaged children do not have the opportunity to benefit from many services, notably health, education and public administration services”. Legally, the chapter II of the 2013 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam mentioned human rights and citizens’ fundamental rights and duties. One NGO strategy document commented that, “this constitution opens a completely new space for social organizations to discuss topics of human rights more freely, and to implement programmes and projects based on the principle of human rights in sustainable development.” NGOs deployed their legitimacy approaching rights-related matters, pending funding and resource (tools, expertise) availability. Because the government considers the right-based approach to programming to be “sensitive”, and in violation of policy, NGOs in this context, can be seen as challenging government.

Despite concerns about a negative government response, some respondents reported that their organizations shifted their interventions from humanitarian projects to policy engagement despite the “sensitive” nature of policy advocacy. The literature has much to add to this discussion.

Advocacy is one NGO interaction with governments that may sustain the impacts of development projects through structural changes and promotion of rights (Lewis & Kanji, 2009). NGOs increasingly target numerous global issues and they aim for sustained changes. Cook, Wright, and Andersson (2017) argue that NGO advocacy practices may lead to structural

changes in numerous arenas. In Vietnam, a senior advisor in one NGO explained that NGOs changed their mandates to adapt to social and political changes, so they could advocate for policies at appropriate levels (community, district, province, or central levels). Their policy engagement was perceived to fit with the mandates. Perhaps ironically, although NGOs engaged in policy advocacy, they also tried to make that advocacy apolitical by not being, in their words, “partisan.” One director explained,

Doing policy means involvement in politics. However, by doing politics, NGOs remain non-political because they are non-partisan. I do not participate in any political party. This cannot prevent me from engaging in policies and politics. Many other organizations... also have the same understanding.

Similarly, Hannah (2007) notes that NGOs struggle to create a formal space for their advocacy roles in developing contexts to ensure an equal engagement in the policy sphere with governments, given their non-political nature. When NGOs in Vietnam engaged in policy projects, they did not belong to or reflect the perspectives of any specific political parties.

In written documents, several organizations articulated their position on advocacy. For example, one organization made “policy influence” a separate objective in their 2016-2020 strategy. NGOs specified several components (construct knowledge, establish evidence databases, build supporter networks) involved in their moves to advocacy. One organization highlighted their advocacy across all their priority programs in their annual report 2016. Another promoted a stronger voice among ethnic minority women and socially-marginalized people, and integrated an examination of gender-based violence into their national agenda. Still other organizations considered advocacy to be one of their key tactics in their Vietnam operations, together with

securing child-centered approach, improved partnerships, and increased government accountability:

We will advocate for greater public investment in improving the lives of children from minority ethnic groups – particularly their nutrition and education. And we will call for inclusive economic development and the reduction of economic inequality affecting ethnic minority children.

NGOs used several tools to deploy their “apolitical” policy advocacy. First, being aware about their own funding limitations, political sensitivities, and their limited access to formal policy-making processes, they attempted to maximize the impact of community-based evidence.

Hudson (2001) notes that one role for NGOs is to link grassroots communities with upper levels of governance, ensuring that their voices are heard. In Vietnam, for example, one organization consolidated and disseminated field-based evidence (children’s clubs, children’s voices, children-led injury prevention communications) to the 2015-2020 national agenda on child participation when NGOs were invited by government to contribute ideas on the development of the agenda. Another researched social inequality among some populations and aimed to mainstream inequality in Parliament’s Social Development Committee agenda. Other organizations advocated grassroots-level child-friendly models to bring positive impacts to children’s lives. This use of evidence shows how NGOs used their strengths. However, despite such efforts, NGOs did not seem to have much influence over the policy process in Vietnam. Although they organized several events for advocacy purposes, they had no means available to ensure that any messages coming out of these events were heard by government.

Second, organizations collaborated with government departments to deliver or scale policies for nation-wide impact. In Vietnam, an organization in this research collaborated with the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) to organize policy dialogues on industrial development, and with the Central Institute for Economic Management, a leading social research institute in Vietnam, on Vietnam's long-term development goals. Also, few NGOs allocated part of their grant funds for collaborating with central government departments on clean water-related policies. NGOs understood that they could not engage directly with parliament, so instead they used discussions with related departments to disseminate key messages and evidence from their projects. These practices appear muted, though roughly consistent in comparison with NGO activities in other development contexts. NGOs increasingly use their capabilities to vote, lobby, advocate, and hold political representatives accountable for their actions (Chakanika & Chuma, 1999). In one example, through lobbying government delegates, cooperating with developing country delegations, and mobilizing public pressure, NGOs were able to generate significant impact during the pre-negotiation phase of the UNEP Convention on Biological Diversity to issue the Biosafety Protocol (Arts & Mack, 2003).

Third, NGOs created networks and forums to amplify their voice. Such networks might include several NGOs with the same interests. For example, one NGO took the initiative of networking with other organizations with the same programmatic interest to advocate for wider coverage of health insurance for children up to 12 and even 16 years of age (current policies in Vietnam cover only children under six years old). Another NGO used the National Youth Forum to amplify youths' voice on Youth Law. The National Youth Forum served as a platform for 800 youth representatives from across Vietnam, and was jointly convened by Action Aid Vietnam,

the National Committee on Youth of Vietnam, Plan International Vietnam, and ChildFund International. In 2015, the Forum focused on the review and enforcement of youth-related laws and policies. NGOs have clearly learned to take advantage of collective efforts on issues of interest.

Fourth, some other organizations coordinated with several stakeholders -- financial institutions, international bodies, the private sector -- in their advocacy projects, resulting in several national guidelines and policies related to conservation. One respondent reported that because the links among these institutions were weak, NGOs would want to play the coordinating role linking those institutions and creating a collective result.

Fifth, under some circumstances NGOs were able to coordinate their advocacy work through government departments. For example, one NGO undertook consultation with Ministry of Health throughout the development, endorsement and adoption of eyecare policies and guidelines, which eventually received adequate government response.

Although my data did not reveal when NGOs began their advocacy efforts, the move into the policy sphere suggests that this is a recent change to NGO operations. Early NGO projects implemented at the time of the 1986 economic reform did not engage in policy advocacy, but by the time of my study, NGOs had begun to implement policy-level interventions. This change in role and mandate appeared to rely on both their prestige as social development organizations as well as their capacity to convey well-framed, evidence-based messages to the appropriate levels

of formal decision-making. One NGO senior advisor cautioned, however, that despite such efforts, NGOs should not assume that their messages are heard or acted upon.

An example of success in policy advocacy was reported in one organization's annual report. The organization implemented a two-year project to inform a new law enhancing citizen's participation in policy processes. This involved cooperating with the Vietnam Lawyers Association to draft the Law on Referendum through policy research and advocacy workshops, including collecting citizens' views and opinions from all 63 provinces in Vietnam on the proposed law. The Law on Referendum was approved by the National Assembly in November 25, 2015. For the first time in legislative history the right to referendum was stipulated in the Constitution of Vietnam to ensure that the voices of citizens, especially those living in poverty and in marginalized communities, are heard in the process of developing laws directly affecting their lives. This example shows that although NGOs had no actual standing to discuss policy-related matters with authorities, their networking activities, if carefully conducted, can bear fruit.

Several NGOs prioritized research activities in their strategy documents. Outside Vietnam, and as discussed in chapter 2, researchers have expressed concerns about the quality of NGO research projects (Atkinson & Scurrah, 2009, Delisle, Roberts, Munro, et. al., 2005), and suggest that NGOs should connect with universities or research institutions in order for research results to meet standards for academic rigour (Olivier, Hunt, & Ridde, 2016). However, one director of a NGO in Vietnam argued that NGOs were in fact well-placed to conduct research because of their international connections and if they maintained good collaborations with research institutions. For example, when I was working with a NGO, we cooperated with a university in

central Vietnam to conduct an evaluation of a 10-year community development project. Another organization partnered with a university in northern Vietnam to conduct a baseline survey on disability issues. Both examples represented short-term agreements between NGOs and research institutions in Vietnam. As discussed above, research has certainly helped NGOs build knowledge and create evidence to use in advising the government on several development issues. A particular strength of NGO research is their focus on disseminating evidence collected at the level of the community. When done well, such research would seem to enhance an organization's credibility with external stakeholders.

Despite some successes in the research domain, NGO directors were often concerned about their ability to assess the effectiveness of their projects. This concern has been raised in other country contexts as well. Scholars have noted that NGOs lack rigorous techniques for measuring their effectiveness (Olivier, Hunt, & Ridde, 2016, Ghere, 2013, Pillai, Wei, & Maleku, 2013, Watkins, Swidler, & Hannan, 2012, ISSEE, 2010). One NGO director in Vietnam admitted that “we believe [in an impact] rather than we have evidence [of such an impact].” NGOs sometimes failed to evaluate programs because of unrealistic or inappropriate outcome indicators. One senior manager reported that:

Once [we] implemented a project about empowering women through economic development and rights promotion. Local partners were very excited about the micro-credit component because of economic opportunities for poor women... However, one of the indicators was that three years after the project ended, the proportion of women nominated in district-level leaderships was changed like this and that. This indicator was unreal, because the NGO, by and large, could not interfere, by any means, in the

arrangement for human resources of the government... They control all the political systems, and we cannot do anything about it.

As this comment indicates, NGOs cannot influence government staffing processes given the government's own "Core Cadre Master Plan." This plan aims to regulate staffing of the leadership positions of state-owned departments and organizations. The NGO project described above introduced no measures that could influence the political processes of appointing leadership.

Indicators were often used to measure task-level, not impact-level results, and were best illustrated by examining NGOs' annual planning and strategy documents. For example, one NGO's annual planning document aimed to show the effectiveness of a fund-raising objective. This objective would be achieved through two tasks: staff capacity building, and preparation of concept notes for funders. Indicators proposed for achievement included the number of staff receiving training, and the number of submitted proposals. This organization also employed the same approach to designing indicators for other objectives. For instance, the objectives of strengthening local-groups' capacity (project management, communication and facilitation) was measured by the number of meetings conducted, the number of field visits and reports with recommendations, the number of field visits and reports co-conducted with local participants, the number of recommendations followed up, and the number of project reports shared. Task-level success indicators were also used by another NGO. Monitoring and evaluation indicators can be formative, process-focused, or outcome-focused. In this situation, NGO-devised indicators did not speak to longer-term project outcomes or impacts. I think that NGOs need to provide evidence, in some way, for their long-term project outcomes to donors, the government, and communities.

At times, effectiveness means that achievements are sustained or replicated after projects were completed. Although NGO projects may have been implemented with the best intentions and designs, their duration is always restricted to a project cycle. One government official noted that when projects are completed and efforts withdrawn, their effects also stopped. Project effects could not be replicated because of fund limitations, local government leadership changes, and follow-up and maintenance deficits. So, NGO projects might produce short-term results, but their long-term impacts would remain uncertain. This concern is not unique to Vietnam: the effectiveness of NGOs' projects on local social and health systems has been a focus of criticism for many scholars (Pfeiffer, 2003, Pfeiffer, Johnson, Fort, et al., 2008).

Several reasons were claimed for implementation ineffectiveness. First, as in other development contexts, NGOs may have made assumptions about community needs that were not reflected in reality. NGOs also made assumptions about the effectiveness of modes of project delivery. In addition, they assumed that projects were designed to maximize or ensure effective responses to communities' needs. The NGO directors I spoke with expressed disappointment when their best efforts did not yield real change.

Second, implementation schedules affected projects' effectiveness. For example, a senior official in government reported that a foreign NGO had sponsored a project aimed to improve the well-being of coastal fishery villagers. The project activities included communications with the villagers on coast-related matters (natural disasters, border issues). However, when communication sessions were organized fishermen were out at sea and could not attend. Instead,

project staff decided to convey messages to their family members but could not ensure that the messages were passed on to fishermen, and whether the messages were conveyed accurately. When asked why project activities could not happen during holidays when fishermen stayed at home, the government official who was responsible for implementing the NGO project said that their staff could not work on holidays. This is an example of how reliance on local implementation partners, who in Vietnam are part of or approved by government, can jeopardize the implementation of what might otherwise be important and worthwhile projects.

Project implementation was typically characterized by a participatory approach which means that several stakeholders engaged in implementation processes (community groups, local governments, professionals, beneficiaries). As has been documented in a number of development contexts, community participation represents a valuable implementation tactic (Hoque, Clarke, & Huang, 2016, Kuhl, 2009, Akukwe, 1998, Ghimire, 1998, Cincotta, 1994). Uncertainties arose with the actual application of this approach. First, while multi-component, multi-objective projects might include involvement of several state-owned departments, these departments tended to focus on single, “vertical” objectives (e.g., the health department just focused on health outcomes of projects). In the words of one director,

We work on food security, which covers numerous areas, agriculture, health, and women’s issues. Generally, it’s a mixed thing. One government department cannot manage this project. Health people cannot direct agriculture people. Then, we as a NGO must coordinate the money and deliver wire-transactions and disbursements to each specific activity.

As this comment suggests, in Vietnam, government departments often do not work well with each other. The departments operate “vertically”, which means that each department fulfils specific tasks assigned by the central government, and the department is responsible to the government for the tasks. For example, the department of health must fulfill health-related tasks. Cross-departmental links are limited. Therefore, any project that engages two or more departments may be poorly implemented because of the lack of a principal responsible department. For example, a school-setting health project may be difficult to implement because it matters whether the department of health or department of education will be the main responsible department for the project. Therefore, when NGOs partnered with several different departments, they were required to take on a coordinating role, which was not considered officially legitimate by government. Inevitably, this placed a great deal of stress on NGO-government relationships. NGOs were required to tread carefully when engaging in multi-objective, multi-sectoral programming.

Secondly, local implementing partners and NGOs may have different organizational practices that can lead to conflict. Although NGOs tended to prioritize delivery of quality programs in a transparent way, local partners complained that NGO’s internal control measures were too tight to deploy in the field. One NGO director stated, “When tenders are invited, local people are used to dishonest behaviours; therefore, they feel very uncomfortable working with [us].” The conflict happened between a NGO, which aimed for financial transparency in bidding, and the local departments, which did not want the transparency. I think that this mention is just a quote from a director of an international NGO, and this mention does not mean to depict the whole country as corrupt. In real life, if this dishonest behaviour happened with this organization, it

may or may not happen elsewhere, and it may be hard to quantify the level of corruption in this research project.

Thirdly, at times community groups were paid to participate in project implementation. In their project, Islam (2013) criticizes that community participation may sometimes be distorted by such practices. For instance, in Vietnam volunteers and project promoters are often paid monthly incentives to join project activities. Problems appeared because of differences in how specific NGOs allocated per diem costs. And, of course, when NGOs withdraw, and with them their money, local participation flags.

Government officials were concerned that NGOs lacked knowledge of state-owned agency operations and administrative procedures, and this deficiency affected field implementation. For instance, as noted above, NGOs did not realize and align with government expectations regarding permits, partnership agreements, implementation guidelines, geographic locations permissions, and reporting requirements. A high-ranking government official argued that foreign NGOs often submitted incomplete or even incorrect documentation, resulting in delayed approvals and project implementation. Foreign NGOs were expected to become fully aware about and observe government regulations, without which project implementation would be affected.

Both NGO directors and government officials proposed solutions for this knowledge deficiency. For instance, a NGO director considered building staff's soft skills to search for necessary information and to build relations with government officials. Few government officials indicated

that there were no mechanisms in place to facilitate communication between government and NGOs. They pointed out that:

International organizations may want to sponsor local organizations, but they do not have the correct information. For instance, we recently worked with a French development organization. Although they have had a representative office in Vietnam for many years, their understanding of the policy environment and Government regulations is limited. Government, foreign NGOs and local NGOs, to a limited extent, should exchange information about themselves.

Poor exchange of information between government and NGOs led to a number of problems. Although this official did not identify clear mechanisms for knowledge exchange, he/she referred to the NGO Resource Center, which was established in 1993 through a partnership between foreign NGOs and the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations (VUFO). It aims to facilitate sharing information, resources and experiences between foreign NGOs, their partners and local organisations. It also aims to strengthen relationships and enhance dialogue between foreign NGOs and other development actors in Vietnam, including government agencies and donor organisations. The Centre, which should have access to and facilitate the proper flow of information, does not appear to operate to its full potential. It is clear that a lack of knowledge or understanding on both sides affects creates considerable uncertainty in the implementation of projects.

