

Department of Political and Economic Studies (Development Studies)
Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki

NAVIGATING BETWEEN IDEAS OF DEMOCRACY AND GENDERED LOCAL PRACTICES IN VIETNAM

A Bakhtinian reading of development aid practice

Minna Hakkarainen

ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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Opponent

Professor Clive Thomson, University of Guelph

Pre-examiners

Professor Helle Rydstrøm, Lund University

Professor Clive Thomson, University of Guelph

Supervisors

Professor Adam Fforde, Victoria University

Dr. Tiina Kontinen, University of Jyväskylä

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Abstract

The study draws on the findings of previous ethnographic studies that picture development practice as a space of contestation in which actors engage with cultural values, history and the socio-political context in ways that create deviations from the project 'script'. The study adds to the debate by approaching the contestation as taking place in language that reflects both existing realities and the discourses in which the actors are positioned. The study conceptualizes development practice as a process of construction of, and negotiating over, meanings. The selected approach suggests that the 'ambiguity of words' that manifests itself in development practice is necessarily a part of development practice as actors simultaneously belong to different and sometimes contradictory contexts in which words are given their meanings. Through case studies of two types of development interventions (a Savings and Credit Intervention and a Village Self-reliance and Development Intervention) by a Finnish NGO in Vietnam, the study – drawing from a Bakhtinian reading of aid practice – inquires how contestation over meanings of terms central to the NGO's development thinking contribute to changes in the NGO's aid practice in relation to the promotion of gender and democracy.

The study argues that multiplicity of meanings has important implications for aid practice and for donors' agenda of democracy promotion in aid recipient countries. Promotion of democracy necessarily calls for deep contextual understanding as meanings, manifested in concrete utterances, are also contextual and therefore, may vary in ways that hinder or slow down project implementation. Furthermore, the study argues that non-responsive behaviour to development interventions may reflect prior experiences of unsatisfactory state-led development projects and people's understanding of them. Moreover, the study highlights the role of gendered norms and gender roles in Vietnamese society from the perspective of grassroots democracy promotion by showing how they affect women's access to formal decision making forums in villages.

Keywords: *development thinking, development practice, NGOs in development, language in development, democracy promotion, grassroots democracy, gender, gendered norms, Vietnam, meaning construction, heteroglossia, monologism, dialogical relationship, Bakhtinian reading.*

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On several occasions during the past few years my daughters have asked me why I chose to conduct PhD research. To them my choice became linked with my constant worries about money, but even more importantly, when visiting my office at the university they mostly saw no one there except me. Concerned by my obvious lack of company they wondered if I felt lonely at work, if I really liked what I was doing. Well, to be honest, some of the time I didn't... Yet, after a weekend spent in my office trying desperately to restructure my thesis before handing it in for pre-examination, my daughter once again asked me if there had been any other people there. When I replied that I had been the only one, but had actually enjoyed the peace, she looked at me worriedly and said: 'Mommy, do you think you are normal?'

All researchers know that their work is, at times, quite lonesome. However, if one is lucky one may still enjoy a community that makes such inconveniences look small. Indeed, it is difficult to think of nicer people than those in Development Studies and I apologise for not thanking each and every one of them separately, as they certainly deserve to be thanked. But most of all I remember lively conversations over morning coffee and tea with 'early birds' Mari Lauri, Aija Rossi and Pertti Multanen that always provided a good start to the day. I also want to express my special thanks for excellent peer support to Erja Hänninen with whom I enjoyed numerous stress-relieving lunches. Hisayo Katsui taught me true Japanese discipline when writing articles together. I am also grateful to Päivi Mattila, my room mate for quite some time and a role model to anyone. With Saija Niemi I had a chance to retire to Lammi biological station for an intensive writing session at a critical moment in writing my concluding chapter – an escape from everyday realities that all researchers should try every now and then. A special role was also played by Henni Alava with whom I shared moments of joy and happiness as well as some of frustration and desperation. My deep gratitude also goes to members of research groups that I had the privilege to be part of: Tiina Kontinen (who later became my supervisor), Anja Onali and Sirpa Rovaniemi - also a member of the Terminal II group in addition to Eija Ranta, Henri Onodera and Gutu Wayessa. Their encouragement and criticism, as well as that provided by Laura Torvinen, during our PhD seminar sessions, helped me to improve my thesis in significant ways. I am also grateful to Marjaana Jauhola, who set the example of a colleague who is never too busy to share her knowledge. I miss the talks and Science Walks

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she comforted me by saying, ‘It seems to me that if you can convince him of the merits of your thesis, you can convince anybody!’ From Adam I learned the value of knowing the weak points in one’s work in order to get rid of them as best one can. Besides Adam, Tiina Kontinen also had a central role in my research process with the hard task teaching me conventional writing styles in the social sciences. She pushed me to work in a more disciplined way, gave me deadlines for writing and emphasised the importance of a well structured thesis, despite my resisting her advice until her final ultimatum: ‘Minna, it is now high time for you to decide whether you are writing a novel or a PhD. I am only with you if you are writing a PhD!’ Well, there are moments in life when one knows it’s time to bend.

I have now thanked many people, but not the two persons who took the trouble of pre-examining my thesis. I sincerely thank Professor Helle Rydstrom for her insightful suggestions for improving the final manuscript. I am also utterly grateful to Professor Clive Thomson who acted as my other pre-examiner and agreed to be my Opponent in the public defence of my PhD. Known for his long-term engagement with Bakhtin’s ideas, his account of my manuscript was of crucial importance to my PhD project.

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is shaped by everyday experiences. I never heard my father say that I could or should not do something because of my sex. To him, I could choose any path in my life, freed from the gendered prejudice still faced by many girls and women today. It was his unconditional love and support that significantly shaped my character. Thus, I dedicate this dissertation to my father. But I also owe thanks to my husband who took care of our two wonderful daughters and our entire household when I was away in the field for my research and during my writing retreats. If not always without complaints, he still enabled me to finish my research. And it is through him and his entire family that I have learned what it means to be a wife and a mother in a Vietnamese family. Even if I do not easily conform to the norms attached to those roles, I am definitely aware of their existence.

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List of abbreviations

BoM	Board of Management
CIDSE	Coopération Internationale pour le Développement et la Solidarité
CPRC	Commune Poverty Reduction Committee
CPV	Communist Party of Vietnam
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
EU	The European Union
FHH	Female Headed Households
GAD	Gender and Development
GDD	Grassroots Democracy Decree
INGO	International Non-governmental Organisation
JPO	Junior Project Officer
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
ODA	Official Development Aid
PC	People's Committee
PO	Project Officer
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
SIDA	Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency
UK	United Kingdom
UNDP	United Nation's Development Project
US	The United States (of America)
VBA	Vietnam Bank for Agriculture
VDB	A Village Development Board
VUSTA	Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations
VWU	Vietnam Women's Union
WID	Women in Development
WVS	World Value Survey

PROLOGUE

*Curiosity often leads to trouble.
(Alice in 'Alice in Wonderland')*

In literature, a common way for a narrator to distance himself from the story is to create two levels within the text. In Russian literature classics, for example, we may often find a frame story within which the narrator sits in a train or a bar and tells his friends a sad, romantic or imaginary story he has eye witnessed or heard – this is the main story within the frame story. In this tradition, the stories are often powerful as they have ability to move the emotions of a reader and teach them about life in the form of a narrative, which leaves space for the reader's own interpretations. In academic research, however, facts and evidence have replaced emotions as a way to convince the reader of the message that the author wants to convey. And yet, this does not automatically mean that the author of the text will not be emotionally involved, nor have a well-defined motivation to produce the text in the first place. When working on a doctoral thesis, however, the author's motivation may be the very practical one of better career prospects, or symbolic: gaining a title that sounds nice at family reunions, perhaps.

The basis of my own motivation derived from two different sources. First, during my initial encounter with a project involving the single women of Minh Son commune, I was convinced that it would fail. The women proved me wrong. Second, after several years spent engaged with development practice, I wished to understand why some development interventions worked well in one place but not necessarily in another. If the specific type of technical intervention was not able to explain positive developments at the grassroots level such as I had witnessed myself, then what should we focus on as development practitioners? Alice calls this curiosity, some call it science. Whatever name we want to give it, we can agree that it is not an easy task. It may even lead us to trouble.