6.3. Top-down directives from headquarters

Four NGO respondents and one central government officer contributed their opinions on how foreign NGO's international headquarters influenced their field offices in Vietnam. Foreign

NGOs in Vietnam normally reported to and complied with directives issued by their overseas-based regional or headquarters offices. For example, NGOs might have to shift their intervention focus to advocacy because of a global office's directive. Head offices also imposed regulations on, and required compliance from, their local organizations. For instance, a head office might require a local office to sharply reduce its operating budget, asking it to raise funds from other sources. Consequently, the local office was expected to cover nearly all expenses on its own, including operating and program costs. In one case, the local Vietnam office actually had to transfer part of its overhead budget to its US-based headquarters.

Beyond financial dealings and changes to rules and compliance processes, headquarters-issued policies might also simply be irrelevant or inappropriate for a local program. One NGO director said that newly-recruited staff at headquarters lacked field experience, therefore leading them to issue changes to programs were inappropriate to the local context. Foreign NGOs in Vietnam might not always obtain support from their own international office, making their operations more vulnerable to changes in funding, programming, and local political interference.

Headquarters-imposed policies might also run counter to Vietnamese law. A government official commented, "foreign NGOs may have their own regulations at headquarters level. Those regulations, when reaching Vietnam, must correspond with Vietnam's regulations. If those policies cannot harmonize with each other, administrative processes will be prolonged." Foreign NGOs in Vietnam are often placed in the impossible position of trying to obey both their organizations' and local regulations, creating another time-consuming aspect to working in Vietnam.

Moreover, the NGOs studied suffered from the uncertainties caused by too many layers of supervision. The greatest challenges occurred when they had to concurrently convince government, headquarters, and donors of the need for a course of action before actual implementation, sometimes an impossible balancing act, and certainly a tiring one.

6.4. Uncertainties related to staffing

All NGO interviewees were concerned about staffing their organizations' operations. Recruiting and retaining qualified staff challenged NGO directors because benefit packages were less rewarding than those offered by the private sector and even by government. NGO directors might be unable to adjust salary scales to be competitive due to funding limitations. How to allocate adequate funds for effectively staffing operations has been an on-going challenge for directors.

Despite challenges in recruiting staff, NGO directors required that staff possess proper qualifications. Many operations require multi-talented staff who are also willing to work overtime, and for modest benefit packages, and possibly be based in remote field sites where living amenities are not as desirable or attractive as in urban areas. One director complained that their organization struggled to find a suitable candidate for one key position:

I travelled to [name of remote place] two months ago to recruit staff for the position of project assistant based in the field. Interviewing nearly 10 people, I could not select anyone. Several village-heads applied but they could not take charge of the few communes that we needed. We also needed basic agricultural skills, nutritional

education, team skills... We also received an application from an electrician. Generally, mixed applications.

In their analysis of global health NGOs, Gilson and colleagues (1994) argue that under conditions of funding vulnerability, NGOs may compromise on staff qualifications, e.g., by recruiting untrained or inadequately-trained staff. This was certainly seen in Vietnam, where NGOs complained that requirements for particular skills led to problems with staff recruitment. Talented individuals with required qualifications normally expected more competitive job offers. Personnel recruitment has for many organizations become a very challenging problem.

If recruiting staff is difficult, retaining staff is even more so. First, the NGO work environment was generally considered to be less dynamic because of less demanding and altruistic management compared with the vibrant for-profit business sector (no rewards for early completion of project objectives, no penalty for late deliveries of project outcomes). In general, as one respondent noted, NGO directors tend to be strong at technical expertise, but weak at people management. Specifically, they lacked the tools and measures needed to recognize and evaluate staff efforts.

Second, workplace policies, including personnel responsibilities, were unclear, and generally overly tolerant. For example, in one organization, Key Performance Indicators (KPI) for each individual staff member were too general to be used to assess staff performance. Therefore, failure to deliver projects, or great initiative taken in deploying projects, might be attributed to working environment factors, resulting in no punishment or no recognition, respectively. Such circumstances might lead to demoralization of workers and a general lack of motivation.

Third, short-term project-based recruitment raised concerns about career progression for staff. Even for the few permanent staff who thought their career paths were set, those career paths were unclear or not accessible due to lack of implementation or supervisory attention. As a result, staff might seek longer-term careers outside of the NGO sector, and commitment by staff to their organizations was considered weak.

Even under funding constraints, in order to improve staff morale and/or effectiveness, some NGOs sought to improve staff skills for building relationships with high-ranking government officials, and for conducting advocacy efforts. Still other organizations determined that their staff needed to acquire leadership skills or the capacity to build local partners' capacity. In general, these approaches aimed to improve staff competencies and productivity to contribute to organizational development. No evaluations exist to prove whether these activities enhance staff commitment, or benefit NGOs' development.

A few NGOs undertook systemic changes to ensure better staff performance. For instance, one NGO restructured its staffing from a specialist grant-based vertical model (a staff member would be assigned to and held responsible for their granted projects) to a generalist geographically-based horizontal model (a staff would be responsible for all projects/grants allocated in one geographic area). The representative of this NGO explained that the restructuring reduced the number of staff functioning in each geographic area, and because the staff was the only organization's representative in the geographic area, he/she became the point of contact that promoted more effective coordination between communities and implementing partners. In

addition, one NGO representative mentioned that their organization would build measurable sets of indicators to appraise performance for each staff category and for the entire organization, however they did not have tools and knowledge to do so. Staff recruitment methods were also adjusted, such as by offering field-simulation sessions in new-staff orientation programs to familiarize them with real conditions in project communities. In general, these kinds of systems-level improvements aimed to build effective working environments and better, more capable teams. However, although the literature suggests that NGOs, through their initiatives, are known to strengthen the capacity of their partners, local governments, and individual beneficiaries (Freed, Dujon, Granek, & Mouhhdine, 2016, Suleiman, 2013), in this study no respondents reported successful outcomes of these tactics for systemic change.

6.5. Implications for NGO operations

6.5.1. Changing mandates

Five NGO representatives and one implementation-level government officer provided their comments on whether NGOs changed their mandates to adjust to the particular context of Vietnam. Despite numerous programming, financing, and political uncertainties, I found it surprising that foreign NGOs did not markedly change their overall roles or mandates in Vietnam. However, in practice, NGOs simply adjusted their priorities and directions so as to meet local conditions without running afoul of government. One NGO director confirmed that, “I do not think the roles of NGOs in Vietnam change. Their projects are always about technical support and innovative solutions to emerging issues... The roles remain, but specific operational priorities may change.” Further to this comment, many NGO directors clarified their loyalty to Vietnam. They remained in Vietnam to support disadvantaged populations, to complete their

missions, and to support the government. Moreover, NGOs showed their commitment to the country's development efforts through adjusting their poverty-relief deliveries to coincide with government priorities. Government officials were positive in confirming that NGOs had delivered several projects to alleviate poverty in local areas. In practice, NGOs managed to recognize government's sovereignty and to align their projects within its legal framework. For instance, a NGO director stated, "The NGO's mindsets are to benefit communities, and this is important. When government regulations change, people must accept." Although NGOs adjusted their operational tactics, they expressed a strong, value-driven commitment to their work in Vietnam, and were likewise committed to delivering humanitarian interventions and poverty reduction programs.

Ironically, although NGO directors confirmed that their roles in Vietnam remained unchanged, some exhibited confusion about their roles. In the words of one,

Sometimes our roles become confusing. We think we are not political... But when we do advocacy, it relates to politics. We want to change institutions, and we advocate the changes... Or there are many problems that we shut our mouths on, but we really want to interfere with. We manage to influence the government and change their minds. We do not say what we think, and it is why the government must watch us.

6.5.2. Changes to avenues of accountability

During the interviews, only three NGO informants and one central government officer commented on the issue of NGO accountability. I consider accountability "internal" in the sense that the organizations have some control over this factor as they develop strategic plans and

implement programs. NGOs prioritized accountability to grant donors, and as has been reported in the literature, their downward accountability to populations was considered comparatively weak (Clark, 2001, Fox, 2000). A NGO director commented on his organization's "upward" accountability as follows:

In practice, to this point in time, upward accountability to donors is more prioritized, at least through complying with compulsory conditions. Donors' requirements are very rigid, they require reports: they require mechanisms; they require obeying codes of conduct. One obvious reason we comply is that they are our donors and if we do not have the money, we cannot implement projects. This is a NGO's top priority.

Another NGO director said that,

Even when NGOs, like [our organization], receive donor funding, we still use our own internal compliance systems to manage the funds. Secondly, we have audits to ensure we are following donors' guidelines. Additionally, organizations are evaluated by the Vietnam Tax Authority to ensure smooth transactions.

At the same time, NGOs were also aware of the need for "downward" accountability to grassroots communities:

It is not that [our organization] does not realize how its downward accountability to populations is presented. More and more mechanisms exist in place to improve this, such as transparent information, access to various information channels, reporting evaluation findings to intermediaries with the hope that the information reaches communities.

So, while NGOs prioritize accountability to donors in order to ensure their access to grant funds, they also indicate some commitment to communities, as well as to government authorities.

However, as commented by one NGO director, NGOs need to comply with donors' requirements, and this is the top priority.

6.5.3. Changes in delivery strategies

Although only few interviewees provided their comments on the issues around NGO accountability and mandates, two-thirds of NGO respondents, one central government officer, and one implementation-level government officer commented on the issue of program implementation. Scholars have described several tactics NGOs used to deliver projects, including capacity building and project modelling (Chowdhury, Jahan, & Rahman, 2017, Suleiman, 2013). In this research project, the representatives of NGOs discussed what they thought of as “innovative” approaches for delivering projects, one of which is what they referred to as the “output-based” approach. Although this approach is now fairly standard everywhere, and known as “results-based management,” it was proudly presented as innovative by my informants. One NGO applied this approach to water and sanitation:

In the old days, we had several staff, from a bidding officer to technical professionals... The water program comprised so many people... Now, we apply an output-based approach [contracting private contractors]. We just come over to check water meters, and whether the water-flow is strong, and the water quality is acceptable... We do not care about the construction of water towers; it is the contractor's job. We just care about our outputs, meaning whether the water is clean, and local people are happy. We count the number of water meters and pay the contractor.

The above director elaborated that contracting private contractors offered several advantages. First, this approach focused the organization's efforts on quality management rather than process-based implementation issues. Second, contracting and financing matters were simplified and paperwork needs reduced (a large part of the paperwork was transferred to the contractor). Third, management of risk was transferred to contractors. Fourth, contractors were also asked to reserve and manage maintenance and contingency funds, so the organization did not have to organize and oversee them. Finally, the output-based approach led to more business partnerships with the private sector. One organization's Annual Report 2016 claimed that the "innovative output-based approach" expanded and sustained access to basic services for the underserved.

Another method that NGOs employed was to construct "models of care" (Chowdhury, Jahan, and Rahman, 2017; Suleiman, 2013). Here, NGOs devised and piloted innovative, reliable models of care for underserved communities before transferring them to local governments. One organization created a social entrepreneur model for sanitation marketing through a partnership with the Central Women's Union. The partnership opened a business that produced and marketed spare parts and equipment for latrines, with the goal of allocating the commissions gained from country-wide distributions to Women's Union operations. This NGO was also well-known for its model of linking resources to help people with disabilities Vietnam-wide. These NGO-authored models were highly appreciated by government.

In Vietnam, like many other NGOs the world over, NGOs created and nurtured implementation networks, especially those related to policy advocacy initiatives and which were beneficial to benefit population health (Akco, Dagli, Inanici, et. al., 2013, Brechin & Salas, 2013, Zaidi,

Mayhew, & Palmer, 2011). They use their networks to influence government policies on poverty reduction, and to persuade and drive the government in their social and political arrangements (Ahmed & Potter, 2006). For example, one organization established the Youth Act to End Poverty Network (YAEP), which engaged 640 young men and women mainly from poor and disadvantaged areas, to increase youth's role in national development and poverty eradication. The YAEP acted as a youth platform to share their activities, plans and ambitions, and to exchange knowledge and culture. In particular, different foreign NGOs centered their efforts around the NGO Resource Centre to form working groups, to avoid duplicated funds, and to build grounds for coordination.

Capacity building was an approach that NGOs employed to deliver projects to communities. One of the NGOs maintained that it was amongst its key prioritized methods. Another organizations worked to build the capacity of stakeholders (government departments, civil society organizations, communities) to manage projects with the participation of communities. In this context, NGOs used several methods to support the capacity of local institutions, including experience exchange, training, and study tours. Said one government official:

In the old days, local NGOs did not have much experience in policy advocacy. Then we were invited on overseas study tours to witness how people advocated policies. Foreign professionals also came over to Vietnam to teach why policy advocacy is useful, what policies were, so that we believed that policy advocacy was not unfamiliar.

In this sense, the NGOs that engaged in this work could no longer be considered direct implementors, but instead transferred knowledge and technologies to other individuals and institutions, who, in turn, delivered interventions on the NGOs' behalf. As such, capacity

building positively changed individual and institutional awareness about development. NGOs have claimed that this achievement represents sustainability. This change might last in communities even after foreign NGOs had withdrawn.

Foreign NGOs strengthened local organizations as part of a strategy to hand projects over. Some foreign NGOs' directors confirmed that they would soon phase out of Vietnam, leaving local organizations with opportunities to lead in serving local populations and development goals. Local organizations might then raise funds domestically and internationally, and some international donors would name local organizations to take the lead. In this sense, foreign NGOs provided resources that facilitated local projects. An informant gave this example:

NGOs are very good because they provide local organizations with information, for instance, on the worldwide use of asbestos, how many countries have banned it, why the ban, evidence on asbestos-related harm... We have got much useful information... Some other groups want to extend the use of asbestos in Vietnam, they also give a lot of evidence. Although this evidence is out-of-date and unscientific, we would not have known. Then foreign NGOs provided us with the good information.

The above informant stated that when local organizations acquired appropriate resources (knowledge, information), they could confidently deliver interventions. In this example, local organizations were prepared and ready to take over field-based implementation.

NGOs might use multiple methods concurrently to deliver their initiatives. For instance, they combined coordinating resources, engaging stakeholders, bridging gaps, networking alliances, and building movements, in addition to providing technical knowledge. Therefore, foreign NGO

staff needed soft skill sets (networking, relationship building, coordinating) different to just technical expertise (agricultural extension, medical examination). There were no data to assess how effectively the combined approach worked, and whether NGO staff possessed the soft skill sets.

Interestingly, although using several methods to deliver their projects, NGOs could not imagine making their general operations more effective and responsive. On one hand, they might localize their operations, becoming a local NGO. In this dimension, NGO directors were concerned about the legal aspects of localization, and about the separation from international alliances that this might entail. On the other hand, a NGO might become an international alliance member. In this sense, NGOs might focus their efforts on fund mobilization, and escape local politically-controlled implementation. However, NGO directors stressed that they needed more time and further analyses because of the lack of precedents in Vietnam to become a local or international organization. Limited scholarly attention has been paid to whether and how NGOs can improve their own institutional capacity in terms of human resource and organizational performance. Seims (2011) states that donors strengthen NGOs' internal capacity (e.g., management, project delivery).

6.5.4. NGO alignment with government

Based on my experience, although NGOs sometimes challenge the government on matters associated with human rights and other priorities that may differ from those of government, they, in general, want to engage with and complement government priorities and directives, and participate in government-led development policy development and initiatives. NGO alignment

with government may be considered an internal factor because NGOs may decide, to some extent, whether and to what degree they align with government priorities.

Nearly all NGO respondents (twelve out of thirteen NGO interviewees) discussed their concerns regarding alignment of their organization's projects with government's objectives and priorities. These opinions were supplemented by comments provided by three of the four implementation-level government officers interviewed, and one central government officer.