In the process of writing my thesis, I have been in trouble myself. Not just occasionally, but constantly. Expecting to take a 'Great Leap Forward' as a researcher, the real experience has been rather like sinking into the Siberian swamp. You do your level best to get out of it but there are traps everywhere which you do not see until you walk into them. Unlike a snake that can moult, I realized that in order to find my strengths as a researcher, I needed to go back to the basics as I understand them: applying what I know best and combining that with my firsthand knowledge

of 'doing development'. It is up to the reader to judge the outcome of the choices made. I myself have 'gone down the Rabbit Hole'.

1 INTRODUCTION

This research project started as a study of development interventions as a contextualized field of practice. I was interested in questions concerning the promotion of democracy through development interventions in the authoritarian state of Vietnam. Inspired by earlier ethnographic accounts of development (Ferguson 1994; Li 2007; Mosse 2005) that draw attention to contestation within aid practice, I decided to study contestation in order to understand better the challenges of promoting democracy, and democratization processes (if any), at the grassroots level. Two fields were chosen for examination: a Savings and Credit Intervention model for single women in Minh Son commune¹ in the greater Hanoi region, and a Village Self-reliance and Development Intervention model in Xuan Dong commune, Hoa Binh province. As is common with inexperienced field researchers, I anticipated a relatively straightforward knowledge accumulation process based on asking a question (that I thought would be relevant) of my interviewees and getting an answer to it. The following interview situation, however, illustrates information exchange that did not follow this simple model:

An interview with a female project beneficiary (a single woman) in Minh Son commune:

Question (Myself): ‘I would like to know if you are familiar with the Grassroots Democracy Decree of the Vietnamese Government? The first draft was issued in 1998.’

Reply (Female interviewee): ‘*Chị không biết.*’ (I don’t know [about the Decree].) (Int. 12)

Question (trying to change the focus from the Decree to a more general discussion of local democracy): ‘According to your understanding, what do you think about local democracy?’ (Turning to my research assistant: ‘Does she ever think of this issue, as the Government aims to promote this?’)

Reply: ‘*Tôi chẳng biết cái gì.*’ (I don’t know anything about it).

At this point I tried another strategy. I explained to my interviewee that one idea of the savings and credit project is that women themselves choose their represent-

¹ Names of the communes and the names of the interviewees and the NGO have been changed, and names of the districts omitted in this study to safeguard the interviewees’ anonymity. It should be noted that place names as well as names of the people are written without diacritics. Diacritics are used, however, for other Vietnamese words to help the reader to properly identify the original word(s). With Vietnamese names of persons I follow a common practice of placing the surname before the middle name and given name(s).

atives on the Board of Management and thus have an opportunity of participating in decision making concerning the project. I then asked if such participatory experiences in the project have made it easier for her to participate in other meetings in the village.

Reply: 'Em cũng không nghĩ đến chuyện đó đâu.' (I don't think of participating [in other meetings] at all.)

Following the exchange, my interviewee told me that she has an ill son and therefore she does not participate in any village activities.

* * *

This encounter, as well as several others in the course of research, urged me reconsider my approach to my research topic. In place of my assumption that I knew what contextual factors were relevant for my interviewees, not getting the kind of answers I had expected forced me to ask why was it that some of the women, not just this particular one but several others as well, reported little or no knowledge of the government's Grassroots Democracy Decree while men and, for example, the female staff of the Vietnam Women's Union (VWU) were likely to be familiar with it?

It was during interview situations like the one described above that I realised that a focus on formal policies, such as the Grassroots Democracy Decree, was a highly unsatisfactory approach. Rather, my experiences from the field suggested that in order to understand the potential for democratic change, I should first examine the constraints on participation in communal decision making as experienced or reported by my interviewees. Thus, I began to see that it would be necessary to understand more about being an individual, a socio-cultural being, in a Vietnamese village instead of simply assuming the relevance of government policies (even when they existed) to people's access to democratic practices. Moreover, my interviewees' utterances suggested that a person's sex somehow played a role relevant to my investigation of grassroots democracy. This urged me to try and understand how gender affected my interviewees' access to initiatives in which they might practice democracy. Gender, therefore, was not initially on my research agenda but, rather, it became an inevitable prerequisite to entering into dialogue with my data in order to see what it had to tell me about practicing democracy in Vietnamese villages. In this way the political became personal and, therefore, deeply engaged with people's gendered experiences: a significant turn in my understanding that is reflected, as the reader will see, in what follows.

1.1 Background of the research

This is an in-depth, contextualized study of development theory and the practice of Defi, a Finnish voluntary NGO operating in Vietnam. The aim of the research is to explore the complexities of development intervention and democracy promotion in their interplay with local norms, practices and understandings. That is, I examine how development aid practice, here NGO interventions, seeks to facilitate grassroots democratic change. Moreover, at the heart of my inquiry, and guiding the research process lies an understanding of democracy as well as gender (as linking to democracy) as contested concepts. This means that I do not work with a single or fixed definition of what is meant by ‘democratic change’.

Complexity of aid practice as described by ethnographies of development

The study contributes to academic discussions of development wherein development is understood as a contested, non-technical and political field of practice. The study thus partakes in a field of academic inquiry in which ethnographic research has played an important role (see in particular, Ferguson 1994; Li 2007; Mosse 2005). For example, Ferguson (1994) has shown how contestation that takes place within aid practice is linked to the cultural values and practices of project contexts. Ferguson’s study on Lesotho played an important role in increasing our understanding of complexities within development practice by showing how development projects may produce unintentional change such as enabling the state to expand its power or reproducing rather than removing relations of inequality (Lewis and Gardner 1996: 72-73). Following the path paved by Ferguson, Li (2007) pointed out the importance of history in defining contexts and illustrated how development becomes political in concrete contexts. Here, she poses a crucial question for development practitioners to consider, asking ‘how programs of improvement are shaped by political-economic relations they cannot change’ (Li 2007: 4). In addition, Mosse (2005) demonstrated the contestation that takes place between different actors who enter aid projects with different agendas, bringing with them changes to the project content. He showed how aid consultants then aim at solving the ‘problem’ of these changes by reformulating the language of project documents (introducing new development concepts while editing out others) to manage and justify transformation that has already taken place.

These studies share an interest in ‘unforeseen’ changes in aid practice: that is, events and developments which were not part of the project ‘script’.² Thus, all of them examine changes that take place within aid projects as read against original project documents and point out how different contextual factors bring about pressure that impacts on aid interventions – here understood in terms of intentional change that is expected to deliver certain kinds of positive improvements in the context (Koponen 2007: 59; Hobart 1993: 1; Gardner & Lewis 1996: 50).

My thesis shares with earlier ethnographic studies an understanding of aid practice as subject to contestation. Moreover, I approach development practice as a field of human action rather than as a field that is defined by technical solutions to identified development problems, thus sharing with Long (2001) an interest in actors within aid practice. Development practice understood in terms of human action also means that it cannot be treated in isolation from issues of power and social relations in a particular project context. This also relates to the relationship between development interventions and a democratization agenda as both are, in one way or another, products of human action. In the following section, I introduce perspectives on the promotion of democracy to contextualize it within aid discourse.

The democratization agenda in aid practice

Democracy and development are often seen to walk hand in hand in development discourse even though the relationship between the two is much debated in the research literature (e.g. Przeworski & Limongi 1997; Blondel et. al 1999, see also Boutros-Ghali 2002). Furthermore, NGOs are believed to play a key role in democratizing non-democratic states and thus development donors have, since the 1990s, increased their support for these organizations (e.g. Diamond 1997). And yet, the results of democracy assistance so far have been described using terms such as ‘a great disappointment’ and ‘hopeless’, among others.³ It seems

² I use the term project script to refer to the project plan that communicates the donor’s development intention prior to its being subjected to changes that derive from the actual project context, including the effects of actors playing a part in the project. Thus the project script reflects initial ideas as well as an understanding of how the developmental change is to be produced.

³ These critical views were presented by Thomas Carothers (Vice President for Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) and Carlos Hernandez (Executive Director, European Partnership for Democracy) in a seminar ‘Democracy as a Prerequisite for Development?’ organized by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland and Demo Finland, 16.9.2010.

as if Western donors have forgotten that ‘democracy is not instant coffee’⁴ when defining the objectives of democracy assistance.