NGOs have traditionally supported the development goals of the government and aligned their objectives accordingly. One NGO director stated that "No one force[d] NGOs to do that [support government priorities]," and "if we do not realize it [supporting government], we have no reasons to stay here." Another NGO director affirmed that, "The role of NGOs, in general, and of development agencies is to bring resources to what the government prioritizes. If a NGO's strategies do not relate to the Government of Vietnam's, it will be in a bad position. It will get its foot kicked." Still another NGO director concluded that:

People are normally mistaken, that we think we are "non-governmental," meaning we do not have to serve any governments and we do not need to follow anyone. In reality, we are operating in the territory of a country and we are committed to observing host country regulations... We need to align with government. We must understand that we do not come over to change this or that, but we are just a factor that supports the changes in Vietnam.

In general, respondents suggested that NGOs assumed a role of helping government achieve its development objectives. This is generally consistent with the literature; indeed, many donors require as a condition of funding that NGO sponsored programs align with country priorities (Akukwe, 1998, Badu & Parker, 1994, Webb, Kye, & Sant'anna, 1995). NGOs in Vietnam, perhaps more than in other settings given their potentially difficult position vis-à-vis government, clearly acknowledge state sovereignty.

The NGOs studied worked carefully to ensure their alignment with state priorities, referring to public master plans, state development reports, and official strategic plans in framing their own objectives. They endeavoured to build strong partnerships with government departments at various levels in order to ensure compliance with objectives and financing conditions. One NGO took the initiative of consulting both government departments and local communities in order to establish complementary priorities. Another organization consulted the five-year Social Economical Development Plan (SEDP) in order to develop programs consistent with government priorities. Still other organizations analyzed national statistics or their own research findings to ensure alignment with government priorities. The knowledge that NGOs gained through those sources facilitated their alignment with the country priorities.

NGOs participated in establishing government development objectives through several mechanisms. One such mechanism, the Health Partnership Group (HPG), was comprised of development partners (including foreign NGOs), the Ministry of Health, and other Ministries, and aimed to improve the effectiveness of external supports to the health sector (NGO Resource Centre, 2010). HPG annual meetings reviewed the milestones of national health programs,

thereby facilitating the contribution of NGOs to national planning. The HPG served as a primary forum for developing trust, building common understanding, and facilitating progress towards an improved health system.

In addition, NGOs also offered support to the drafting of the Vietnam Voluntary National Review (VNR). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development encourages member states to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels. These national reviews are expected to serve as a basis for the regular reviews by the High-Level Political Forum, meeting under the auspices of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. The regular reviews by the High-Level Political Forum are to be voluntary, state-led, undertaken by both developed and developing countries, and involve multiple stakeholders. The VNR allowed for sharing experiences and progresses, strengthening government policies and institutions, and mobilizing resources for implementing Sustainable Development Goals. Vietnam is one of the VNR countries and shared its progress reports biennially. The NGO section of the 2018 Vietnam VNR Report was led by a NGO through several consultation workshops with ministries. Through supporting VNR reports, NGOs enjoyed an opportunity to participate in establishing state priorities.

NGOs also served on several national committees, such as the National Blindness Prevention Committee, through which NGOs offered their technical and financial resources in establishing objectives. NGO's active participation in state priorities facilitated a healthy government-NGO partnership that promoted trust, common understanding, and sharing.

Some NGOs followed multiple channels to support establishing development objectives. One NGO, for instance, actively joined in the processes of developing a Five-Year Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP) at central and local levels. This organization was among foreign NGOs offering help to furnish the NGO part of the VRN reports. The NGO also served on the National Target Programs in Sustainable Poverty Reduction (NTPSPR)⁴. Another foreign NGO offered support through the government-organized Consultative Groups of Donors. This organization also co-led the National Children’s Forum and co-chaired the 2018 World Economic Forum in Vietnam. NGO’s active engagements in these mechanisms meant that NGOs played significant roles in informing and shaping state development priorities.

Despite the apparent positive relationship between NGOs, and government, the implementation of NGO projects continues to face obstacles. The reasons for this are as follows: First, the government and NGOs approached the same objectives differently. Although the government expected tangible service delivery, NGOs might deliver intangible outcomes. For example, government might prefer the construction of rural-appropriate latrines, or microcredit programs for disadvantaged rural women’s groups, over programs advocating “sensitive” issues of human

⁴ The National Target Program on Sustainable Poverty Reduction for 2016-2020 was approved by Vietnam Prime Minister through Decision No.1722/QD-TTg. This US\$2 billion program aims to reduce the number of poor households in the country by 1-1.5% per year, to increase the per capita income of poor households to 150% and of those living in disadvantaged districts by 200% by 2020, as compared with 2015. The programme will be carried out across the country, with coastal, island and border areas as well as communes in extreme poverty as top priorities.

rights. Second, the government did not publicly disclose some of its priorities, or their priorities were unclearly articulated, so that NGOs could not provide support or align appropriately. For instance, one NGO was unclear about state policies regarding conservation areas, and therefore was unable to deliver relevant projects that may have supported government conservation priorities. Third, even though a program might be aligned with publicly stated government objectives, NGOs might face state regulations that restrict effective delivery, for instance, by denial of access to certain geographical locations.

Despite these occasional difficulties, informants generally reported that NGOs offered meaningful contributions to Vietnam's social and economic development. According to a high-ranking government official, foreign NGOs contributed approximately 300 million dollars annually for several years in a row. This assistance also corresponds with the financial figure provided by UN Agencies in Vietnam, Delegation of European Union to Vietnam, Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam. (2014). According to one respondent, at the macro-level, NGOs contributed greatly to the achievement of Vietnam's Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and they offer strong support of the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). At the micro-level, they contributed to nationally prioritized programs, such as for maternal and childcare, blindness prevention, and the 2030 national nutrition strategy. These contributions have been recognized by government.

These findings are consistent with the international literature. Srivastava and colleagues (2016) comment that through partnering with government, NGOs contribute resources to nations' social welfare and development planning. Mabawonku (2001) comments that NGOs may translate

scientific and technical information into evidence-based recommendations or initiatives that are understandable and usable to decision-makers, the media, and the public. NGOs can share with governments their participatory approaches to the planning and design of community-based initiatives (Ahmed, Capistrano, & Hossain, 1997). Likewise, NGOs have been shown to build and strengthen governments' project implementation capacity (Maxwell & Lirens, 1994). In Vietnam, as reported by one government official, NGOs raised the need for community-based natural disaster mitigation plans, and then offered the government funds and internationally-referenced materials to support the development of national disaster-mitigating guidelines. Another NGO provided lessons on global child abuse prevention initiatives, thanks to which the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) and the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) issued regulations on positive discipline (to replace corporal punishment). NGOs also supported the first government-issued tobacco regulations in 2000, and were also lauded by government for providing locally appropriate technology and programs (local language, cultural sensitiveness in ethnic minority communities). One NGO director shared their organization's support for improving the capacity of local healthcare workers to provide high quality eye care:

In 1992, only a few hundred cataract surgeries were performed annually. Now the number is 240,000 per year, meaning a greatly increased number of beneficiaries. Moreover, in 1992 we had only two eye surgeons, now we have 1,350. In the 21 project provinces, [name of organization] supported providing not only basic eye care and cataract surgery, but also specialized care such as pediatric eye care, glaucoma treatment, and interventions for diabetic retinopathy.

Although most NGO directors confirmed their firm stand in supporting state development objectives, others doubted how real or meaningful NGO inputs were to state-owned programs. One NGO director disclosed that the government actually did not take the initiative of consulting NGOs, and NGOs "managed to be invited" to those events as simply observers. At times, NGOs disseminated key research findings at large events involving high-ranking professionals and policy makers, but informants told me they were not able to determine whether these findings were acted on or even heard.

Reflecting on the situation in Romania, Topor and Boroiu (2011, pp. 599) note that government has generally not taken into account the economic and financial contributions of the non-profit, non-governmental associations to the labor market, including to the financial dynamics and stability of the financial market in Romania.” This problem was also articulated by high-ranking government officials in Vietnam. One official stated that NGOs did not appear in their department’s strategic plan because it was unclear whether they had a secure source of funding. Another official confirmed that the provincial Five-Year Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP) included no budget lines for NGOs because NGOs had failed to provide progress reports on the projects, unclear or unusable inputs into long-term plans, and lack of evaluation metrics demonstrating improvements in key development indicators. Even when NGOs submitted biannual reports to local governments their contributions were seen as too modest to be included final reports. A government official concluded that, “The presence of NGOs in the provincial socio-economic report was very faint.”

NGO contributions to country development were blurred by different approaches to assessment and evaluation. While NGOs measured specific task-level objectives (mid-range outcomes), government departments tended to focus on long term outcomes and impacts, even though Vietnam's statistical bureau lacked monitoring and evaluation tools to measure specific indicators and to synthesize them in greater national development reports. In addition, NGOs rarely communicated financial issues (especially high indirect costs), project costs, and human resources to central- and local-level governments, and instead reported directly to grant donors without including government. Therefore, government was not fully aware of the details of NGOs' project implementation.

6.6. Respondents' recommendations for NGOs

This chapter examines internal factors that influence NGO operations in Vietnam, and several recommendations here address issues over which NGOs may have some control. However, for convenience, I also include the recommendations derived from NGO representatives' own perspectives, which target external factors which NGOs would appear to have little say.

6.6.1. Educating government and donors

Several interviewees in this research project (three NGO respondents and one central government officer) suggested that NGOs need to educate government departments and donors on various issues around NGO operations in Vietnam. The respondents mentioned that the government had little understanding of NGO operations, and this tended to complicate government-NGO relationships, and hence compromise the development of effective partnerships. A high-ranking government officer suggested that NGOs should disclose their

projects for public review, and bridge knowledge gaps to facilitate partnerships with the government. The government “worried” that foreign NGOs could create political upheavals, hence social instability. This worry might negatively affect government views on NGOs. The participant recommended that NGOs should have effective, transparent communications with the government and other stakeholders. This respondent went on to assert that full provision of information might decrease the government’s “worry” about NGOs and CSOs. However, from my experience, how NGOs can “educate” the government and enhance their relationship remains a question. Currently, no official channels exist for two-way communication, except that NGOs have to apply for several permits required for their operations and activity implementation, and they have to submit annual reports to the government. Occasional chances for NGO feedback might happen when local governments offer a meeting as a means of communicating with NGOs. However, even under these circumstances NGOs might not necessarily communicate their concerns due to their concerns over dissatisfying government.

Some respondents suggested that NGOs could do a better job of communicating with donors regarding local conditions in Vietnam. For instance, NGOs could discuss the in-depth physical and political challenges that their operations encounter so that donors would become knowledgeable about field-level implementation issues without always asking for a rationale. One director suggested that:

We have to provide donors with clarifications. When donors grant you funds and you cannot deliver, the donors may suspect that your capacity and competency is not enough. They do not understand the conditions in Vietnam, the challenges from government

departments, and challenges from local governments... I think we need to provide explanations.

In addition, donors also needed wider and deeper background information on local, community-level issues that affect NGOs (poverty, health improvements, systems). Through the provision of background data, NGOs can educate donors about local priorities, NGO operations in Vietnam, and several other development needs. Such knowledge would help donors prepare and earmark funds as appropriate to local conditions.

Based on my experience, donors normally required project objectives be achieved without regards to actual local conditions (such as transportation issues, populations' literate level, local government's staff capacity). NGOs' leaders may be afraid that their organizations might fail to win grant awards if they share these local challenges with donors. In my opinions, the organizations' leaders should confidently educate donors on those challenging conditions in order to achieve donors' respect and possibly positive funding prospects.

6.6.2. "Collaborating among themselves first"

Five NGOs, one central government officer, and one implementation-level government officer commented on the importance of collaboration among NGOs. Informants strongly recommended that NGOs should collaborate with each other to maximize their impact on state development, such as progress toward meeting the SDGs. The literature also notes that NGO collaborations with each other increase NGOs' access to information and resources, their legitimacy and power, and commitment (Mosley, Maronick, & Katz, 2012, Yanacopulos, 2005).

Through such collaboration, NGOs generate impacts on population well-being, and cope with environmental turbulence (Ahmed & Potter, 2006, Chapman & Fisher, 2000). For example, in Vietnam, I experienced working with the NGO Network for Health, which was granted funding for implementing a program on HIV/AIDS in a northern province of Vietnam, and a NGO consortium, which co-led a climate change and adaptation project in central and south Vietnam. Both projects were among the several examples of NGO collaborations in the country. According to a respondent, NGO collaborations ensure that they “strengthen the voice of grassroots communities, strengthen the voice of mass media”, and raise stronger voices to the government. This respondent stressed that a stronger voice would have a greater impact and would ensure that government would pay attention.

Some respondents suggested that NGOs might also collaborate with each other on several programming issues to avoid overlap. They might also share their ways for fund diversification and tactics for effective program delivery. In addition, NGOs might coordinate on operational policies (e.g., paying the same salaries and per-diems) to avoid confusion and conflict at the local level. The respondents argued that these measures facilitated effective coordination among NGOs.

A few interviewees mentioned that although NGOs had their own systems of operation and management, and might sometimes be driven to compete against one another, they nevertheless recognized the need to support each other. These interviewees stressed that the NGOs might have centered around the NGO Resource Center to promote and push members towards actions on collaboration agendas.

6.6.3. Increasing the effectiveness of NGOs

Nearly half of the interviewees (seven NGO representatives, one central government officer, and one implementation-level government officer) recommended that NGOs work to enhance the effectiveness of their operations. For example, several respondents suggested that instead of working in several widely dispersed geographic and program areas, NGOs might narrow their focus to specific areas, and build close relationships with local communities to ensure that programs properly address local needs. Moreover, the participants stated that NGOs should have expertise in their areas of focus to ensure success. One informant suggested that effectiveness could be mandated in organizational strategy documents, cutting across several key organizational objectives. The NGO regarded organizational effectiveness as one of the five goals in their 2016-2020 strategic plan. They implemented the Development Effectiveness Framework in the development of robust and sustainable programs to ensure impacts for children.

One government official stated that NGOs might update programming to ensure consistency with local conditions and trends, and mandate the updated strategies in organizational strategy documents to ensure that they had the resources to concentrate efforts on specific problems and in specific contexts. Several respondents noted that the old-fashioned charity approach should be replaced by innovative, holistic projects with clearly identified strengths and follow-up capabilities. One respondent gave an example that, instead of providing food to very poor communities, NGOs should identify the root cause of poverty in those communities, and carefully conduct a needs assessment, from which to work with communities and local

authorities on a suitable strategy addressing poverty reduction. Second, both government and NGO respondents noted that NGOs should promote and test development initiatives through collaborations with multiple state-owned agencies, local authorities, local organizations, media, and contract-based service providers, including technical consultants. Third, according to one government official, NGOs ought to propose an exit strategy early in their programs, such as follow-up provisions in the forms of secured funds or sustainable income-generating livelihood activities in local communities. Lastly, one government officer suggested that NGOs might integrate their projects with public funding initiatives, arguing that this strategy would create mutual interdependence and facilitate the long-term sustainability of projects.

6.6.4. Acquiring knowledge about government

About one-third of interviewees (six NGO interviewees and one central government officer) discussed the problems that NGOs have in acquiring relevant knowledge about government. As noted here and in the literature, NGOs must obey state priorities and frameworks and to maintain good relationships with government (Anku-Tsedde, 2014, Mercer, Thompson, & Araujo, 2014, McLoughlin, 2011, Fisher, 2003, Gary, 1996, Lubin, 1987). This priority was also articulated in some NGOs' strategy documents. Some NGO representatives expressed a need to acquire knowledge of government departments' operations and administrative procedures. These respondents explained that understanding and being able to adhere to the approval processes for necessary applications (registration certificates, operation permits, project approval documents, tax-related formalities) as well as appreciating how the work culture of government departments might affect such approvals, is of significant benefit to NGO operations. The above respondents added that knowledge is also needed to facilitate contacts with the proper department, and with

the officials who have the relevant authority, to approve projects and permits. One government officer noted that NGOs were better able to comply with government policies if they “spoke the government’s language. In short, respondents reported that understanding of government organization, processes, and functions was especially important to the proper financing of projects, and such knowledge facilitated selecting the right department to partner with in terms of disbursing projects’ resources for program activities.