Civil Society and democratization – the underlying assumptions

Since the early 1990s, taking inspiration from political change in the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe, development donors started to offer a central role to civil society organizations in enhancing democracy in transitional and developing countries. It has been argued that ‘aid to challenging groups in civil society [...] is often the most effective way of pressuring for democratic change in a country with an entrenched authoritarian regime’ (Diamond 1997: 341). Yet the question of how to ‘do’ democracy was and remains highly problematic and debated, and little evidence-based research exists on the role of NGOs in democratization. Despite the aid flows to support democracy promotion in the South, a certain disillusionment has started to take place among donors (Ishkanian 2008: 58).

The challenges are many. First, there is no single, universal definition of democracy (Kurki 2010, 2013; White 2004: 8; Drydyk & Penz 1997; Inoguchi et al 1998: 2); rather, the definition varies from actor to actor. In Western societies, a multiparty system is generally seen as a minimum requirement for a country to be called democratic. Democracy, if thus understood, therefore points to a need to establish political structures that contain an element of competition between political parties. However, it is also acknowledged that the existence of competing parties does not necessarily guarantee a functioning democracy (Tripp 2013: 518-519). Russia is often cited as an example of this. Ishkanian (2008: 68-69) concludes that the usual explanations given for the failure of democracy include culture, authoritarian legacy and economic conditions which increase social inequality.

It is important to note that when assessed with the criteria of competing parties, the one-party state of Vietnam does not qualify as a democracy (Inoguchi 1998: 175). Democracy as a term, however, is also used in Vietnam – though often with meanings that differ from those of supporters of liberal democracy – understood through local historical progression. Therefore, when promoting and discussing

⁴ This slogan has been used by the US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright (Buxbaum 2008) and Benita Ferrerero-Waldner (2006), the European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy. An earlier quotation can be found in Geyer (1998: 98) in Schatz and Gutierrez-Rexach (2002) where it is identified with a Tunisian scholar stating that ‘Democracy is not instant coffee, it is a process’.

democracy, it should be kept in mind that words have different meanings for different actors (e.g. Cornwall 2008; Cornwall & Brock 2005). It has also been proposed that ‘the current ambiguity that surrounds the discourse on democracy assistance threatens not only the credibility of the approach’, but it also lacks reflection on ‘what type of democratic end states are envisioned’ (Lappin 2010: 184). Jenkins (2001: 251) has reminded us that ‘different circumstances produce different meanings [of words], and these change over time in response to unpredictable influences’. Bakhtin (1996) refers to the same phenomenon by saying that meaning is produced by use. Therefore, in order to understand to what extent the discourse is shared, it is necessary to go deeper into the use of terms and concepts such as democracy in order to identify the values and ideologies attached to them.

One of the constraints in assessing the role of civil society in democracy promotion is the scope of NGO activities. Most NGOs work in geographically restricted areas and, therefore, are likely to have impacts only at the local level.⁵ The hopes that target civil society, however, let us assume that micro-level prodemocracy activities will lead to similar changes at the macro level. Alagappa (2004: 48) sees potential for democracy promotion by civil society in its linkages to political society, saying: ‘The impact of groups advocating democracy can be substantial if they connect with political society and the legislature.’ However, the line between civil and political societies has been identified as a key constraint for actors in civil society to ‘generate’ democratization, whatever the latter is perceived to be. For example, in the case of Indonesia, the democratic movement arguably lost the momentum to alter power relations in society following the regime change, as democratic actors largely continued to position themselves as anti-state instead of entering into the political arena (Demos 2004: 3). Thus, as an outcome, Indonesia developed ‘into a consolidated top-down democracy dominated by its powerful elite’ (Törnquist 2008: 3).

Nonetheless, it is possible to look at the problem of separation of civil and political societies from a different angle. Jenkins (2001: 259-260) argues that by excluding civil society organisations (CSOs) linked to political parties, donor policy ‘jeopardizes the healthy development of “political society”’. This phenomenon is a consequence of donor strategy as well as donor-speak. Support for civil society is seen as a way to enhance democracy in developing countries without direct interference in local politics and the sovereignty of independent states (see e.g. Ottaway & Carothers 2000: 12; Ishkanian 2008). Democracy assistance – especially that offered by the United States – transforms political goals into technical solutions to improve governance and to support civil society. Jenkins (2001) thus

⁵ This applies to Defi as well.

argues that, following the same logic, Poland's 'Solidarity' would have been excluded from democracy assistance, even though analysis has shown that its linkage to political society was a key factor in the success of political change in the country.

Unlike civil society support by the US that reflects the neo-Tocquevillean view that the existence of a dynamic civil society *per se* strengthens democracy (Ishkanian 2008: 59), in Europe the relationship between civil society and democracy is not considered to be such a direct one. Different countries, even within the EU, have different development thinking behind their development aid. In the UK, the Department for International Development has preferred not even to speak about democracy, but about 'the capability, accountability and responsiveness of the state' in order to 'achieve lasting improvements in living conditions for large numbers of people' (DFID 2009). Democracy, therefore, was mainly seen as a means to fight poverty, and the state as a principle actor responsible for it.⁶ The Nordic countries, for their part, also see good governance to be an essential precondition for democracy and have been active in democracy promotion (Ishkanian 2008: 63; MFA 2002; MFA 2014).

Following the example of other donors, especially those from the 'likeminded' Nordic countries, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland acknowledges the role of NGOs as an important part of Finland's democracy assistance (MFA 2001; MFA 2002:35; MFA 2014). Funds channelled to Finnish NGOs as well as directly to Southern NGOs (through a 'Fund for Local Cooperation' instrument) both occupy a place in the Ministry's democracy-promotion agenda. It is therefore not surprising that in the 1990s the second largest number of Finnish NGOs were working on democracy / human rights issues (OECD 2000: 25).⁷ The projects of Finnish NGOs are required 'to be able to show that the project addresses the special needs of social minority groups, the needs of vulnerable citizens and the gender issues' (MFA 2001: 35-36; see also MFA 2002 and MFA 2014). The Ministry's policy papers thus situate gender equality as an integral part of a democracy-promotion agenda, especially when it comes to NGO interventions. This broad approach to democracy adopted by Finland along with other Nordic countries thus recognizes the enhancement of women's political and economic participation as a central theme in democracy support in addition to enhancement of civil society

6 This has recently, however, changed. A new policy approach communicated in the Human Rights and Democracy Programme emphasizes support to local civil society 'to push for [democratic] change' (FCO 2012). It is worth pointing out that the new democracy programme is a tool to advance a peace and security agenda by the UK government.

7 Education was the most popular field of development co-operation activity by the Finnish NGOs as well as by most development NGOs of OECD countries (Ibid.)

and good governance (e.g. MFA 2014; Sida 2013a, 2013b; See also MFA 2002). The Finnish Ministry, however, has pointed out that NGO projects aiming at the advancement of democracy and human rights often lack sustainable objectives and methods of assistance.

An analysis of Finland's Democracy Assistance has concluded that it is justified on three main grounds: first, democracy is expected to produce positive effects on development; second, democracy is a domestic value (and therefore cannot be ignored in aid practice); and third, Finland is a member of an international community that also expects it to support a democracy agenda in the South (Hossain et al. 2003: i). The research concludes, however, that these justifications may not appear as solid in developing countries where the aid is operationalized. Furthermore, it is pointed out (ibid.: ii) that 'the aid practice continues to prefer projects to processes', which may 'substantially hinder the promotion of democratic culture within the development cooperation'. It is interesting that even though all big donors seem to share the understanding that 'democracy is not instant coffee', the aid modalities have not been able to regenerate themselves accordingly. The study (ibid.) further states that the democracy-assistance projects which were examined emphasize the role of the state and that 'proper attention should be given to the specific roles of the state, market, and civil society in the democratization of a country' (Hossain et al. 2003). This discovery reflects the situation wherein ODA projects are mainly conducted in cooperation with the recipient states, whereas NGOs are supposed to reach civil societies in the South, often even avoiding state actors. Furthermore, an evaluation that targets democracy promotion by an NGO created by Finnish political parties points out that results of interventions greatly depend on the commitment of the Southern partners to the democracy agenda (MFA 2009). This, of course, is not a surprising finding and applies to the success of other development agendas as well. For example, it has been suggested that achieving gender-mainstreaming goals is dependent on factors such as support from senior management, that is, those having the official power to implement changes (Benschop & Verloo 2006: 20).