6.6.5. Head office’s policies and directions

A few NGO representatives addressed how managers working the organization’s international headquarters influenced the operations of field country offices in Vietnam. One respondent stated that overseas headquarters were often remiss in not consulting and informing themselves about local laws and culture when imposing restrictions on or directing field operations. In addition, another NGO representative noted that headquarters staff were criticized for not offering appropriate, concrete directions or practical supports for staff on the ground, for instance, ways to develop relationships with government; or to implement, monitor and evaluate projects. Still another NGO representative considered that mechanisms were also needed to promote field offices’ capacity building and organizational development. Importantly, respondents felt that headquarters’ staff should regularly update and enforce codes of conduct so as to protect field staff and associates from deviance from local norms of behavior.

6.7. Recommendations for government

Nearly all of the respondents provided recommendations for government (twelve NGO representatives, two central government officers, and three implementation-level government

officers). According to the NGO respondents, the central government needs to strengthen awareness about NGOs' operations among their several departments and local governments. NGOs' representatives complained that while the People's Aid Coordination Committee (PACCOM) had a reasonably good understanding of NGO operations, and they issued regulations of these operations, they did not collaborate with NGOs on specific projects. These respondents went on to comment that, NGOs, conversely, collaborated with specific ministries (e.g., the Ministry of Planning and Investment, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs) and local-level governments (e.g., province-, district, and commune-level governments), that did not fully understand how NGOs operate, and were not even aware of current government's regulations on NGO operations. Therefore, based on my experience, even after NGOs obtained registration and operation permits, they might still face obstacles in communicating and transacting with ministries and local governments.

The literature illustrates governments' regulative, one-way controls over NGO operations (Murtaza & Austin, 2011, Tandon, 1989). In Vietnam, respondents noted that improving the regulatory process, or at least making this process clearer and less of a barrier, could result in improved government-NGO coordination. First, a government officer recommended the creation of regulations enabling rather than restricting NGO operations. NGO representatives argued that government must understand that CSOs and NGOs need favourable conditions to flourish and to contribute to the country's development. Second, several NGO representatives were concerned that despite the existence of several policies regulating NGO operations, the country lacks the necessary legal frameworks for governing charity and civil society (e.g., Law on Charity, Law on Associations). These representatives went on to confirm that the Law on Charity and the Law on

Associations would positively facilitate NGO operations. However, from my knowledge, both laws have not existed yet. Third, research respondents argued that different policies have traditionally overlapped and hindered each other, eventually compromising NGOs' performance. Therefore, in my perspective, a better approach would be for the central government to work to identify and address gaps in NGO-related regulations in order to ensure consistency within the national system. Fourth, and as discussed at several points in this thesis, NGO respondents argued that government needs to reduce the amount of administrative paperwork, simplify procedures, and provide concise, clear, and concrete guidelines.

Specific mechanisms to improve the policy environment were recommended by several interviewees. In their views, the government was expected to direct departments and local governments to implement existing laws to ensure that government-NGO collaborations were fully reviewed. As noted in the literature, and described in this thesis, government-NGO mistrust is often caused by discrepancies between generally supportive policies and unsupportive practices (Batley, 2006). Respondents in this study argued that NGOs should be more active in sharing participatory approaches to development, including staff capacity building. These respondents went on to recommend that the government would then be in a better position to develop their development priorities and resource planning so that NGOs could effectively contribute. One NGO representative suggested that the government can also establish a national database about development needs and funding availability which NGOs can access. Moreover, another NGO director noted that NGOs might engage in negotiations on international agreements (e.g., Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade) to strengthen governance for sustainable development.

Some interviewees noted that from a resource perspective, the government should lift current restrictions and allow foreign NGOs to raise funds domestically. Moreover, these interviewees stated that the government should allow foreign NGOs to access state funds for public and social services. From my perspective, if NGOs can access the state funds and implement projects delivering public and social services to local communities, the pressure on government to manage implementation would be lessened so that it can focus effort on leadership. In addition, respondents argued that government should be willing to step in and offer transitional funding to maintain projects after NGOs withdraw. However, based on my experience, this might be a risky process insofar as reliance on state funds might create more dependency by NGOs on government and thus in an even more unequal position in what is already a sensitive relationship.

6.8. Recommendations for donors

Nearly all of the NGO interviewees (eleven out of thirteen), one implementation-level government officer, and one central government officer had recommendations for donors.

Although Vietnam has recently achieved status as a middle-income country, donor support is still needed to support the country's development. Several NGO representatives noted that international donors might consider offering a transitional plan for Vietnam. These respondents explained that financially, donors were encouraged to provide flexible, non-restrictive, packaged funds to fully cover initiatives that effectively solve development problems. In addition, the respondents also recommended that donors were expected to coordinate amongst themselves to avoid overlaps and gaps. Donors were particularly encouraged by government officers to consider post-evaluation activities and make efforts to sustain projects in progress.

Programmatically, interviewees encouraged donors to focus on a few projects (rather than many). Government officers interviewed further recommended that donors could favour government-related priorities. NGO directors interviewed also recommended that donors promote and advocate for civil society in Vietnam, because “Donors have a strong voice and the ability to put pressure on certain Vietnamese institutions to support NGOs.”

Respondents observed that donor-NGO communications could be strengthened. Some NGOs’ representatives suggested that NGOs’ field offices could provide donors with knowledge of local topics of interest (poverty, health promotion gaps, data). Based on my experience, once donors acquired knowledge of the local landscape, they could earmark funds where relevant and share local challenges with NGOs, and promote NGO results in Vietnam. Better two-way communications would likely ensure the effectiveness of fund disbursements in local areas. However, as Cooley and Ron (2002) argue, NGOs are not likely to complain directly to donors for fear of triggering their dissatisfaction.

In summary, in this chapter I reviewed the internal influences that affect NGO operations. In terms of program implementation, NGOs often introduced new concepts and devised comprehensive, multi-component programs, though these were often compromised by improper implementation schedules, reliance on local implementation partners, ineffective coordination among government departments, NGOs’ deficiency in knowledge about state-owned agency operations and administrative procedures, and poor government-NGOs information exchange. How NGOs staffed their operations represents another internal challenge. It is hard to recruit

highly-qualified staff, and it is even harder to retain staff due to less-rewarding benefit packages, less dynamic working environment and altruistic management, and unclear staff and workplace policies. NGO operations were also influenced by changes in regional or headquarter strategies and finance.

A NGO may devise very interesting program logical frameworks, or model of local community development, that engage local governments, government departments, and several local communities. These initiatives aim to generate a sustainable model of practice that would remain functioning after the NGO programs withdraws. Unfortunately, these programs are often based on assumptions that local governments and government departments cooperate effectively, local community members enjoy high level of literacy, state agencies fully support the program implementation, and the NGO staffs fully understand the programs' concepts and are capable to transfer knowledge to local people. When these conditions are not met, program success may be compromised.

My experience suggests that NGOs should carefully evaluate risks possibly associated with the implementation of their programmatic initiatives, and propose measures to mitigate those risks before, or during the implementation. Yet NGOs normally do not have the resources (time, financial resources, methods) to conduct such risk analyses.

My experience is consistent with complaints about the top-down policies that headquarters staff deploy in ignorance of in-country conditions. Once, headquarters asked country offices to apply an online approving system. Because the multiple million dollar system did not work properly,

the country office had to use both the manual system and the newly-created online system, and this overlap greatly consumed time and effort of staff members. Moreover, the online system allowed access to only four staff, and other staff were requested to “borrow” the access from the 4 “allowed” staff. This limitation violated the confidentiality that the organization traditionally respected. Headquarters staff convinced my office’s staff that this system was a “global trend,” and they were resistant accepting complaints about the use of the online system.

In order to cope with these internal influences, and to better help the government achieve development objectives, NGOs adjusted their mandates, accountabilities and strategies. Foreign NGOs did not markedly change their overall roles or mandates in Vietnam, but simply adjusted their priorities and directions so as to meet local conditions without running afoul of government. NGOs prioritized accountability to donors rather than to grassroots communities. NGOs used several tactics to deliver projects, including capacity building, project modelling, and contracting private contractors.

When I worked with some NGOs in Vietnam, I experienced several changes in their programmatic strategies. One NGO changed their strategy from delivering projects that met communities’ needs (schools, seeds, latrines) to projects that promotes the rights of and the right holders (for example, villagers) and the responsibilities of duty bearers (for example, state-owned agencies). This NGO had an impaired relationships with the government, and this influenced implementation progress. Another NGO adjusted their strategy from implementing big construction projects (for example, general hospitals) to multiple-component community development projects that engaged community education on sanitation and hygienic issues,

advocate for local standards on latrines, and supports for very small charitable activities (family-based water tanks, school-based water filtering system).

I have also reviewed the various recommendations made by respondents for how to reduce uncertainties and improve the environment for NGOs. Respondents recommended that NGOs might better strategize their contributions to national development. The government was expected to promulgate enabling rather than restrictive policies for NGOs, and government-NGO partnerships should start on an equal basis. Donors were advised to promote and advocate for civil society in Vietnam through the offering of flexible, non-restrictive, packaged funds to fully cover program activities.

Although the proposals are reasonable, my experience indicates that some of these recommendations are not practical. For example, respondents suggested that NGOs should cooperate among themselves, though such coordination is not practicable because each organization has their own administrative, financial, and operational systems, alongside their unique programmatic priorities and fund-raising initiatives. In my experience, few coordination meetings ever resulted in any real plans. I also joined several projects where NGOs were expected to work together. From my perspective, however, each participating NGO seemed to bring in their own small projects, without necessarily sharing common project objectives.

Respondents also recommended that the government promulgated enabling rather than restrictive policies for NGOs. However, because the government currently does not have entirely positive

views of NGOs, and may label the NGOs as a threat to national security, it is not ready to approve any regulation that favours or supports NGO operations.

CHAPTER 7 - DISCUSSION

The previous chapters highlighted the constraints (internal and external) that reflect NGOs' non-status in Vietnam, and the strategic response of NGOs in the face of these constraints, which I have characterized as "uncertainties". NGOs tend to apply flexibility in order to maneuver through these constraints. In the discussion that follows, I argue that the core problem that faces foreign NGOs in Vietnam is their ambiguous social standing.

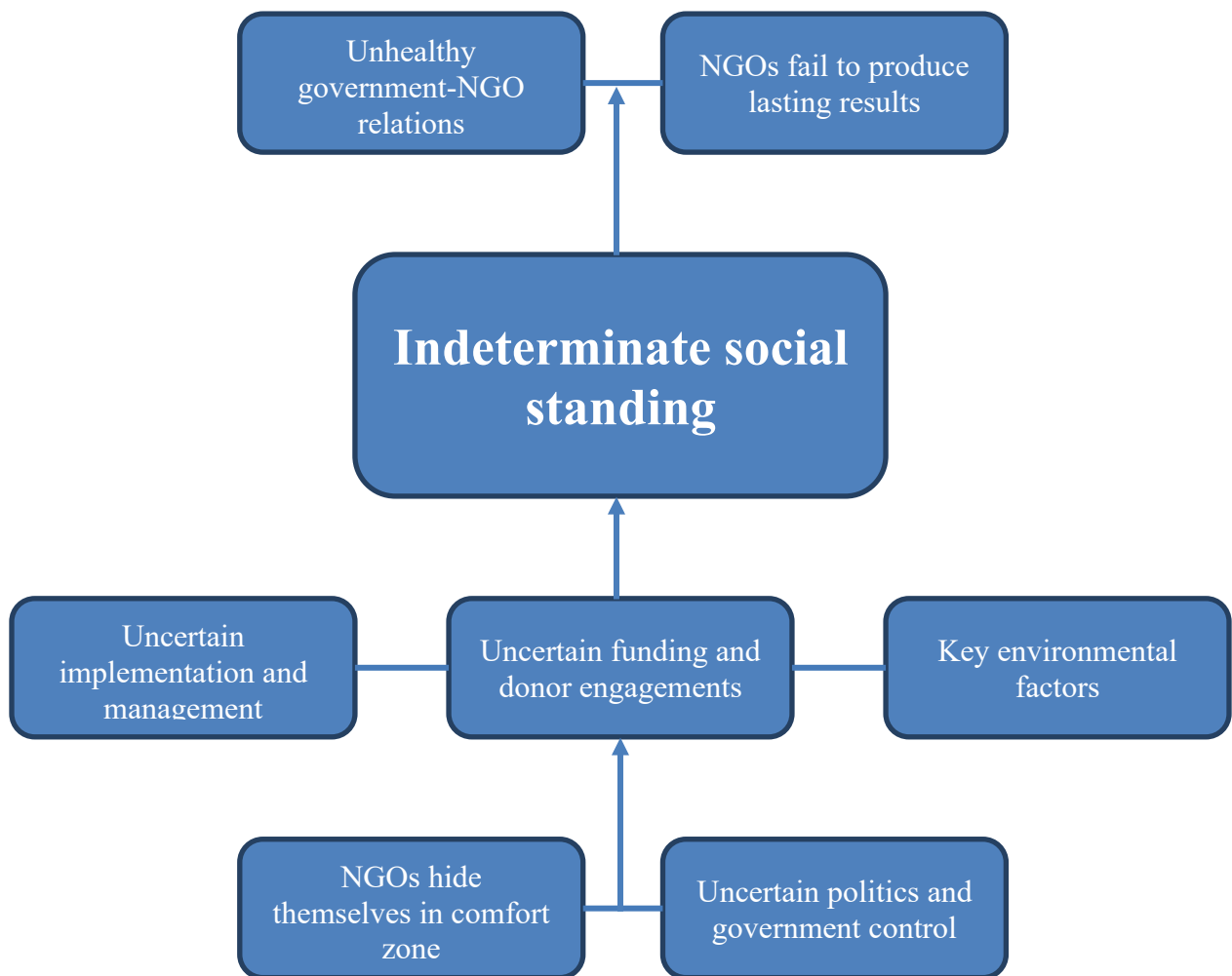


Figure 11: Problem tree on NGO operations

This problem is related to three main issues: implementation and management of organizations' operations, unclear funding and donor engagements, and various key environmental influences. These three issues lead NGOs to "hide" themselves in a what they refer to as a "comfortable zone" out of government view and to thereby escape government scrutiny and control. However, this does not create a healthy government-NGO relationship, and as a consequence, affects the quality, impact, and sustainability of projects.

7.1. The core problem: Indeterminate social standing

NGOs have no official standing in Vietnam. Although those whose directors were interviewed for this study are in registered organizations, these organizations are not eligible to join the government-recognized list of political and social agencies. This means that although NGOs operate, their presence in the country is ignored by the government, and NGOs occupy unofficial roles. I find in this study that although this fact compromises their effectiveness, it might afford them flexibility in adjusting strategies and shifting priorities as needed, and thus facilitates NGO operations in conditions of uncertainty. In the literature, where scholars have discussed NGO flexibility in project planning, implementation, and partnerships (Olivier, Hunt, & Ridde, 2016, Fisher, 2003, Holdsworth & Winkley, 1990), they have not explained the origins of that flexibility. This research project shows that flexibility in a Vietnamese context comes from the unofficial roles that NGOs occupy, which also offers NGOs room to maneuver.

However, this flexibility is also a challenge to NGOs when they are uncertain as to how to proceed with strategic directions. For instance, the dilemma inherent in choosing to remain a beneficiary international NGO, or becoming an international alliance member, or localizing

operations, all challenge foreign NGOs in Vietnam, with each direction or decision involving pros and cons. Because NGOs are uncertain about their future directions under such conditions, and no precedents exist, they tend to employ an approach that is open to several scenarios. For example, they may operate on the funding that is provided through an international alliance member. In this case, funding is normally guaranteed, but NGOs rely strategically on their sponsoring headquarter. NGOs may, at the same time, seek funds to run their own implementation, which means that NGOs may fail to be granted with funds, but they have more autonomy on strategic actions. Normally, NGOs opt to financially survive on guaranteed funds or on their own. This uncertainty has the potential to dilute directors' effort to ensure quality service delivery. The directors may not focus efforts on a specific approach.