I would argue, based on a brief review of Finnish policies of democracy promotion, that discourses supporting civil societies as promoters of democracy in the global South seem to assume similarities between civil societies there and those in the North. However, given that CSOs are supposed to be separate from the state (the normative approach taken in liberal societies towards civil society), this is not only a problematic theoretical starting point, but it also fails to reflect the reality in authoritarian states. For example, in Vietnam a view that civil society is a distinct sphere represents a minority position amongst CSO actors (Wischemann 2010:

20). In development aid practice, as noted above, the rise of civil society discourses in the 1990s meant that aid donors started to channel increasing amounts of money to the Southern NGOs mainly through Northern NGOs. In contrast, in 2010 the EU commenced a review of its external relations policies, including development aid, with internal discussions promoting the view that all EU civil society aid should be allocated directly to Southern civil societies, instead of channelling it through Northern NGOs (personal communication, Lappalainen 2010). This would imply that either the EU does not see particular value in Northern NGOs operating in the South, or that the discourse criticizing new, unequal power structures involved in North-South NGO cooperation is becoming the dominant one. My argument is that Northern NGOs have a role that differs from that of their Southern partners which can, in fact, lead them to be critical of local realities. Northern NGOs may, for example, play a buffer role vis-à-vis local authorities or work as mediators between local people and Southern partner organizations. Furthermore, the donor community should also understand the impacts of aid flows to Southern civil society which may not only be positive. Such flows have enhanced, as may be observed in Vietnam and elsewhere, the NGO-isation of civil society in the South, transforming it into a field of professional experts, and thereby decreasing the ownership by the rural population of civil society in their respective countries. The assumption seems to have been that strengthening Southern civil societies by channelling them more money would automatically have prodemocracy impacts, a Tocquevillean position that is strongly represented in the ethos of US aid, as already pointed out.

Yet research on the relationship between civil society and democracy has confirmed that ‘there is no necessary connection between civil society and democratic change’ (Alagappa 2004: xi). According to Alagappa (*ibid.*), ‘civil society supports democracy when its dominant discourse is rooted in democratic ideals and prodemocratic organizations acquire critical mass’. This is an important finding that should communicate at least two things to donors: first, the assumption that civil society organizations are automatically democratic may not hold (Wischermann 2010; see also Hannah 2007). Not all CSOs conform to democratic ideals and, therefore, it would be important to know more about their internal functioning in order to support those which genuinely follow democratic principles in their activities. Second, we should better understand what comprises ‘prodemocratic’ critical mass in different contexts if we want to enhance a meaningful, not just procedural, democracy.

In politically closed societies, or those under the power of ‘illiberal regimes’ as Kaldor and Kostovicova (2008) term them, critical mass should include those

in power. In Vietnam that condition would mean that the presence of substantial numbers of communist party members or organizations close to the Communist party that support new conceptions of democracy would be critical. Gallagher (2004: 442-443), when analyzing possible avenues of political transformation in China, points out that the country is already witnessing a gradual change: a ‘mutual penetration of the state and social groups that has a transformative effect on the state itself.’ This can be seen in the changing boundary between the state and social groups. Another interesting option for change, according to Gallagher (ibid.) would be ‘civil society’s capture of state-led associations or institutions’. This would, in fact, be beneficial for civil society organizations as they would be able to utilize existing structures in order to mobilize the people for prodemocracy work. Kaldor and Kostovicova (2008: 111) express an opinion that ‘the best prospect for democratizing illiberal regimes is through liberalizing civil society spaces and stimulating a debate and deliberation’.

Unlike Western civil society organizations which see one of their main roles as watchdog over the government, civil society in Asia is not necessarily confrontational towards state; rather, civil society-state relationships ‘span a broad spectrum’ (Alagappa 2004: xi-xii). Similarly, I would argue against the hidden assumption that Western civil society organizations always see themselves principally in watchdog mode because Western societies are not homogenous either, and relationships between CSOs and the state vary. Based on my own long-term experience as a civil society activist, I believe that for at least the past decade the market sector – particularly global businesses/transnational corporations – has been seen as a bigger danger to the development goals promoted by civil society than those posed by states.⁸ Therefore, talking about Asian civil society as a universal concept may be highly misleading as CSOs in Asia position themselves differently vis-à-vis the state depending on their analyses of their working environment and the goals of their organization (for Vietnam, see Wischermann 2010; Hannah 2007).⁹

8 Similar argument was placed by Fuentes & Shields (1989: 186) concerning social movements identifying economic forces too powerful even for the states to control.

9 Wells-Dang (2012) has suggested that when trying to locate civil society in Vietnam (as well as in China) we should look for informal cross-sectoral networks instead of formal organizations. Thus, the focus of study of civil society in the two countries turns to individuals as well as organizations within the networks. Informal networks, as argued by Wells-Dang, have been more effective in contributing to social change than formal CSOs given the restrictive authoritarian working environment. Moreover, as pointed out by Nguyen-Marshall (2012), ‘mutual-aid societies’ ranging from labour-exchange organization to ceremony-assistance and lending societies have strong roots in Vietnamese history that predate the French colonial period. It is perhaps here that we ought to search for ‘Vietnamese civil society’ (see also Fforde 2008).

CSOs in Vietnam as well as in neighbouring China are more likely to see themselves as supporters of the state than critics of state policies, for a range of possible reasons: first, the process of registering a CSO in both countries is subject to laws which leave a lot of space for interpretation by implementing agencies. Legally registered local NGOs have, therefore, been thoroughly vetted by government authorities, to whom they are also regularly required to report their activities. Thus, their very existence is dependent on their relationship with the authorities, and Hannah (2007) confirms that Vietnamese CSOs seem to locate themselves close to the state or at least to avoid confrontation with it. This does not mean that there are no CSOs that disagree with state policies but, rather, that they most likely avoid confrontation – by sticking to ‘safer’ fields of activities such as service delivery, for example. Kaldor and Kostovicova (2008: 91) share this view and add that ‘autonomous initiatives [under “illiberal regimes”] are exercised at a great risk’. Second, cultural values in China and Vietnam have traditionally strongly emphasized the importance of social harmony.¹⁰ Social harmony is still openly propagandized by the governments, often under the rhetoric of political stability, but a similar value can be found outside political society as well. Thus, the reconciliation of social harmony with political opposition does not come easily. Instead, the ‘step by step’ approach is seen by many Vietnamese as the best way to unite the requirement of change and the political realities.

Towards a contextual study of democratization: addressing grassroots and gender

To understand the constraints in democracy promotion (and development aid in general) it is important to take into consideration contextual factors and their influence on democratization within processes generated by development interventions. Taking into consideration earlier calls for a contextualized analysis of development aid practice (Lewis & Opoku-Mensah 2006: 607; Opoku-Mensah et. al. 2007; also Fforde 2008), my research aims to contribute to discourses on democracy promotion at the grassroots level (village / commune) through an in-depth analysis of two types of development interventions by a selected case-study NGO.

¹⁰ It can be argued that the notion of social harmony is an undercurrent in the Confucian doctrine. It is the very essence of the Confucian notion of ‘rectification of names’ which situates a person correctly within a family and society (see also Lee 2000: 118). According to Kallio (2014: 302), Confucianism is actively, yet selectively used in China by proponents of ‘Socialist Confucianism’ as an ideological-moral basis on which to build a harmonious society under the rule of the Communist Party of China. Social harmony has also been stated as a reason for sexual differentiation as well as control of emotions (Lin 2000; Wawrytko 2000: 167).

It is important to note that discourses on democracy assistance or democracy promotion – two terms that are sometimes used interchangeably – often focus on the national level.¹¹ My research, however, concerns questions of grassroots democracy promotion, that is, at village and commune levels. This, as my research shows, necessarily brings questions of gender to the core of my inquiry. In most accounts of democratization as well as in democracy-promotion projects, gender is not at the centre of inquiry, and often not even mentioned. A focus on governing systems and competing parties easily ignores gender as an issue connected with democracy and thus, it is argued, ‘in most cases [donors] are supporting men by democracy support’ (Abdallah 2010). Abdallah’s claim reflects a wider observation that ‘gender is still ignored in much academic political science’ (Celis et al. 2013: 2).