Foreign NGOs sometimes want to hand over development projects to local social and technical associations, which are established under a state-owned umbrella technical association (Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations – VUSTA). However, the hand-over might be complicated if local NGOs are not issued operating permits. Foreign NGOs in this study explained the need to determine whether to terminate project-based, longer-term partnerships with local NGOs, or to remain as key implementors with activity-based, short-term consultancy contracts with local NGOs. The dilemma of how to work with local NGOs reflects the uncertainty that exists in circumstances when, for example, foreign NGOs might not be ready to hand over projects, and where local NGOs are not ready or lack the capacity to take over projects. Because civil society initiatives are not officially sanctioned in Vietnam, and the legal frameworks governing NGOs are unclear, any hand-overs to local NGOs might invite political interference. More research is needed to understand this process.

Despite their ambiguous role in Vietnam's social and political system, NGOs assert their legitimacy to operate in Vietnam through their public adherence to globally-accepted, fundamental values (Atkinson & Scurrah, 2009), and their commitment to the needs of less-well-off groups. For instance, they endorse the rights-based approach to programming in which they highlight the responsibilities of rights holders (communities) and duty bearers' (the government). They also argue to government that there are many groups who lag behind the rest in the country's development and deserve help. NGOs are put into an uncertain position insofar that government has in fact invited them to participate in Vietnam's poverty reduction. In this way, NGOs insist on their legitimacy to operate in Vietnam despite their uncertain funding conditions and the adverse social and political circumstances under which they often operate.

7.2. Immediate causes of the indeterminate social standing

7.2.1. Issues with program implementation

Scholars have described several tactics NGOs used to deliver projects, including capacity building and project modelling (Chowdhury, Jahan, & Rahman, 2017, Suleiman, 2013). This research project adds several single approaches (output-based approach, intervention modelling, networking, and capacity building) and combined approaches that NGOs employed to deliver interventions. Although these diverse approaches represent NGO innovations and flexibility, the effectiveness of those approaches has not been confirmed.

For instance, NGOs are part of effective networks and wield information relevant to population health (Akco, Dagli, Inanici, et. al., 2013, Brechin & Salas, 2013, Zaidi, Mayhew, & Palmer,

2011). They employ their international and domestic networks to influence government policies on poverty reduction, and to persuade and drive the government in their social and political arrangements (Ahmed & Potter, 2006). This research project has highlighted that NGOs have established such networks and channels of communication, e.g., the Youth Act to End Poverty Network. However, whether such newly-emerged institutions can evolve to generate lasting impacts is unknown.

Capacity building represents another important project dimension. The findings I discuss here are consistent with those described elsewhere (e.g., Suleiman, 2013; Humphries, Gomez, & Hartwig, 2011) that through capacity building, NGO projects approach macro-level objectives (democracy, gender equity, global citizenship). NGOs have claimed that this achievement may also facilitate sustainability. This study has found that NGOs transfer knowledge and technologies to local institutions, that, in turn, deliver interventions on their behalf. The technologies and competencies thus remain with local groups when the interventions end.

The NGOs interviewed for this research seek to transfer delivery models to local organizations. The models would thus stay with the locals, a situation that implies project sustainability. However, whether models are applied or not depends on the availability and capacity of local. This research has clearly shown that local organizations may lack the follow-up funds needed to maintain the initiatives that NGOs launch.

Although NGOs and their initiatives are known to strengthen the capacity of their partners, local governments, and individual beneficiaries (Freed, Dujon, Granek, & Mouhhdine, 2016,

Suleiman, 2013), the literature seldom examines whether and how NGOs might improve their institutional capacity (human resource, organizational performance). This research shows that NGOs' directors are concerned about lacking sufficient measures and tools to effectively manage and evaluate their organization's performance. NGOs therefore require donors' understanding and support to strengthen their internal capacity (management, project delivery) (Seims, 2011).

Community participation represents a valuable implementation tactic (Hoque, Clarke, & Huang, 2016, Kuhl, 2009, Akukwe, 1998, Ghimire, 1998, Cincotta, 1994). This project has shown that participatory approaches, although promoted in NGO projects, may fail due to the government not legitimating NGOs' coordinating role, local partners not being familiar with participatory processes, and political constraints on faith-based organizations. This project found that local communities were often paid for their participation, which does not necessarily entail real or authentic participation.

Implementation success depends heavily on NGO approaches to staffing. Interestingly, the literature has not revealed much about how foreign NGOs staff their operations. Interviewees in this research reported that NGOs have reviewed all their strategies, including their personnel policies. Unfortunately, I could not find the information on how the reviews have been carried out in official documents (strategy documents, progress reports). Available documents that I reviewed concentrate mainly on scheduling, funding, and key program results.

The literature indicates that under conditions of funding vulnerability, NGOs reduce staff (Mosley, Maronick, & Katz, 2012), or compromise on staff qualifications, e.g., by recruiting

untrained or inadequately-trained staff (Gilson et. al., 1994). This research has illustrated that numerous internal factors (compensation policies, work environments, performance appraisal) and labour market factors (newly-emerged business enterprises, local organizations) all influence the staffing of NGOs. Given this complexity, foreign NGOs in Vietnam were found to reduce staff numbers, but respondents did not indicate that they have compromised on staff qualifications or recruitment procedures. In addition, NGO directors suggested several innovative methods to refresh their staff and improve the work environment. For instance, organizations use individual- (for example, key performance indicators, staff capacity building) and systematic-level measures (for example, staff reporting restructuring) to improve staff qualifications and effectiveness. However, these positive approaches are not mandated in official NGO documents.

Successful implementation requires careful selection of partners. The selection of appropriate, capable, and willing partners was reported to be a significant requisite of effective collaboration. Because NGOs are allowed by government to partner only with locally-authorized agencies, the number of partners to select from is limited. NGOs rely on their experience to select the appropriate partners, though this relationship may be characterized by uncertainty.

Despite NGOs' commitment to providing humanitarian relief, scholars are concerned with NGO delivery effectiveness, and offer ways to improve effectiveness, including focusing on establishing service standards and strengthening systems (Pfeiffer, et. al., 2008). Adopting these approaches may lead NGOs to becoming professional, technical associations responding to contracted consultancy tasks. This research offers additional ways to improve delivery

effectiveness, including focusing resources on only a few pointed development issues or geographic areas, and mandating focusing resources on improving the effectiveness of project implementation. Above all, this research has emphasized that NGOs should maintain core values of participation, empowerment, and sustainability. Although these approaches together ensure NGO effectiveness without compromising their core values, how to balance the several aspects of participation and empowerment on one side, and of consultancy tasks on other side, remains a concern.

Although scholars have thoroughly examined the alignment of NGO priorities with those of government, evaluations of NGO contributions to state development are rare. This research has illustrated that respondents held conflicting opinions about NGOs' contributions to state policy. While NGO directors highlighted the potential for input on national development priorities, government officials tended to view those inputs negatively. Although NGOs provide significant resources to a country's development, ranging from financial to technical supports, in Vietnam they seem to remain unwelcome visitors with only uncertain mechanisms to ensure that their voices are heard, and their programs recognized.

Hudson (2001) writes that NGOs link grassroots communities with upper levels of governance, ensuring their voices are heard within current existing legal frameworks. This study specifies the several tools NGO employed for policy advocacy (the advantage of their grassroots experience, strong networking capability, and capacity building approaches). However, the effectiveness of those tools is uncertain. Success stories are documented, but NGOs routinely face difficulty accessing policy makers. No formal or institutionalized mechanisms exist to ensure their voices

are heard. Interviewees recommended that NGOs need to illustrate more progress in policy areas.

This research found that NGOs are interested in conducting research to show convincing evidence of program effectiveness. But researchers have expressed concerns about the quality of NGO research projects (Atkinson & Scurrah, 2009, Delisle, Roberts, Munro, et. al., 2005), and suggest that NGOs should work closely with universities and research institutions to meet standards for academic rigour (Olivier, Hunt, & Ridde, 2016). Storeng and Palmer (2019) illustrate a conflict of interest between NGOs (and their donors), who want to show that their investments generate positive results, and researchers, who want to report what have been observed and evaluated. This study found that NGOs in Vietnam are subject to strong mandates to conduct research and to strengthen collaboration with academic institutions. Yet because donors do not value NGOs as research institutions (Delisle, Roberts, Munro, et. al., 2005), they are unlikely to earmark funds for such activities. Respondents reported that NGOs require donor support to ensure funds for research, not just for funding activities in the field.

NGOs strive to deliver a variety of macro-level goals (democracy, gender equity, and global citizenship), but the success of these initiatives is uncertain. Scholars are concerned about NGOs' unrealistic goals (Watkins, Swidler, & Hannan, 2012), long-term social achievements, and standing in global health governance (Buse & Walt, 1997). In this study, NGOs directors noted that some NGOs established ambitious objectives without considering their ability to achieve them. Although NGO initiatives are promising, the NGOs generally lack the

competence, expertise, and financial resources to achieve their goals. NGO delivery performance, therefore, remains uncertain.

How NGOs sustain project results is a problem. Because of funding shortages, NGOs use different methods to ensure availability of funds for operations and project implementation (Biermann, Eckhardt, Carljford, Falk, & Forsberg, 2016, Berry, 2014, Mosley, Maronick, & Katz, 2012, Sarriot et. al., 2004, Gellert, 1996). For instance, NGO fixed-term interventions necessitate exit strategies to ensure a smooth transition to local governments (Abramowitz, 2015, Ejaz, Shaikh, & Rizvi, 2011). The interviewees in this research project offered practical guides to this finding; NGOs could opt to devise their exit strategies early in programming, or establish follow-up funds or devise economic-opportunity activities to financially maintain project results. Although the inclusion of follow-up components might signify NGO sustainability, those tactics have not been applied yet.

The respondents of this research study recommended that NGOs coordinate or integrate their initiatives within existing administrative and political structures. Pfeiffer and colleagues (2008) and Pfeiffer (2003) note that such an approach might secure political support and ensure sustainability. However, when NGOs fully integrate with public administrative systems, they may lose their identity as independent, civil society organizations (Cheng et. al., 2010), and they may become even more tightly controlled by government. Interviewees suggested that NGOs maintain their core values of empowerment, participatory approach, and long-term sustainability to avoid full integration with government. When NGOs keep their conventional values, they separate themselves from government systems which often employ a top-down approach.

However, how NGOs keep their conventional values within public administrative circles remains a question. Further studies may be required to provide answers.

NGOs bear “political responsibility” when they implement projects as they are accountable to the various stakeholders (Atkinson & Scurrah, 2009, pp. 46-49). While NGOs in Vietnam are not charged with reporting on local development indicators, they actually do so for the sake of local communities. This action has the potential to endanger partnerships with local governments if it exposes less than desired performance. I have illustrated a political scenario where NGOs must balance the interests of local governments, the needs of local populations, and their access to continued donor funding. The results reported here suggest that NGOs carefully report their own findings and opinions, regardless of government perspectives, in order to secure sustainable funding.

From a wider perspective, NGOs favour balancing other aspects of their operations. This research has illustrated that NGOs adjust their priorities to fit several internal and external factors influencing their operations. Such prioritization balances interests among wider structures, political and socio-economical contexts, and facilitates ongoing material incentives in the funding landscape. However, when devising ways of implementing projects, NGOs face several dilemmas, ranging from violating their core values to undermining their partnerships with local governments. It seems that the harder NGOs work to survive, the more problems arise.

This research has revealed two dimensions of NGO operations. On the one hand, NGOs promote horizontal, bottom-up approaches to community development and the use of local

knowledge, which they claim are their strengths (Islam, Siti Hajar, & Haris, 2013, Akukwe, 1998). On the other, headquarters offices may impose operational policies and procedures on their field offices, ignoring local knowledge and constraints. NGOs aim to standardize their operations globally, but their implementation is highly local.

Headquarters policies and procedures impact NGOs' field offices' performance and survival. However, the relations between headquarters and their field offices have not been discussed in the scholarly literature, perhaps because the activities and concerns of country offices are conflated with those of headquarters offices. This work has determined that although headquarters offices have a mission to facilitate field office operations, their guidance may be irrelevant—both practically and culturally. These misguided efforts greatly challenge NGOs country offices when they are tasked with balancing stakeholders' interests, thereby delaying field implementation. Bridging field-headquarter gaps require headquarters' financial, technical, and strategic support, including cultural sensitivity and field understandings. Effective field-headquarter transactions enable NGOs' effectiveness and promote the image of both headquarters and local offices.

7.2.2. Funding pressures and uncertainties in engagements with donors

NGO funding conditions are constrained by several external variables, including Vietnam's economic development, donors' rescheduled schemes and requirements, the wider bilateral-political environment, and government-restricted domestic fund raising; and internal factors such as headquarters-promulgated strategies, and delivery ineffectiveness. NGOs are certainly aware of the “no funds – no operations, no operations – no funds” formula; in response, they employ

several adaptive approaches to sustaining their funding (Mosley, Maronick, & Katz, 2012). For instance, they approach the flourishing private sector, which emerged as a result of the 1986 Open-Door Policy, to identify and access funding opportunities. This finding is consistent with the findings of Arhin, Kumi, and Adam (2018), Besel, Williams, and Klak (2011), and Aldaba and colleagues (2000) who have shown that NGOs often leverage funds from the private sector to navigate periods of financial vulnerability or uncertainty. NGOs are committed to seeking alternative funds for their operations, and the development of a private business sector in Vietnam offers a fertile ground for innovative funding prospects.

The findings confirm NGOs' willingness to access state funds to compensate for funding deficits. However, there is a risk in this approach that reliance on state funds makes them more subordinate to government and hence in an even more unequal position in that already sensitive relationship. NGOs also expect to raise funds domestically. While many foreign NGOs confirm their inactive fund-raising status domestically, others are still somewhat able to raise funds within Vietnam. How these "flexible" NGOs can "maneuver" within the restrictive local fundraising regulations remains hidden, as admitted by one NGO director. It is useful for NGOs to collaborate to learn about possible initiatives. Unfortunately, a NGO that is successfully obtaining local funding may not share the secret with competitors for the same funding; survival is at stake for both parties.

One controversial issue is whether NGOs compromise their ethics and the effectiveness of project implementation when they are so focused on funding their own survival. Focusing on funding and development, especially donors grant funds renewal, may distract NGOs from a

focus on high-quality project implementation (Mercer, Thompson, & Araujo, 2014, Kamat, 2003, Cooley & Ron, 2002). Several NGO directors refused to compromise their values and missions. For example, one NGO in this research would not carry out projects that they do not have the expertise because they do not want to compromise the quality of program implementation. Another NGO would not accept funds from donors linked to child exploitation. Although NGOs must satisfy donors' requirements, they also rely on their own capacity and strengths, which they believe determine their survival.

NGOs devise ways of coping with funding challenges, ranging from revising program objectives (interventions, deliveries) to implementing fund-raising initiatives, including diversification and private sector engagement. My findings also offer several recommendations to donors. For instance, donors are requested to offer a transitional period so that NGOs and the government have time to prepare for the rescheduled funding schemes. Donors are invited to also consider sponsoring follow-up interventions for project sustainability. In particular, donors need to coordinate among themselves for effective program coverage. Moreover, if donors have the means to continue funds, they also have the power to reschedule the funds, when relevant. Cooley and Ron (2002) argue that NGOs would not dare to provide recommendations for donors for fear of their dissatisfaction. In this research study, although NGOs expect several things from donors, they do not seem to submit a proposal. Therefore, donor engagement in solving funding shortages remains unclear.

7.2.3. Key factors of the working environment

According to the literature, economic development involves both opportunities and challenges. One country's wealthier status may result in a positive medium-term economic outlook, hence benefiting bi- and multi-lateral relationships. However, countries may face more competitive funding schemes, and must balance development outcomes and changes to economic environment. Development also marginalizes certain populations, creating inequality in accessing public and social services. This research provides some perspectives from NGOs. Although foreign NGOs in Vietnam are able to explore more funding opportunities than they were, they also face more competitive funding requirements. Although populations that are lagging behind economic development, and newly-emerging social issues offer NGOs reasons to stay in Vietnam, the NGOs must ensure that their programs effectively meet the needs of disadvantaged communities. Vietnamese economic development has amplified pressures on NGO operations.