Feminist scholars have, however, illustrated that gender is a fundamental factor to be taken into account in the democracy project. For example, Eisenstein (1994) argued that understanding women first as mothers (with the responsibilities attached to motherhood) enhances policies that assist women in their role as care-takers, thereby domesticating women. One point of departure for feminist criticism of gender policies is that they aim to ‘modernize’ gender relations when they should be deconstructed (Maloutas 2007). Moreover, economic development that has often been seen as a precondition for democracy in the sense that it is believed to increase an individual’s freedom of choice and economic well-being (see e.g. MFA 2001), may arguably increase women’s vulnerability in the labour market (Chow & Hsung 2002; Tran Thi Van Anh & Le Ngoc Hung 2000: 100, 102; Leng & Sim 1997). In addition, research has pointed out that formal democracy does not guarantee women’s access to political participation (Iwanaga 2008; Mervis et. al 2013; Veneracion-Rallonza 2008), thus suggesting gendered obstacles to participation (see also Cornwall 2008: 279). Feminist research suggests that gender plays a role in more ways than one in the democracy project. Therefore, especially when focusing on grassroots democracy, it no longer seems adequate to discuss decision-making structures without considering the access individuals and / or households may have to them. A brief introduction to the grassroots level has already revealed that even if (decision-making) structures (perhaps claimed to be democratic) are in place, different individuals have different capacities, capabilities and opportunities to take part in and influence decision-making

11 Here we find an interesting similarity with the argument that in the theoretical debate about citizenship, ‘views and perspectives of ‘ordinary’ people are largely absent’ (Kabeer 2005: 1) thus communicating an ‘empirical void’ also seen in democracy discourses focusing on macro-level analysis. As I see it, democracy at the grassroots level touches upon issues also discussed in terms of *inclusive* citizenship by Kabeer (ibid.) such as justice, recognition, and self-determination.

processes within those structures. And it is from this perspective, I argue, that our analysis and understanding of gender becomes significant from the point of view of democratization: a perspective that borrows from the ‘democratic functioning’ approach that is interested in people’s access to political activity where political activity can take place in any sphere of life (Drydyk 2005).

Researcher’s positionality: Methodological curiosity and personal biography

As noted earlier, ethnographic research has significantly contributed to our understanding of development trajectories as contested, non-technical and political, a thesis I have chosen to explore as it manifests itself in language. More specifically, I have brought a Bakhtinian reading to analysis of my data to facilitate my inquiry into the ‘ambiguity of meanings’, as noted, for example in Mosse (2005). In particular, my objective was to examine how paying special attention to the meanings of different words could enhance our understanding of the contestation and complexities of aid practice. Being aware that a Bakhtinian reading is not an obvious analytical framework in development research – even if it became a natural choice for me because of a background in literature and linguistic studies in addition to Area Studies¹² – I shall thoroughly introduce methodological choices made in this study in Chapter Three. Here, it suffices to say that in my view, the strengths of a Bakhtinian reading lie in its ability to resist essentialist interpretations by emphasizing the complexity and dialogical interplay of heterogeneous voices in society (see also Clifford 1983: 136-137).

To explore the contestation within aid practice as manifested in the construction and transformations of meanings in the course of development interventions, I investigate two types of intervention models in a project by Defi, a small Finnish voluntary NGO. The selection of the interventions is closely linked with my own history in this particular NGO project. My involvement with it began in 1995 when I first met the director of Defi who was searching for a partner NGO that would help Defi to accumulate the needed self-financing for their planned Vietnam project, as required by the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs,¹³ the main donor for NGO projects in Finland. At the time I was secretary to another small NGO that soon after made a decision to support Defi’s Vietnam project to the tune

12 I believe, like Martinez Kuhonta et al. (2008) that Area Studies has a great potential to contribute to social science inquiry by sharing contextualized insights of political importance.

13 According to the funding regulations, the required share of self-finance in NGO projects at the time was 20% of the total annual budget. Half of the self-financing could be covered by voluntary work while the other half needed to be a financial contribution.

of FIM 110,000¹⁴. I was also selected by my NGO to be one of the two people from our association to follow the project's implementation and keep our board and association members updated on its progress.

My first project visit took place in summer 1997 and entailed my first direct encounter with the Defi's project beneficiaries – roughly a year after the Savings and Credit Intervention (one of the two cases studied in my research) had been established in Minh Son commune. At the time, I was already the vice-chair (and later the chair) of my NGO, the co-sponsor of Defi's Vietnam project. The agreement between the two NGOs was mutually beneficial. On one hand, Defi got access to the needed funding as 'my' organization had – a few years earlier – unexpectedly received a bequest to be used 'to support poor people in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam'. On the other hand, despite long engagement with Vietnam, 'my' NGO lacked the human capacity to set up a project of its own. Meanwhile, although Defi had found someone (who became the project director) who had both experience in development aid and the willingness to make a personal commitment to start a development project in Vietnam, it lacked money and experience in the Vietnamese context – both things that 'my' NGO could offer. Thus my first visit to the project sites was part of the role assigned to me by the board of my NGO as an outcome of the cooperation contract between the two NGOs: I was to follow project activities to ensure that 'our' money was being used appropriately.

When accepting my follow-up role, I was totally inexperienced in development cooperation. My earlier engagement with Vietnam had been framed by my contacts with the Vietnamese community in Finland and my interests had been limited to cultural issues such as food, religion and family relations. These interests had been nourished by my studies of Sinology (East-Asian Studies), the nearest (geographically as well as culturally) Area Studies option one could select at my university. My new role in the Defi project therefore opened windows onto an unexplored Vietnam that proved both exciting and frustrating: exciting as I constantly learned new things about the country and its people, and frustrating as I became painfully aware of the limits of my knowledge relevant to the project realities. Eventually, several years after the first (of many) visits to the project sites, I reached a point where 'doing' development no longer satisfied me. Instead, I started to feel it was necessary to go deeper into the world of development cooperation in order to better understand what I was engaged with.

Having been personally involved in the project since its very beginning has helped me in my research process in many significant ways. For example, my several visits to the project sites – both to Minh Son commune (greater Hanoi

¹⁴ Around 19 000 euros.

region) and to Dong Xuan commune (Hoa Binh province) – but not limited to these two – had offered me a general understanding of both places in terms of the landscape, people’s livelihoods and key local actors in addition to Defi’s project activities. I had learned the protocol of NGO field visits that included courtesy calls to commune People’s Committees, drinking tea in the office of the district Women’s Union (WU) chair, and getting occasional reports from Party secretaries in the villages if they were available during the times of my visits. I had accepted that only then could I go and meet the project beneficiaries and try and learn from their perspectives. Over the years, I also understood (without fully accepting) that I should not pay unexpected visits to the project sites even if I was visiting Vietnam for other purposes and the visits fit my schedules. According to the rules of play, I was always required to inform the local partners – that is, the WU at the district and commune levels – about my visits, after which the WU would contact the local authorities so as to get the needed approvals for my visit. Thus, there was no room for ad hoc visits to the project communes.¹⁵

Along with developing an understanding of the project contexts, I was increasingly exposed to the complexities of development interventions. For example, some years after the introduction of the micro-credit programme to Minh Son commune, I realized that I had totally misjudged the capacity of the single women to learn new skills in the project. Frankly speaking, when meeting the women for the first time in 1997, I was convinced that the project would fail should it depend on the women who were introduced to me as the Board of Management (BoM) members. My assessment had not so much to do with their sex, but rather their lack of communicative competence, which I wrongly interpreted as a lack of overall development potential.

When starting my research process, I had already visited the project sites several times and thought that I knew the project well enough to conduct my research relatively quickly. Quite certain of my insights, I even drafted the main research outcomes, some of which emerged as highly mistaken in the process of actually analyzing my data. The research process proved me, again, wrong and the process of changing my position from an NGO activist with a personal history in the project to a researcher was not an easy one. For example, at the beginning, I had no idea how to ‘take two steps away from the project’ as advised by my professor, nor how to break free from my actor’s perspective; distancing myself from the

15 In the case of Minh Son commune, this has now changed. I no longer need to involve any ‘middlemen’ in order to meet the single women who participate in the project. All meetings can be arranged through the Board of Management, which can be interpreted as a sign of increased independence of the single women, on the one hand, and as diminishing control by local authorities in the commune, on the other.

project was, therefore, far more difficult than I had expected. Several times my peer researchers accused me of uncritical treatment of the utterances of the project director and of inadequate attention to views presented by other actors within the project thus producing a representation in which the Defi director possessed all the goodness and wisdom required for the project. When I repeatedly faced similar critique, I realised that there must be a bias in how I saw different actors within the project.