Specifically, when Vietnam's economy actively integrated with the global market, the government developed multiple partnerships with many nations. A large part of NGO funding comes from donor governments, and Vietnam's bi- and multi-lateral relationships tend to drive the dimensions of funding for the country, including foreign NGOs. The dependence on foreign funds makes the nation's and NGOs' funding landscapes more vulnerable to donors' policies and requirements.

Coupled with the nation's economic development, donors de-list Vietnam from their priority lists, impose higher grant requirements (such as a shortened timeframe, an insistence on tangible results, shrunken funds), and drive project priorities. As securing funds for their operations

becomes more difficult, NGO's survival becomes uncertain. While NGOs have limited control over donors, the one thing that they can do is focus with greater energy on delivering quality outcomes. Thus, as respondents have noted, they strive to develop model innovative projects that build on their current competencies, produce long-term results, and are implemented cost-effectively.

NGO operations tend to suffer from staffing challenges due to newly-emerging issues arising with rapid economic development. Labor market competition in Vietnam has accelerated due to the emergence of a for-profit sector and increasing numbers of local NGOs. The literature shows that NGO staff qualifications can be affected by resource constraints (Gilson, Sen, Mohammed, et. al., 1994), and by the challenging settings that often characterize NGO activities and associated physical and infrastructural challenges (Watkins, Swidler, & Hannan, 2012). How to recruit and sustain qualified staff is a critical issue for NGOs.

This research has found that the translation for the terms “non-government organization” and policy “advocacy” may matter. If translated straightforwardly, both terms mean counter-arguments. Counter-arguments are labelled “sensitiveness” in Vietnam context, and, therefore, government staff and communities are fearful of working with NGOs. Counter-arguments are also regarded as social evils, which are outlawed. Therefore, translations of key concepts needs to be done carefully and communicated effectively to avoid misunderstandings.

7.3. Root causes of the indeterminate social standing

7.3.1. NGOs “hide” themselves in a comfort zone

One theme that cuts across several layers of NGO operations is the idea of a “safety zone”. Given the uncertainties that have been outlined, NGOs become conservative in how they operate. They are reluctant to undertake some actions, or to work towards certain goals. However, this reluctance affects their ability to be innovative and effective. Indeed, NGOs may be seen as hiding themselves within their perceived “safety zones” to avoid state interference.

For example, NGOs in Vietnam have been reluctant to embrace more entrepreneurial business models. Topor and Boroiu (2011) examined business-oriented models in Romania where NGOs diversify finances through business-oriented activities. The research project in this dissertation has widened this perspective, discussing the entrepreneurial mindset under both effectiveness and fiscal angles, and explored the possibility that NGOs might become a special class of entrepreneurs. Yet, Kamat (2003) notes that community empowerment for social justice involves promoting the poor’s rights against economic elites, and cautions that the shift to an entrepreneurial model may disconnect NGOs from the political possibilities of changing society because of the apolitical and managerial approach to community development. This research shows that NGOs still managed to align with a social development agenda while acting in ways consistent with the business-oriented principles of organizational efficiency and value-for-money finance. Respondents believe that this approach to project implementation results in effectiveness. However, NGOs may be too conservative and too reluctant to take the new role of entrepreneurs.

The effectiveness of NGOs’ projects on local social and health systems has been an area of concern for many scholars (Pfeiffer, 2003, Pfeiffer, Johnson, Fort, et al., 2008). My work has

illustrated causes of NGOs' ineffectiveness – they based interventions on assumptions. For example, at times, they may make assumptions about community needs, delivery methods, and effectiveness, and they lacked post-evaluation, follow-up activities. NGOs' interventions would likely be strengthened if they improved their work approach, which might require time, solid financing, and most importantly, an evidence-based work approach. A question remained, however, about whether NGOs could be ready to cope with challenges so as to better able to implement projects.

Researchers have noted that NGOs lack rigorous techniques for measuring project effectiveness, including the critical assessment of research results (Olivier, Hunt, & Ridde, 2016, Ghere, 2013, Pillai, Wei, & Maleku, 2013, Watkins, Swidler, & Hannan, 2012, ISSEE, 2010, Delisle, Roberts, Munro, Jones, & Gyorkos, 2005, Pfeiffer, 2003, Cumper, 1986). This study shows that although NGOs have devised several methods to demonstrating project effectiveness, they are not using the right indicators. NGOs tended to tailor the indicators to fit their successes. This approach might immediately satisfy NGO directors, and probably donors, but might not support strengthening the capacity of NGOs. NGOs would be well advised to move beyond their traditional conservative measurements and really measure their effectiveness.

Scholars have written that NGO projects do not respond to the most-pressing community needs (Galway, Corbett, & Zeng, 2012). This research supports this argument, with the further comment that NGOs will “safely” select beneficiaries to favour donor-expected success at the expense of equity. The intentional selection of beneficiaries might exclude groups in need, and hence increase social gaps. The need to balance donor requirements and grassroots mandates is

in fact a challenge to NGOs. This research has illustrated that NGOs tend to select a safer path in order to ensure their survival.

Bernard and Grewal (2014) suggest that NGOs need to explain themselves and clarify their goals and operations if they want to gain a better standing in global politics. However, this research project has shown that NGOs might be unready and thus unwilling to escape their “safety zones” and educate stakeholders about themselves. I think that it may be difficult to do this in the Vietnam context, but NGOs have not investigated any activities to educate stakeholders about their priorities, modes of operations, and missions, so their roles and effectiveness remained closed to public audits. NGOs may overcome this obstacle to really promote themselves in global politics.

This research has demonstrated that NGOs in Vietnam have not paid enough attention to increasing stakeholders’ knowledge about their roles and mandates. The NGOs included in this research did not spend much time or effort clarifying their roles, their ways of project implementation, and their finances to local governments. Similarly, Ahmed and Potter (2006) in their work have argued that organizational roles are socially constructed, and stakeholder-NGO interactions depend on how each defines the other’s roles. In this research, stakeholders include government departments and local governments, donors, and communities. The research has illustrated that government departments and local governments, donors, and communities all lack complete knowledge or understanding of the roles and mandates of NGOs in Vietnam, and this has negatively impacted their ability to work together. Respondents in this research project have recommended that this barrier will only be overcome if NGOs take the initiative to promote their

image by educating stakeholders on the value of their activities and what NGOs do and do not do. With their expertise in communication and information campaigns, NGOs should be able to competently transform stakeholders' awareness and knowledge, and thus improve relationships.

In addition, if NGOs presented themselves to stakeholders, they might also learn about stakeholders' concerns and modes of operation. For example, they could learn how government departments operate. Government-NGO relationships became more vulnerable when NGOs were under-informed about government departments' operations. This deficiency tends to exacerbate NGO implementation problems, as well as their relationships with public sector agencies. Therefore, through opening better channels of communication, as advised by interviewees, NGOs can ensure that they learn about and fully understand state departments' operations and administrative procedures, and concurrently educate the government about the details of their own operations. Mutual understanding would facilitate healthy partnerships.

Coupled with their self-promotion efforts, NGOs might also clearly define their lines of accountability. This research supports the finding by some researchers that despite NGOs' clearly-defined accountability to donors, their downward accountability to communities is comparatively weak (Atkinson & Scurrah, 2009, Clark, 2001, Fox, 2000). Further, this project has shown that although upward accountability is usually clearly required by grant contracts, their downward accountability to communities is less clearly determined, despite several measures required by governments and donors: e.g., complying with internal control measures, complying with state financial audits and reporting requirements. NGO directors could not show how these measures associated with the downward accountability. Moreover, those measures

were vaguely noted in NGO official documents, in statements such as “a more transparent and accountable relationship will be further developed and applied.” This suggests that NGOs may remain unable to clearly demonstrate their accountability to grassroots populations.

In summary, NGO operations, including goals, strategies, effectiveness, roles and mandates, accountability, and finance, should be clear to government and other stakeholders. This clarity would certainly improve mutual understanding, bringing about healthier relations and greater trust from stakeholders. However, these advantages will not occur if NGOs stay in their “comfort zones” and are unwilling to promote their identities and to present their work for public scrutiny. Yet NGOs may find it hard to do so because of the structural position of NGOs. The government imposes regulations on NGOs; several aspects of NGO operations are labelled “sensitive” by the government; and gaps exist in policy development and implementation. NGOs also rely on donors for grant funding, the donors may lack understandings of field-based matters, and they may impose their own priorities and reporting requirements.

Scholars have noted that government-NGO relationships are characterized by unequal power, in which NGOs must obey state priorities and frameworks (Anku-Tsede, 2014, Mercer, Thompson, & Araujo, 2014, McLoughlin, 2011, Fisher, 2003, Gary, 1996, Lubin, 1987). Durham and colleagues (2015) and Aldaba and colleagues (2000) argue that governments have the financial and managerial capacity to determine the dimensions of any links they establish with NGOs. In Vietnam, although foreign NGOs cannot access government funds, they are subject to government control. This research project suggests two concrete factors that determine NGOs’ compliance with government sovereignty. First, government uses its discretion to constrain

NGO operations and even to deny their initiatives. Second, NGOs may want to hide away from government scrutiny. Once again, NGOs will need to find the will to raise their voices if they want to improve their standing in current Vietnamese society.

Lastly, the findings indicate that NGO collaborations with each other increase their access to information and resources, their legitimacy and power, and commitment to community well-being (Mosley, Maronick, & Katz, 2012, Yanacopulos, 2005). As many scholars have observed, thanks to a willingness to collaborate, NGOs are able to leverage greater program impact on community well-being, and cope with challenges in the working environment (Ahmed & Potter, 2006, Chapman & Fisher, 2000). This research is consistent with these observations, confirming that NGO collaborations have generated better impacts and been able to support their legitimacy. This research project offers several practical suggestions on why and how NGOs might collaborate effectively, ranging from micro-level activities (the steps of undertaking collaboration, delivery tactics) to macro-level issues (the sharing of ways for fund diversification). These suggestions might strengthen collaborating processes for positive impacts on community well-being.

Although coalitions of NGOs constitute an important dimension of NGO operations, these coalitions may not always survive political pressure, resource shortages, short-term orientation, and failures of leadership (Hu, Guo, & Bies, 2016). This study finds that although acknowledging that collaboration generates positive results, most decisions made during collaboration meetings do not result in concrete action. Even NGOs' participation with fellow

NGOs is intermittent because of self-interest. When a NGO shares its tactics, funding, and “secrets” of implementation and partnerships, it may become less competitive in acquiring funds.

7.3.2. Uncertain politics and government control

As Tandon (1989, pp. 21) has pointed out, governments direct and determine the one-way nature of government-NGO relations in Asia. Fisher (2003) stresses that NGO policies may sometimes be “schizophrenic” and may actually “conceal co-optation” (pp. 22). The research supports these statements, and offers as evidence several policy-associated obstacles that NGO operations face, ranging from government departments’ lack of knowledge of NGO operations, to complex and restrictive government regulations that frequently compromise NGO activities.

This research demonstrates that Vietnam lacks knowledge or understanding of how NGOs operate, a deficiency originating from the country’s political monopoly. The classification of NGOs as “sensitive” - sources of concern or even distrust - represents a political, top-down approach to NGO operations.

The government’s stance makes it unlikely to accept actions supporting or facilitating civil society operations. Regulation 102-QD/TW⁶, the most serious relevant policy, does not target NGOs, but it does ban political party members from discussing and facilitating civil society. Thus, the country’s political structure effectively isolates NGO operations. In a single-party political system, this ban is serious because it not only impairs efforts to facilitate NGOs operations, but also obstructs full understanding of NGOs and their work. Although NGOs have attempted to overcome social and political obstacles to advance the well-being of the

communities they serve, no state agencies dare support or discuss their efforts. This “willful ignorance” represents the greatest political barrier against effective integration of NGO operations into contemporary development programs.

Decree 12/2012/ND-CP⁵, Decision 76/2010/QD-TTg.⁶, and Decree 93/2009/ND-CP⁷ all frame NGO operations in highly restrictive ways. This study shows that arbitrary enforcement of regulations, variable policy implementation, poor coordination among levels of authority, and unclear policy directives affect their operations, funding, and programs of NGOs. This creates a policy environment where NGO operations are highly vulnerable to unpredictable political interference. The vulnerability is made even more serious because officials lack knowledge of NGO motivations and activities due to Regulation 102-QD/TW⁸.

Dupuy, Ron and Prakash (2016) argue that low and middle-income countries may regard international assistance, including from NGOs and civil society, as an important resource for development. They comment further that governments may, however, consider NGOs a threat to the state’s political control and may impose restrictive regulations on NGO operations and funding flows. This research is consistent with these authors’ findings, adding that a government

⁵ Decree 12/2012/ND-CP issued in 2012 is about the registration and management of foreign NGOs in Vietnam.

⁶ Decision 76/2010/QD-TTg. regulates the content, agendas, procedures and organization of events engaging “foreign factors”.

⁷ Decree 93/2009/ND-CP issued in 2009 is about the management and utilization of foreign NGOs funds.

⁸ Regulation 102-QD/TW states that political party members would be expelled from the party if addressing or discussing civil society.

might shift its willingness to engage with NGOs from time to time, e.g., changing conditions from favourable to restrictive. In Vietnam, coupled with quick shifts in the policy environment, NGOs' limited participation in policy processes also affected their own operations. Ultimately, the government's policy shifts and its lack of transparency deepened the unpredictability of policy impacts on NGO operations.

This research also supports Murtaza and Austin's (2011) assertion that governments continually impose regulations on NGO operations even if NGOs offer great support to state development. This study has shown that even when NGOs support state priorities, they still face difficulties stemming from undisclosed government development goals, tightened regulations, and conflicting approaches. The alignment of NGO strategies and development goals with government remain a constant challenge.

Vietnam plans to participate in newly-emerged treaties such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), and the participation normally requires the existence in-place of an official means of holding referendums, a policy of access to information, and assured rights to association. This research project has shown that in Vietnam government prioritizes economic development over social development. The Law on Charity and the Law on Associations were therefore never promulgated, which negatively impacted NGO operations. NGOs require these elements of democratic society for their development, and they expect that the government will lift its existing barriers to join the mainstream in the world economy. However, this project has illustrated several political obstacles to achieving these freedoms. The government seems to fear that NGOs will generate an unstable society and

unsettle the country's politics. How Vietnam will balance these fears with the pull towards more democratic practices remains uncertain.

7.4. Consequences

7.4.1. Unhealthy government-NGO relations

Murtaza and Austin (2011) argue that governments continually introduce regulations over NGO operations despite recognizing NGOs' contributions in development. This research project finds that although the Government of Vietnam greatly welcomes NGO engagement, they remain cautious about NGO operations -- applying a half-willing, half-alert approach to NGOs. On one side, regulations of NGO operations are restrictive. On the other side, loose, arbitrary policy implementation may create room so that a NGO can "maneuver". Conversely, NGOs endeavour to observe state regulations, and concurrently strive to "maneuver" within the already-reserved room, or even to widen their flexibility.

Scholars have examined government-NGO trust and mistrust. While trust is enabled by well-defined commitment and equal dialogues, mistrust is caused by discrepancies between generally supportive policies and unsupportive practices (Batley, 2006). Trust also facilitates shared responsibilities, commitment and willingness in government-NGO partnerships (Solana, 2014, Paudel, 2013, Roka & Fernando, 2013, Bustreo, Harding, & Axelsson, 2003, Haque, 2002).

Trust represents a key element in government-NGO partnerships.

This research study has illustrated that NGOs and government being knowledgeable about each other's operations may be critical to developing an effective partnership. When NGOs

understand government departments' operations, they can comfortably collaborate with the right departments, partner with appropriate partners, finance projects, and comply with government policies. Also, government-NGO trust is promoted and benefits if the government becomes knowledgeable about NGOs.

However, this study has shown that the government remains sensitive regarding civil society engagement in social organizing, and in consequence, NGOs are reluctant to have their operational values (roles, effectiveness, transparency) publicly updated and audited. In addition, poor government-NGO exchanges of policies and knowledge likely leads to poor government-NGO relationships. Interviewees in this research recommend that in order to address these problems, NGOs should prioritize learning about government operations and procedures so as to enable effective deliveries. They also mentioned that effective mechanisms should be devised to promote exchanging policy updates and knowledge and to ensure healthy partnerships.

Because governments and NGOs have different perspectives on policy development and implementation, they need strong commitment to achieving common goals. This research has shown that where restrictive regulations predominate, and a top-down approach to policy development exists, the establishment of trusting relationships is unlikely. Government-NGO partnerships lack this kind of trust, and are therefore difficult to sustain.

Besel, Williams, and Klak (2011) indicate that NGOs often survive funding limitations through “formaliz[ing]” (pp. 58) relationships with government institutions and ensuring compliance with states. However, this research project has found that in Vietnam, the government denies

foreign NGOs' access to public funds, and requires that NGOs be financial donors to the country. The regulations place heavier financial pressures on NGOs and makes government-NGO partnership seriously vulnerable to financial survival difficulties.

This project shows that NGOs expect to mainstream their funds and programs in public systems, when both government and NGOs share responsibilities to manage implementation and expenditures. This coordination might happen in clearly-defined partnerships and already-existing policy dialogues between government and NGOs (Batley, 2006). In Vietnam, both government and NGOs are unlikely to be prepared for the partnerships and the policy dialogues. How to mainstream NGO operations in these kind of state systems needs clarification.

Scholars have written about government's willingness to partner with NGOs. Willingness ensures commitment to effective implementation and goal achievement (Paudel, 2013, Ahmed, 1999, Brinkerhoff, 1995). Amirkhanian and colleagues (2004) find that unwilling government departments are a challenge for NGO operations in Central and Eastern Europe. Even in more democratic societies where voluntary activities are promoted, NGO roles are not always well-recognized or respected, and they may have trouble partnering with unwilling government departments (Ahmed & Potter, 2006). This is consistent with the findings reported here. This research project has identified key reasons for this unwillingness, ranging from NGO-originated factors (e.g., the non-refundable nature of aid, strict financial management, history of engagement, weak effectiveness) to partner side factors (e.g., tight schedules). These identified variables should be further examined to understand governments' willingness to partner with NGOs.

7.4.2. NGOs fail to produce lasting results

NGO projects have been criticized for lacking sustainability, and this is normally discussed in terms of their dependence on external funds (Hudson, 2001), weak evaluation methods (Pillai, Wei, & Maleku, 2013, Sarriot, Winch, Ryan, et. al., 2004), small scope and size (Crane & Carswell, 1992), and short-term approaches (Pfeiffer, Johnson, Fort, et. al., 2008). Currently, the literature has not engaged with the implications of governments' policy on sustainability. This research project has highlighted that in Vietnam, policy gaps exist in awareness, in implementation, in coordination, in consistency, and clarity. Due to these gaps, NGOs' prestige might be damaged due to delayed disbursements, and NGOs' project sustainability is compromised due to burdensome administrative procedures and reporting requirements. These gaps might place NGOs at risk of losing donor funds. In circumstances of such financial uncertainty, NGOs cannot implement long-term large-scale approaches or rigorous evaluation approaches.

Further empirical research and methodological advances are required to quantify the variables of the policy environment and their implications for NGO sustainability. In a wider picture, the government-NGO relationship framework, particularly in developing country settings, must be consolidated, and the variables (capacity, willingness) quantified.

7.5. Summary

Although NGOs have the legal ability to operate in Vietnam, they do not occupy an official position or have formal standing vis-à-vis either government or beneficiary communities. This

non-official status offers NGOs rooms for maneuvering, yet it is difficult for NGOs to grow in terms of scope and impact without an official status. This uncertain position is rooted in two main causes (Figure 11). First, the communist government restrictively controls civil society sector growth. They have never accepted any actions promoting, supporting or facilitating civil society operations. Second, NGOs tend to take a very low profile so as to avoid excessive government scrutiny. In effect, they create a secured social and political space where they can operate with minimal interference. That they vaguely establish program frameworks, or reluctantly undertake actions, is related to the need to avoid such interference. NGOs want to ensure smooth operations at the expense of a more explicit and straight-forward approach. Both causes are further complicated by uncertainties in delivery implementation, funding conditions, and several other environmental factors. All these factors, and their relations with each other, can be depicted in a diagram that expresses NGOs' ambiguous, non-official status in Vietnam. As a result of the lack of clear standing in society, NGOs risk losing funding opportunities and other supporting measures (policy, techniques) to produce and/or support lasting positive outcomes. In addition, the government and NGOs have not adequately built their knowledge of each other, hence undermining effective cooperation, and trust.

CHAPTER 8 - CONCLUSIONS

8.1. Summary of research

Current literature debates NGO roles in global health governance, considering the relations with governments, donors, local populations, and other institutions. The literature acknowledges that the NGO sector has grown substantially over the past several decades, helping secure commitments to and achievement of development goals (Mussa, Pfeiffer, Gloyd, et. al., 2013, Buse & Walt, 1997). The literature also shows gaps in understanding how NGOs operate. Because NGOs, either at a local, smaller-scale level or at an international, greater-scale level, occupy a connecting middle ground between government, international donors, and local communities, they struggle to balance multiple interests in various social, political, economic and funding contexts, while striving to wield power and influence in the complex arena of governance at local and global levels. Although scholars offer solid descriptions of NGO structures and practices, they make only limited references to the uncertainty associated with NGO operations. These uncertainties, however, may shape NGO strategies, programs and even their survival within particular contexts (Watkins, Swidler, & Hannan, 2012, MacPhail, 2010). A better understanding of the causes and consequences of these uncertainties would permit a fuller picture of NGO operations, and also offer a path forward to a more effective, and recognized role in development and governance.

In response to this knowledge gap, this research has explored how uncertainty shapes NGO operations in relation to other institutions, and at multiple levels. Specifically, contextualized in the developing country of Vietnam, the research has addressed the following questions:

- What are the uncertainties that foreign NGOs face?

- What roles or modes of operation do foreign NGOs undertake as a consequence of these uncertainties?
- How do the objectives of foreign NGOs align with Vietnam's national development agendas?
- What modes of coordination are recommended for foreign NGOs and the government departments in Vietnam, and what lessons are there for other emerging economies?

This project serves two purposes. Theoretically, it contributes to literature on relations between the NGO/CSO sector, governments, and other social sectors. In the context of developing countries, where economic development may be prioritized over social and health development, and where the civil society sector is unrecognized in national development, these relations are vulnerable to competing political visions. An understanding of the uncertainties affecting NGOs supports better and less contested relationships across sectors and could be used as a guide for further studies. Practically, this research has gathered several recommendations made by NGO practitioners, and these can be shared among practitioners to foster their application. Although this work did not aim for generalization beyond the particular case of Vietnam, the recommendations might be applicable to non-profit organizations in other contexts.

As is the tradition in this literature, qualitative methods were used to answer the research questions (Porter, 2013, Adato, Roopnaraine, & Becker, 2011, Markowitz, 2001, Lewis, 1999). Specifically, the overarching question of how uncertainty shapes NGO operations typically involves the connections among several structures and processes. A qualitative approach was

judged to be best fitted to examining such linkages, especially when placed within the complexity of a socialist-oriented market economy.

In this qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews and document reviews were the primary methods of data collection. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty representatives of participating NGOs, and with seven other high-ranking government officers who work at both central and provincial levels. While NGO representatives commented on policy impacts and organizational development, government officers shared opinions on policy-making processes, NGO implementation and coordination, and partnerships. In addition, this project also examined documents on NGO strategies and government policies (decisions, proposals, reports).

These data show that NGOs involved in this research have their own missions, visions, and values, and they do not communicate these to the public. What constitutes the NGOs' accountability, and whether the NGOs are responsible for their mandates, is unclear. NGOs will not be able to claim their social standing unless they are better able to communicate and refine their mandates and images.

The data also demonstrate deficits in NGOs' funding, programming, and staffing. First, NGOs' struggles for funding represent a difference between their identities and mandates on one side, and funding sources on the other side. NGO operations need funds, and the NGOs in this research apply several approaches to achieving better funding status, ranging from building staff capacity to actively seeking funding alternatives. However, the measures that they adopted for

improving funding status may violate their identities and mandates. Therefore, NGOs' funding status remains uncertain. Secondly, the data show NGOs' deficits when they develop, manage, and implement programs. Whether it be new concepts or comprehensive, multi-component programs, the NGOs' interventions are perceived by local governments and local populations to be unclear. NGOs examined in this research do not seem to find a way out of this programmatic difficulty. Thirdly, researched NGOs show deficits in staffing their operations; lack of fund allocations impedes their staff initiatives from happening. This study suggests that researched NGOs also lack directions for effectively staffing their operations. The NGOs' ineffectiveness, coupled with unclear workplace policies and short-term project-based recruitment, erode staff commitment.

The country's economic development, which greatly influences its international relations and population health priorities, is among several external factors that impact NGO operations. In addition, the Government of Vietnam's unpredictable and ambiguous regulative policy development and implementation, and its wider political connections, are barriers to effective programming, and may even endanger NGOs' financial survival (Fisher, 2003, Tandon, 1989). In which dimensions these challenges will evolve remains unforeseen when politics are involved.

Given uncertainties in their internal and external environments, NGOs in this research become very conservative, seeking a "safe space" where they can operate without drawing undue political attention or government scrutiny. However, this practice impedes innovation and efficacy. Moreover, they cannot take any actions towards those challenges. Because NGOs do not really challenge the current situation, their effectiveness and survival are vulnerable.

This research shows that NGOs assume roles of helping the government achieve development objectives. Interestingly, despite attempts to support government initiatives, the involved NGOs' contributions to country development are rarely recognized by either the public or by government. On the contrary, several respondents expressed doubt about the real impact of NGO inputs into state development priorities. NGOs overall remain unwelcome or unrecognized visitors to government. NGO alignments with government remain always uncertain. This research makes it clear that involved NGOs must do a better job in both communicating their successes as well as advocating for better development policies. One way to do this, according to my respondents, is to collaborate among themselves to generate a stronger voice and greater policy impact.

Strong NGOs cannot function without government support. At a policy level, the government should promulgate enabling rather than restrictive policies for NGOs. Moreover, it should strengthen legal frameworks for charity and civil society organizations (e.g., the Law on Charities, the Law on Associations). At a practical level, the government should strengthen awareness about NGOs amongst their several departments and local governments, and simplify bureaucratic procedures for compliance. In terms of finance, the government may allow financial measures that offer a means of diversifying NGO sources of funds and enhancing their community projects.

The study suggests that donors need to reform the way they work with NGOs. Certainly, given the growth of the economy and transition of Vietnam to the status of a middle income state, they

must initiate plans to shift priorities and perhaps downscale operations. A particular need is for them to coordinate amongst themselves to avoid overlaps and gaps. One solution is for donors to offer flexible, non-restrictive funds to fully cover program activities, administration, and post-evaluation activities. Programmatically, although donors might have their own priorities, the priorities should effectively support NGO development in Vietnam. Donors might promote and advocate for civil society in Vietnam. My findings suggest that government-donor-NGO communications could be improved to facilitate funding support for Vietnam. Better communications promise to securing flows of funds to Vietnam, and increasing the effectiveness of using those funds.

The lessons drawn from this dissertation are intended for foreign NGOs, with their own strengths and weaknesses, and internal and external connections, in the Vietnam context. Whether these lessons are applicable in another context requires justifications. For example, in countries with enabling policies together with clear legal frameworks for NGO operations, the lessons for the government may unlikely be applied. In contrast, where the governments impose restrictive policies on NGO operations, the lessons may be applicable upon relevant adjustments according to the specific relationships between NGOs and the governments.

8.2. Contributions to knowledge

Although current literature suggests that uncertainty plays a significant role in NGO operations, few studies have evaluated this determinant. Uncertainty represents “ubiquitous” conditions when solutions are needed to bridge knowledge gaps in unknown areas (MacPhail, 2010, pp.58). NGO operations and survival are influenced by several factors internal and external to

organizations. How NGOs develop and how these factors relate to NGO evolution remain unanswered.

This dissertation examines uncertainties surrounding NGO operations. These uncertainties reflect the NGOs' "lived experience" (Cooper & Pratten, 2015) when several factors impacting NGO operations (funding situations, political imposition, "sensitive" issues) are not stable. The uncertainties also demonstrate Whyte and Siu's (2015) concept of "contingencies" wherein the success of NGO implementation relates to and depends on forces over which they have little control. NGOs in Vietnam fail to take advantage of their own strengths (grassroot mandates, participation, communication) to overcome those uncertainties.

This dissertation builds upon scholarship that has addressed how particular uncertainties impact NGO operations. Scholars state that NGOs have been greatly influenced by several uncertainties external to operations, including funding conditions and donor engagement (Arhin, Kumi, & Adam, 2018, Watkins, Swidler, & Hannan, 2012, Mosley, Maronick, & Katz, 2012, Besel, Williams, & Klak, 2011, Cooley & Ron, 2002, Aldaba, Antezana, Valderrama et. al., 2000, Gilson, Sen, Mohammed, et. al., 1994). In addition, governments have imposed several measures to control NGOs and civil society, or have even regarded NGOs as a threat to society and civil order (Dupuy, Ron & Prakash, 2016, Murtaza & Austin, 2011, Fisher, 2003, Tandon, 1989). This research has taken these arguments further, stressing that it is political uncertainty that has most affected NGO operations in this particular context. In Vietnam, the government has been ruled by the communist party, which has never accepted any actions promoting, supporting or facilitating civil society. It is this rule that generates the lack of NGO knowledge

among communities and government departments, and that does not support NGOs having a stand in society. Moreover, political directives shift from time to time, and are not open to the public. Whether and in what dimensions current regulations might change remains unknown to the NGO staff interviewed.

Scholars have thoroughly examined various uncertainties internal to NGO operations, ranging from delivery methods to implementation effectiveness, including personnel issues (Chowdhury, Jahan, & Rahman, 2017, Hoque, Clarke, & Huang, 2016, Abramowitz, 2015, Suleiman, 2013, Ahmed & Potter, 2006). This research study takes that work further, highlighting that involved NGOs have wanted their operations to be secure (in the sense of avoiding interference), and so have tended to hide themselves in “safety zones” – they are conservative in conducting projects. This self-preservation practice has prevented the NGOs from undertaking strong action, and also made them less likely to draw government attention. Moreover, NGOs in this research are reluctant to educate stakeholders about NGOs’ missions, visions, values, roles, and accountability. Ultimately, in this study NGOs have never raised their voices to improve their standing in society. Although all these conservative actions might ensure smooth operations, they prevent NGOs from moving up to the next level of governance and restrict their ability to achieve major impacts.

The literature seldom addresses where NGOs stand in society. Buse and Walt (1997) are generally concerned about NGO standing in global health governance. Bernard and Grewal (2014) suggest that NGOs make the public clear about NGO operations so as to gain better standing in global politics. This research project builds on these ideas, and asserts that social

standing is the main challenge facing NGO operations. Current social structures and regulations in Vietnam do not offer a definition of NGOs, even though the political system imposes public understanding of NGOs. NGOs in this research have done nothing to correct this omission, and so they are misunderstood and at times distrusted. Moreover, although NGOs have been approved to operate in the country, their position in society is unofficial – they are not eligible to join the government-recognized list of political and social agencies, and they do not fit within any formal state structures. The political party and the government neither deny nor recognize the development of these organizations. Their politically-driven temporary status has inhibited NGOs from developing.