It took me time before I understood that one way to become a researcher, not just in name, was through an analytical framework that, if well chosen, would enable me to step outside the actor's skin. Thus, the importance of my Bakhtinian framework is not limited to analysis of my research data but, in addition, it very much determined who I became as a researcher; it suffices to say that, for me, the Bakhtinian reading helped me to change hats from an NGO activist to a researcher. The Bakhtinian analytical framework allowed or even forced me to look at the project from a totally different perspective: to let go of normative causal explanations of successes and failures of aid projects framed by a technical approach to interventions. This was assisted by the fact that a Bakhtinian reading focuses on language and not the results of interventions *per se* (which, as all practitioners know, readily become the major concern of aid projects), thereby promoting alternative knowledge interests to those put forward by donors.

My particular position in the history of the project also had implications for my interviews. As I shall discuss the issue more in the methodology chapter, here I limit myself to noting that being a project insider in the eyes of the interviewees had more positive than negative outcomes for my research process; in an environment like Vietnam it is not guaranteed that people will talk to an unknown researcher on issues that are considered sensitive, such as democracy and sexuality, both touched upon by my study.

1.2 Research questions

The research questions that I introduce below are motivated by the following: first, by my accepting the findings of previous ethnographic studies (Ferguson 1994, Li 2007; Mosse 2005) that development practice is a space of contestation in which actors engage with cultural values, history and the socio-political context in ways that create deviations from the project 'script'. I will add to the debate by approaching the contestation as taking place in language that reflects both existing realities and the discourses in which the actors are positioned. Furthermore, I conceptualize development practice as a process of construction of, and negotiat-

ing over, meanings. The selected approach suggests that the ‘ambiguity of words’ that manifests itself in development practice is necessarily a part of development practice as actors simultaneously belong to different and sometimes contradictory contexts in which words are given their meanings.

Second, I accept democracy promotion within development practice as a field of activity in which the meanings of ‘democracy’ are themselves subject to different interpretations, and thus, subjected to contestation as earlier pointed out by, for example, Kurki (2010, 2013; also White 2004; Drydyk & Penz 1997). Therefore, I am interested in exploring practical implementation of the selected interventions from a perspective of grassroots democracy promotion, taking into consideration the ‘workings’ of gender as influencing a person’s possibilities and access to participation in processes in which democracy may be practiced.

Hence, my research questions are as follows:

*(1) How do **development ideas**, manifested as words with specific meanings, transform into intervention models and how does contestation over meanings in particular contexts contribute to changes in the project ‘script’?*

*(2) How do **gendered norms** and practices manifest themselves in the selected case studies and project contexts and how do they relate to the issue of grassroots democracy?*

*(3) How does the **local political context** interact with the intervention models and what are the implications of the political context to the NGO’s democratization agenda?*

1.3 Outline of the study

The remainder of this report proceeds as follows. In Chapter Two I outline Defi’s working context from the perspective of an ‘official’ interpretation of democracy in Vietnam: that is, the narrative line of democracy as produced by the Communist Party-led Vietnamese state. In addition, Chapter Two introduces the case studies selected for this research.

Chapter Three discusses the Bakhtinian analytical framework, referred to as ‘my Bakhtinian reading’, as well as my research methods. I start by a short introduction of Bakhtin (intended to serve those who are not yet familiar with his work) before moving on to examine Bakhtin’s concepts that comprise the conceptual toolkit used for my data analysis. The chapter also outlines what motivated

my selection of a Bakhtinian reading for the research process, after which I discuss my research methods, in particular, my application of textual analysis as well as interviews as a method for data collection.

Chapter Four analyzes gendered norms in the Vietnamese context, ‘re-reading’ earlier literature on Vietnam aided by Bakhtinian concepts. I am particularly interested in the construction of gendered norms and the meanings and interpretations involved therein. My agenda is to further contextualize Defi’s working environment in terms of gender as well as using the understanding of gender thus produced as a background for my analysis in the subsequent chapter.

Chapter Five is based on my interview data and I ask how single women cope with the gendered (sexual) norms and practices that they are expected to follow. My intention is twofold: to see to what extent earlier gender literature manages to describe the gender problem in the light of the single women’s experiences; and, more importantly, to discover how the single women’s narratives of their lives help us to understand their particular position in their communities.

Chapter Six focuses on analyzing how Defi’s development thinking was constructed and the main concepts that constitute it. I aim to show through my analysis of the NGO’s utterances how meanings are manifested in language and subject to changes when entering into dialogue with different actors as well as local realities.

Chapter Seven analyzes how Defi’s encounters with the local (gendered) realities in Minh Son commune resulted in concrete changes in the Savings and Credit Intervention model. Here, I am interested in how the changing meanings of key words, as an outcome of these dialogical encounters, facilitated changes in the NGO’s aid practice.

Chapter Eight then turns our attention to Defi’s Village Self-reliance and Development Intervention model. It explores how different meanings attributed to notions such as ‘participation’ and ‘the people’, constitutive of the NGO’s understanding of democracy, play a role in project implementation. Moreover, I analyze how gender manifests itself in the Village Self-reliance and Development Intervention model as reported by the interviewees.

Chapter Nine compiles my research findings. Here, I first revisit my main research questions as defined above in section 1.2 and present the main findings, drawing from a bulk of new insights and understanding produced by the earlier chapters. Then, I revisit my Bakhtinian analytical framework and discuss the results of my experimentation with it, exploring both its strengths and its limitations as reflected against my research process. Finally, I suggest topics for further research that are raised by the study.

2 INTRODUCTION OF THE CONTEXT AND THE CASE STUDIES

This chapter introduces selected avenues to understanding ‘democracy’ in the Vietnamese context. I first discuss an idea of democracy that links to the anti-colonial project in Vietnam, thus providing a short historical background relevant to my inquiry into the democracy project in Vietnam. It should be stressed that I am not suggesting that the historical narrative of democracy in Vietnam re-constructed below should be understood as ‘the truth’ of the subject and thus incontestable, as it is by no means the only possible story.¹⁶ Rather, it represents one of many political struggles against French colonialism. Its importance to my inquiry derives from the fact that it comprises what later became the official narrative of democracy in Vietnam, thereby illustrating the fact that the Communist Party of Vietnam and the ideology attached to it suppressed the visibility of alternative democracy discourses in the public sphere in the course of the long fight for independence.

In what follows I touch upon questions of democracy in a socialist state, paying particular attention to the so-called Grassroots Democracy Decree (GDD) that has frequently been referenced by Defi, other INGOs and the donor community as a policy frame for their efforts to enhance grassroots democratic changes. Even though the actual role of the GDD as an instrument of democracy promotion or ‘deepening democracy’ (UNDP 2006) can be challenged (e.g. Törnquist 2008: 5), it remains a key discursive object, framing encounters between donors and local authorities.

Finally, I introduce the case studies that inform my research. That is, the Savings and Credit Project for single women in Minh Son commune, greater Hanoi region, and the Village Self-reliance and Development Intervention model in Xuan Dong commune, Hoa Binh province, both of which were introduced and implemented by the Finnish NGO Defi. My intention is not to delve too deeply into the models, but, rather, outline their main features so as to provide a further research context.

¹⁶ Alongside the state sponsored narrative of democracy in Vietnam that forms the basis of this chapter, there are other, even conflicting views of democracy in Vietnam (consider, for example, ideas of democracy presented by religious groups in Vietnam, such as the Unified Buddhist Church, or bloggers imprisoned on accusations of anti-state propaganda). Such views are highly interesting and deserve a study of their own.

2.1 Democracy and Vietnam

Bearing in mind my argument in Chapter One that ‘democracy’ should be understood as a contested concept, what follows is not an exhaustive account of democracy in Vietnam. Rather, it should be made clear that the official Vietnamese history of the 20th century produces an understanding of democracy that reflects the views of those on the winning side at any point during the long drawn-out struggle. Moreover, not claiming expertise in Vietnamese history and its politics, my intention here is limited to offering perspectives on the issue of democracy at a level that I consider useful in contextualizing Defi’s aims of promoting grassroots democracy in Vietnam through aid interventions. That is, due to the contextual specificities that foreign aid actors face in Vietnam, I shall focus on a normative stance towards ‘democracy’ – a view that is heavily based on Marxist-Leninist societal theorizing. Regardless of the gap between political theory and state practices that one encounters in Vietnam, understanding references to official state policies concerning ‘democracy’ become highly relevant for NGOs when negotiating with local state actors.