The current literature highlights several aspects around government-NGO partnership frameworks (Solana, 2014, Haque, 2002), and describes both negative and positive impacts of government-NGO relationships on population health (Cook, Wright & Andersson, 2017, Anku-Tsede, 2014, Hsu & Hasmath, 2014, Akco, Dagli, Inanici, et. al., 2013, Zaidi, Mayhew, & Palmer, 2011). This research project is consistent with and expands on this earlier work, noting that government-NGO partnerships can never be separated from the political environment. Specifically, this study has illustrated that the problematic relationship originates from the lack of a formally-recognized position for NGOs in society. In other words, once NGOs have been marked with an unofficial status in society, it is difficult for healthy government-NGO partnerships to develop. Efforts to improve government-NGO partnerships need first to secure for NGOs an official social standing.

Studies have assessed NGO effectiveness in relation to their funding status (Hudson, 2001) and implementation approaches (Pillai, Wei, & Maleku, 2013, Pfeiffer, Johnson, Fort, et al., 2008, Sarriot, Winch, Ryan, et al., 2004, Crane & Carswell, 1992). Hushie (2016) notes that government commitment may ensure project effectiveness. This research project expands on this opinion, arguing that with their vulnerable standing, complicated by an unclear policy environment, NGOs risk losing donor support. NGOs cannot sustain project results when their status remains unofficial.

Clearly, NGOs in this research face uncertainties in the environment (government policies, political conditions, funding) and in aspects of their operations (effectiveness, staffing, financing). These uncertainties deeply impact the NGOs' prestige, effectiveness, and the quality of their relations with governments, which, in turn, influences NGOs' survival. The chicken-and-egg situation between these variables suggests that NGOs must act to overcome such uncertainties. Being conservative and reluctant in implementing projects cannot protect NGOs from unstable conditions, and contingencies. This dissertation suggests that each individual NGO, with its own strengths and weaknesses, and internal and external connections, develops strategies to cope with uncertainties.

8.3. Contributions to practice

Several lessons result from the development and implementation of research on NGOs' uncertainties. First, the selection of a qualitative approach allowed the analysis to locate NGOs within their contexts and connected to several aspects facing their operations. In addition, this selection offered opportunities to gather and compare data from different sources, hence

providing quality assurance. Therefore, the qualitative approach has been a useful approach for studying NGOs' uncertainties. Second, the research project, which has involved overseas field activities, needed to be well-resourced in terms of funds, scheduling, ethics clearance, and local connections. Third, cross-checking data with several sources of information, combined with re-visiting the literature, has offered a valuable way to assess data quality. Such procedures strengthen data analyses. Fourth, despite intensive research, several questions about uncertainties around NGO operations remain unanswered. Assessment focusing on those questions may offer a path forward for maximizing NGO effects in coordinating the achievement of sustainable development goals. Therefore, NGOs deserve more research initiatives that engage both scholars and practitioners.

This research is subject to certain limitations. First, although I had several interview appointments with NGO directors and government officers, I did not schedule appointments with donors, beneficiaries, and NGOs' overseas headquarters. Data collected from these groups would offer more complete information about NGO operations in Vietnam. Second, this research project gathered data through interviewing individuals in director positions. Although these informants shared a wealth of information on policy development and implication, their packed work schedules inhibited greater expansion on many topics. In addition, the "sensitiveness" of the civil society sector might have prevented them from fully expressing opinions. Third, although the qualitative approach allowed exploring processes and connections, it did not support quantifying variables such as willingness and trust.

8.4. Recommendations for further research

Several specific questions arose during data analysis. The first group of questions mainly concerns “conventional” NGO values of how NGOs ensured they followed their grassroots mandates and where NGOs stood in society. The second group of questions regarded implementation effectiveness, including collaborations within the NGO sector and with partners (government departments, associations, local community groups). The third group of questions involved alternatives, e.g., how foreign NGOs might hand over their projects to local organizations, or how donors would actively contribute in NGO projects. Answering these questions required scholarly knowledge to capture the wealthy sources of literature and professional experience. Further research on the following topics is needed.

First, this dissertation recommends examining NGO modes of operation. The research found that NGOs might transition to a value-for-money entrepreneurial model. NGO directors confirmed that a business orientation facilitated capturing the best resources and producing evidence-based outcomes for disadvantaged populations and would concurrently align with their social development approach. However, whether the business-oriented model would support NGO-program effectiveness and fiscal survival remained unclear (Topor & Boroiu, 2011). Moreover, Kamat (2003) has warned that the shift to an entrepreneurial approach would disconnect NGOs from their political capabilities to change society. Further evaluation remains to be conducted in this regard.

In addition, several other sources have suggested that NGOs should be professional organizations, each focusing on a few specific program strengths, geographic locations, and beneficiary selections. In practice, as professionals, NGOs could concentrate resources on

producing better impacts and adding value to communities. Professionalization has been among strategies that NGOs have used widely to cope with environmental changes (Tam & Hasmath, 2015, Galaskiewicz & Bielefeld, 1998, Scott, 1995). However, NGOs' leaders need to evaluate internal-external interactions relative to the professionalization. Therefore, whether NGOs should develop to become professionalization remains questionable.

Second, this research has recommended strengthening NGO capacity. The data shows that strengthening the capacity in target communities is among NGO delivery methods. The literature confirms that NGOs have built the capacity of their partners, local governments, and individual beneficiaries through several initiatives (Freed, Dujon, Granek, & Mouhhdine, 2016, Suleiman, 2013). However, little is known about how NGOs are able to build stakeholders' capacity. For instance, this research agrees with scholars who think that NGOs lack sufficient tools to effectively manage and appraise organizational performance (Amirkhanian, Kelly, Benotsch, et. al., 2004, Wiggins & Cromwell, 1995). Systematic strengthening would promote NGOs' standing in the global governance community, but how to and who should build NGO institutional capacity (human resource, organizational performance) requires further study.

Third, this study suggests that donors can play additional roles beyond simply providing funds. For example, they can facilitate fund releases and disbursement through flexible, non-restrictive means. They can coordinate amongst themselves to avoid overlaps. In addition, they can engage more in facilitating program implementation, such as accessing government officers, and easing government-NGO relationships. The literature also recommends donor engagement in supporting NGO operations. For instance, Seims (2011) has suggested that donors might support

strengthening NGO structures and operational strategies to improve delivery effectiveness. However, this thesis agrees with Cooley and Ron's (2002) argument that NGOs dare not target donors for fear of triggering their dissatisfaction. In this research, although examined NGOs expected several things from donors, they did not tender their requests directly to donors. Thus, how donors would engage in the above processes remains unclear. Future studies might usefully prioritize promoting donor awareness and clarifying mechanisms for their involvement.

Lastly, this research has focused on foreign NGOs that have had a long history in Vietnam and enjoyed well-sourced international alliances. Local NGOs, despite representing a much smaller community with a much-shorter history of development, might potentially become key local development organizations in-place, because some foreign NGOs might favour handing over projects to local NGOs. Currently, although knowledge about foreign NGOs is limited, understanding about local NGOs is even more modest, and needs further research.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 – ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After graduating as a medical doctor in Vietnam, I worked for three years as a family doctor in a poor neighbourhood in a small city there. This work really turned my career from being a medical specialist into a community health worker. This experience led me to apply for an Australian Development Scholarship to undertake a two-year Master of Public Health program at La Trobe University in Australia. This program offered me access to public health learning and networking opportunities. I completed this program in end of 2001.

After returning to Vietnam, I was offered the opportunity to work with several international Non-Government Organizations (NGOs). I spent my first ten years in NGO employment implementing project activities in the field, where donors, at times, came to offer funds and request spending plans. On these occasions, I learned that NGOs may refuse to accept donors' funds, and some NGOs' leaders determined to work only with easy-going donors. The following ten years found me taking senior positions and engaging more in strategies, management and finances in the NGO sector. We discussed strategic directions such as whether or not to apply a fee-for-service model. In 2010-2012 the economic recession negatively affected our organizations' funding. Several donors de-listed Vietnam as a priority country, and as a result, several NGOs closed their offices in Vietnam. In order to improve organizational effectiveness, many organizations that remained in the country decided to restructure staffing, financing and programming. Still other NGOs tightened financial outflows by imposing more oversight over approval processes.

After many years of work with international NGOs in Vietnam, I began to question the tensions between a government that wanted international NGOs to align with its policies, priorities and directives, while at the same time NGOs were committed to human rights and other priorities that were inconsistent with those of government. NGOs in this context were in a position to challenge the government where necessary. The government, in turn, restrictively regulated the operations of NGOs, but at the same time, welcomed new NGOs to the country.

I also witnessed conflict of interests between government and NGOs. The government preferred a top-down approach to communities, while NGOs were interested in involving communities in planning and implementation processes. Local governments wanted to mainstream NGO funding into the state's financial flows, but NGOs requested specific spending accounts and audits that fell outside of the local governments' scope of work and financial practices. NGOs preferred to implement activities that built government staff capacity and empowered communities, but the governments expected to use the NGO funds for construction projects.

My questions also centered around NGOs' half-hearted strategies at the community level. NGOs wanted to generate lasting results for communities, but they would not accept accountability for the local people. NGOs wanted to showcase implementation effectiveness, but they were not ready to accept failures. Although NGOs recognized the value-for-money approach that business-oriented sectors employed, they could not apply this approach in their operations for fear of violation of NGO identities. They wanted, but dared not, to complain about donors' heavy demands. They wanted to both challenge and maintain good relations with the government at the same time.

Over time I found that my work with NGOs was frustrating. Their project objectives were sometimes overstated and unachievable. Although the organizations suffered from funding uncertainties, their leaders might accept to spend on a purchase or service, that may not directly relate to organizational effectiveness, without reasonable explanations. Despite spending millions of dollars on the country's development, NGOs were never recognized by government. On the contrary, government further tightened NGO operations. NGOs were invited to few important national events. I asked myself whether NGOs could transform local communities as stated in their missions, and whether NGOs were really welcomed in Vietnam as announced in government bulletins.

I wondered what operational strategies NGOs in Vietnam and in other emerging countries could employ to benefit local communities, and how the NGOs collaborated with local governments. I thought that one place to start would be to evaluate the roles and effectiveness of international NGOs in Vietnam and to make recommendations to improve the government-NGOs collaboration.

After many years of direct work in community settings, I decided to make a career move by pursuing academic credentials in public health, and to focus my questions and concerns about NGOs in the context of an advanced research degree. The PhD program in Global Health in the University of Waterloo allowed me to integrate my professional experience with formal academic training and complemented my knowledge in the non-profits sector. This thesis is the result of joining my professional experience with academic, research-focused learning.

APPENDIX 2 – UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO ETHICS CLEARANCE

12/22/2017

UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO

UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ETHICS

Notification of Ethics Clearance of Application to Conduct Research with Human Participants

Faculty Supervisor: Craig Janes Department: School of Public Health and Health Systems
Student Investigator: Hung Nguyen Department: School of Public Health and Health Systems

ORE File #: 22730

Project Title: Uncertainty that shapes the operations of non-government organizations

Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) Clinical Research Ethics Committee (CREC) is pleased to inform you the above named study has been reviewed and given ethics clearance.

Approval to start this research is effective on the ethics clearance date which is: 12/22/2017 (m/d/y)

University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committees are composed in accordance with, and carry out their functions and operate in a manner consistent with, the institution's guidelines for research with human participants, the Tri-Council Policy Statement for the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS, 2nd edition), International Conference on Harmonization: Good Clinical Practice (ICH-GCP), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA), the applicable laws and regulations of the province of Ontario. Both Committees are registered with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under the Federal Wide Assurance, FWA00021410, and IRB registration number IRB00002419 (HREC) and IRB00007409 (CREC).

The above named study is to be conducted in accordance with the submitted application (Form 101/101A) and the most recent approved versions of all supporting materials.

Ethics clearance for this study is valid until: 12/22/2018 (m/d/y). Multi-year research must be renewed at least once every 12 months unless a more frequent review has otherwise been specified by the Research Ethics Committee (Form 105). Studies will only be renewed if the renewal report is received and approved before the expiry date. Failure to submit renewal reports by the expiry date will result in the investigators being notified ethics clearance has been suspended and Research Finance being notified the ethics clearance is no longer valid.

Level of review:

Delegated review
Full committee review meeting date: _____ (m/d/y)

Signed on behalf of: HREC Chair HREC Vice-Chair CREC Chair CREC Vice-Chair

Karen Pieters

Julie Joza, Acting Chief Ethics Officer, jjjoza@uwaterloo.ca, ext. 38535

Heather Root, Senior Manager, heather.root@uwaterloo.ca, ext. 30469

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Erin Van Der Meulen, Research Ethics Advisor, ervandermeulen@uwaterloo.ca, ext. 37046

This is an official document. Retain for your files.

You are responsible for obtaining any additional institutional approvals that might be required to complete this study.

APPENDIX 3 – HANOI SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH ETHICS CLEARANCE

MINISTRY OF HEALTH
HANOI UNIVERSITY
OF PUBLIC HEALTH

No.: 004/2018/YTCC-HD3
Subject: Ethical Approval



SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM
Independence – Freedom - Happiness

Ha Noi, January 12th, 2018

DECISION

On Ethical approval for research involving human subject participation

THE CHAIR OF THE ETHICAL REVIEW BOARD FOR BIOMEDICAL RESEARCH
HANOI UNIVERSITY OF PUBLIC HEALTH

- Based on Decision No. 560/QĐ-DHYTCC by the Dean of Hanoi School of Public Health on Establishment of The Institutional Ethical Review Board of Hanoi School of Public Health; 16 May 2016;
- Based on decision No. 651/QĐ-DHYTCC by the Dean of Hanoi School of Public Health on the Issuing Regulation of the Institutional Ethical Review Board of Hanoi School of Public Health; 26 June 2015;
- Based on the minutes of meeting to review ethics application No. 018-004/DD-YTCC dated January 12th, 2018.

DECIDED:

Article 1. Grant ethical approval for ethnographic study project:

- Project Title: **Uncertainly that shapes the operations of non-government organizations**
- Principal Investigator: **Manh Hung Nguyen**, University of Waterloo
- Faculty supervision: Craig Janes, University of Waterloo
- Research site: Vietnam
- Project time: from 15/2/2018 to 31/12/2018
- Data collection time: from 15/2/2018 to 30/6/2018
- Review type: Expedited review

Article 2. This decision is effective from **12/1/2018** to **31/12/2018**

Article 3. Principal Investigator has to send progress report once each year and a final report upon the study completion to the Institutional Ethical Review Board of Hanoi University of Public Health (IRB of HUPH).

Article 4. Principle Investigator should notify (IRB of HUPH) immediately of any adverse effects arising from this study (e.g. unexpected adverse outcomes, unexpected community/subject risk factors or complaints, etc.). Active research projects are subject to random audit by the IRB of HUPH.

CHAIR OF HUPH IRB
(Signature and full name)

Ha Van Nhu

SECRETARY
(Signature and full name)

Nguyen Thi Minh Thanh

APPENDIX 4 – INTERVIEW GUIDES

1. What are your general thoughts about uncertainty?

Probes: How about predictability and unpredictability when you work?

2. What are the uncertainties when your organization operates in Vietnam?

Probes: What factors really facilitate your works? What factors don't facilitate your work? What factors come from inside the organization (and regional office/headquarter)? What comes from outside? Would you share any relations between those factors?

3. Please tell me about your projects/deliverables in Vietnam?

Probes: Present projects/activities/initiatives or within 5 years

4. What are the impacts of the uncertainty on the strategic implementation plans of your projects?

Probes: What projects would you deliver in ideal/favourable conditions (at your expectation)?

What changes (at strategic level, at implementation level) did you make on any projects as result of those uncertainties?

5. What are NGOs' roles in Vietnam?

Probes: What roles should your organization play/do not play in Vietnam? What roles should your organization make as result of the real conditions? Please share any changes between the should-be, the preferred, and the real roles that the organization is playing.

6. How do you evaluate your organization's contributions to the development of the country?

Probes: How are the organization's strategic objectives made? How do they fit into the country's development? How do you know that? How has your organization been involved in country's development plans? What works and what does not?

7. What do you recommend for better results of the coordination between the government and NGOs in Vietnam?

Probes: What does NGOs in Vietnam do for better coordination? What do NGOs' respective regional office/headquarters do? What does government do? What do funding agencies do with the NGOs projects in Vietnam?