Thus, my working assumption in this chapter is that rather than being caught up in a straight-forward Western judgment of Vietnam as an ‘authoritarian’ (see e.g. EIU 2012; London 2014) or ‘non-democratic’ state (both claims communicating a lack of liberal democratic political structures), it is useful to seek alternative meanings of ‘democracy’ found in the Vietnamese socio-political context. It is a project that enables identification of possible similarities as well as contradictions in meanings of democracy that are likely to play a role when negotiating space for development interventions by outside actors in Vietnam.

The democracy concept in Vietnam as promoted by the Communist Party-led state is linked to the country’s fight for independence in the early to mid-20th century, during the course of which imperialism and colonialism became associated with Western liberal democracies. France’s colonial rule in Indochina (1887–1954),¹⁷ embracing Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos,¹⁸ was conceived as promoting *inequality*. In a speech in 1920 Ho Chi Minh¹⁹ pointed out that the Vietnamese

17 For those not familiar with the Vietnamese history, Jamieson (1993) offers a valuable source, covering the colonial era as well as the anti-colonial struggle and recent historical developments till 1975. Here it is enough to mention that the French were forced to leave Vietnam after their defeat in the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The fight against colonial rulers in order to gain independence was a factor that, at the time, united Vietnamese political opposition.

18 From 1900 onwards.

19 Ho Chi Minh was the first President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the son of a Confucian scholar, who received a French education in Vietnam and lived and worked in the USA and England before he settled in France between 1919 and 1923. It was in France that he first

people did not have the same rights as Europeans due to discrimination against them; consequently they lacked fundamental rights such as press freedom, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly and organizing (Хо Ши Мин / Ho Chi Minh 1990: 21). Importantly, during the 1920s inequality was seen as a consequence of capitalism, while in the 1930s Ho Chi Minh referred to the same issues as part of the ‘democratic rights’ that the Vietnamese lacked under colonial rule (ibid.: 84). Whatever the explanation for the inequality experienced in colonized Vietnam, the 1930s were marked by ‘feelings of alienation and anxiety’ as well as ‘humiliation and rage’, especially among educated, young urban males, ‘[f]or many of them had come to see themselves as the French saw them: members of a poor, backward, and subjugated race’ (Jamieson 1993: 172; similar observations of experienced inequality based on race categories are described in Ho Chi Minh 1960: 32).

The contradiction between real experience and the French slogan ‘Freedom, Equality and Brotherhood’ that had become a symbol of Western democracy drove many Vietnamese to seek alternative ideas of democracy that were less burdened by historical events in their own country. This goal is illustrated in a speech by Ho Chi Minh in 1945 when he declared the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (or North Vietnam) where he references the contradiction between ‘*liberté, égalité, fraternité*’ and France’s practice in its colonies (Хо Ши Мин / Ho Chi Minh 1990: 95) – a theme that was repeated in his writings throughout the anti-colonial struggle. From the perspective of colonised Vietnam, Western liberal democracies stood for the oppression of non-Western nations, a stance which ultimately disqualified them as models for a democratic society. Yet alternative conceptualizations of democracy that could serve the anti-colonial struggle were not readily available.

As early as 1907, the Tokyo-based Asian Friendship Association had declared its aim to be the opposition of imperialism in Asia (Chan 2003: 26). In practice, however, allies that could make a real difference to the Vietnamese independence movement were nowhere to be found. Roughly ten years later, in 1916, Lenin (1982, 1916/1941) wrote his book, ‘Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism’, in which he criticized England, France, Japan and the USA for their exercise

encountered and embraced Marxism as did several other future leaders of Asian political life who left footprints on its socialist history, such as Chinese Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping (e.g. Chan 2003: 84) and Cambodian Pol Pot. In 1923, Ho Chi Minh moved to Moscow for a short period after which he returned to Asia (Canton in China) where he continued to have contact with both Chinese and Russian Marxists.

of colonialism,²⁰ which marked a turning point in the relationship between independence fighters in colonized countries and socialist ideology. Looking at a map of the world at the time, it is evident that ideological support for the Vietnamese fight for independence could, practically, only come from the Leninist camp. In a speech in 1924, Ho Chi Minh praised Lenin's efforts in combating imperialism, while pointing out that the communist parties in Western Europe such as those in France, Britain, the Netherlands and Belgium had done very little for the colonized masses (Хо Ши Мин / Ho Chi Minh 1990: 47). In the absence of other powerful supporters, Lenin's endorsement of the Vietnamese anti-colonial project also became important in terms of the later political development of Vietnam. It is important to bear in mind that not all nationalists were, nor became, communists; rather, the Soviet Union as a key supporter of the anti-colonial struggle influenced the power positions of different nationalist groups. As a result, 'real' democracy among Vietnamese political actors aiming for national independence increasingly came to refer to the Leninist interpretation, thus bringing the idea of class struggle to the core of the democratization agenda along with the struggle for national sovereignty.

It is against this historical background that the concept of democracy (*dân chủ*) received its socialist characteristics in official (North-)Vietnamese discourses. As pointed by Kerkvliet (1995: 28) 'high-ranking political leaders in Vietnam routinely assert that not only is Vietnam a socialist country but it is a democratic one' following the slogan 'rule of the people, for the people, and by the people', in which 'the people' refers 'especially to workers and peasants'. Despite claims by the political leaders, Kerkvliet (*ibid.*) argues, there is a 'significant gap between what is claimed and what is actually happening, particularly with regard to democracy'. Thus, the meaning of 'democracy' in Vietnamese political use is significantly different from the one that allegedly was found in liberal democratic societies, where the wealthiest (minority) sector of the population was understood to use politics to secure its interests against those of the marginalized working classes. As in China (see Chan 2003), the Vietnamese interpretation of preconditions for a socialist revolution included the education of the peasant class which was to be mobilized to fight for independence alongside the urban proletariat and the Marxist intelligentsia (Хо Ши Мин / Ho Chi Minh 1990: 67).

During US involvement in the Vietnam Wars, South Vietnam was directly exposed to the US discourses of democracy. However, the victory of Communist Party-led North Vietnam in 1975 meant that the Marxist conception of democracy has since dominated official political discourses in the country. It is worth noting

20 The term used by Lenin is 'ultra-imperialism'.

however, that communist rule over the whole country has not been able to suppress demands for a more democratic society expressed by actors inside as well as outside of the country. The ‘official’ view of democracy is thus only one narrative of democracy in Vietnam, but important to visit here as it frames, in many ways, what INGOs can and cannot do in Vietnam. Moreover, as I shall point out later in my thesis, it is useful, possibly essential, for the INGOs to be knowledgeable about official state views and policies on democracy in order to enter into a dialogue with persons representing the state apparatus.

Practicing democracy in the socialist state

The Vietnamese political system does not open itself to examination easily. Access to data has been a challenge for researchers. As noted by Kerkvliet and Marr (2004: vii) ‘the utterances of central leaders and public intellectuals dominated writings on contemporary Vietnam’ and consequently scholars ‘found themselves severely limited as to sources that might support alternative models’. And they continue: ‘Fieldwork was impossible, archives were closed, provincial newspapers inaccessible.’ Even though the research environment has improved, these observations are still relevant. It is much easier to get access to information that concerns the political theory communicated in Party documents and state-controlled media than to collect information on actual practices as manifestations of state governance. The peculiarities of a contemporary Vietnamese political context that seeks to control rather than enhance open socio-political dialogue also affect my account of Vietnamese ‘democracy’ in this chapter: I have had to consciously limit discussion to theoretical principles of practicing democracy in Vietnam that reflect the official, Communist Party narrative of democracy. Furthermore, as will become evident in Chapter Eight, several issues relevant to the understanding of democracy as it is practiced in Vietnamese villages remain outside the scope of my study as they are not readily talked about.

One of the key concepts in understanding the practice of ‘democracy’ within a socialist state is that of democratic centralism (*chế độ tập trung dân chủ*) which came to Asia²¹ from the Soviet Union and refers to the principles governing the internal organization of Leninist parties. Its key principle is that members of the Communist Party may freely discuss the content and direction of politics; decisions are made on the basis of a majority vote and once made, all are expected to follow them. Lenin used the term to emphasize that social debates are not to

21 For an in-depth discussion on democratic centralism in neighbouring China, see Salmenkari 2006.

be conducted across the entirety of society but only within the ‘vanguard’ Party (Britannica 2010).

According to Article 6 of the Constitution of Vietnam, democratic centralism is the governing principle of all state agencies (Constitution 1992; Tran Thi Thu Trang 2004), and the Communist Party of Vietnam (*đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam*) ‘is the force leading the State and society’ (Constitution 1992). The Constitution does not, however, clearly define how the Party is to perform this role though, in practice, the Party dominates political institutions at all levels. Discussions concerning the future of the country as well as the decisions and policy papers thus produced, are seen to belong in the Party domain; they are conducted within the Party structures and are mostly non-public. The ‘closed door’ policy is common practice in the Vietnamese administration and significantly hinders ordinary people and civil society organizations from taking part in political discussions. It is important to note that access to information and knowledge thus obtained becomes a source of power, available only to a restricted and selected group of citizens. Information is not shared between state offices, but is ‘sold’ when this is perceived as beneficial (Gainsborough 2010: 180). Thus, the role offered to the majority of people is to follow Party policies rather than to contribute to their formation. In my experience, even though Article 2 of the Constitution states that ‘all State power belongs to the people’, in practice, the Party as ‘vanguard of the Vietnamese working class’ (Constitution 1992: Art. 4) tends to rule the people rather than treating them as true power holders in society; or, as some researchers have suggested: ‘belonging to the people’ means in reality ‘belonging to the party elite’ (see Gainsborough 2010: 184).

The Fatherland Front of Vietnam (*Mặt Trận Tổ Quốc Việt Nam*) has a central role in the exercise of democratic centralism in Vietnam. Mass organizations, such as the Vietnam Women’s Union, and the Youth and Farmer’s Unions, which were established by the Party, work under the shelter of the Fatherland Front. Mass organizations have an important role within the frame of democratic centralism, as they officially represent the collective interest of the relevant groups of citizens. The Vietnam Women’s Union, for example, is mandated by the Party to represent all the women of Vietnam to the Vietnamese state. The close relationship between the Party and the WU is supposed to guarantee that the wishes, needs and concerns of women are channelled through to the decision-making processes of the Party. That is, democratic centralism ideally supports informed decision making within the Party by taking the perspectives of specific categories of citizens into account.

However, as I shall point out in Chapter Six, different groups within the category of ‘women’ are not equally represented in the agenda of the VWU. Mass

organizations like the WU have a dual role in Vietnamese society. In addition to representing certain societal categories, they are also channels for disseminating official information and informing citizens of relevant state policies; moreover, they are engaged in policy implementation. This has increased and systemized top-down command lines in Vietnamese political practices. Furthermore, according to my own experience working with local chapters of the WU in different provinces, there is great variety from place to place in the degree to which the Union's work is oriented towards the actual needs of the women in their constituencies. In this respect, the WU is not very different from a 'state' that 'rarely moves in the same direction, rarely works together, and rarely sings from the same hymn sheet' (Gainsborough 2010: 180). This diversity within the WU as well as in the state apparatus may, in fact, be seen as including potential for change. It seems to me that the role of the chair of the WU is central to the Union's orientation, but very little is actually known about the selection of people for leadership positions in the mass organizations. Based on fragmented information I have managed to collect from different provinces during development projects in cooperation with the WU, factors such as the 'right' family background are often considered more important than the actual skills required to implement the Union's activities.

It is important to note that, strictly speaking, democratic centralism does not offer a mechanism that would allow independent organizations to take part in political decision-making processes; it is arguably 'blind to the need for an arena for communication other than the vertical communication between leaders and the led' (Salmenkari 2006: 476). Therefore, the demands of Western actors to the Vietnamese state to allow free civil society and to include it in political decision-making practices in the name of democracy are difficult to reconcile with the concept of democratic centralism. Unger and Chan (1995) use the concept of corporatism to illustrate the same issue in the Chinese context. A corporatist ideal state recognizes 'one and only one' organization, such as the WU, as the sole representative of respective individuals, companies or institutions. It is characteristic of corporatism that the state defines which organizations are mandated to represent certain groups. Once the mandate is granted, the state establishes a relationship with the organization that is, by its nature, unequal because organizations are subordinate to the state and the mandate is dependent on the degree of trust the state has for the organization. This is the norm for both mass organizations and influential associations like the Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA) that also tend to have this kind of relationship with the Vietnamese state.

Theoretically speaking, strengthening a free, independent civil society in Vietnam would require the state to reassess the existing political system. Furthermore, it would force the state to introduce a more liberal interpretation of democratic centralism. This aside, there is also no saying that Party members would have similar views on the development of civil society and thus, on the development of democracy in Vietnam. For example, a spectrum of opinions has been expressed in the process of drafting the Law on Associations since the late 2000s. The Party includes members who lobby for a more liberal legislation as well as those who see civil society as a possible danger in terms of political stability. According to one informant,²² the authorities responsible for state security oppose free civil society development the most strongly. Ultimately, however, the question is about political monopoly and the functioning of democracy within the Party itself. In any case a significant shift away from the theory of ‘democratic centralism’ has not yet occurred even though suggestions for a more open society have been expressed at least since the 1980s.

Porter (1993: 98–99), for example, has described internal discussions of the Vietnamese Communist Party taking place in 1989 that were leaked to the public. Even at that time ‘some’ had been critical of the Party’s political monopoly, claiming that it led to the misuse of power. These discussions took place at a historical turning point in Vietnam. Only three years earlier, the Party had adopted a programme of political renovation known as *đổi mới* which focused on economic reforms (initially through e.g. liberalization of agricultural policy and allocation of arable land to households) to create a market economy with a socialist orientation.²³ The impact of the policy, particularly in terms of economic activities, could already be observed in 1989. A central argument expressed for a more pluralistic political system was based on a view that the new, more liberal economic system and the existing political system conflicted with each other. Economic liberalization, therefore, was seen to call for polyphonic political reality; meanwhile, the political monopoly of the CPV was also seen to hinder democratization of the country. The position taken by the leadership of the Party was that this kind of thinking represented ‘extreme democracy’, which would lead the country to a ‘chaotic and anarchistic situation’ (ibid.): the leadership of the Party, guaranteed by the constitution, could no longer be realized if dissident thinking were allowed within

22 Personal communication, January 2010 Hanoi. Name withheld.

23 A general overview of *đổi mới* politics can be found e.g. in Fforde and de Vylder (1996). One of the key arguments presented there is that economic reform was largely a spontaneous bottom-up process. That is, local actors such as agricultural collectives or state factories developed sideline activities in order to fulfil the state plans imposed on them as well as to extend the family economy. This is a contentious position.

society. In Bakhtinian terms, the Party at this point is engaged in an authoritarian, monologic dialogue in which it may listen to multiple voices in certain situations but lacks readiness to radically reassess its own position within a changed society. This, in broad brush strokes, was the situation facing Defi. But, as we shall see, there appeared some grounds for optimism.

The Grassroots Democracy Decree – deepening Vietnamese democracy?

A key document in donor discussions on Vietnamese democracy is the so-called Grassroots Democracy Decree,²⁴ first issued in 1998 by the government of Vietnam and soon attracting the attention and support of development donors in Vietnam.²⁵ Article 1 of the Decree (No. 29/1998/ND-CD) is useful in contextualizing its issuance. First, the article states that the decree is designed to ‘mobilize the peasants’ and the great material and intellectual strengths of the people in a project of economic development, thus defining the decree as an instrument of the country’s economic development agenda. Second, it aims to enhance ‘social and political stabilization’ and ‘rural solidarity’ as well as to ‘build clean and strong Party organizations, administration and mass organizations in communes, to prevent and overcome the problems of degradation, red tape and corruption [...]’. Similarly, Article 2 of the updated Decree (No. 79/2003/ND-CP of July 7, 2003) addresses the maintenance of political stability as well as the prevention of red tape and corruption as objectives of the exercise of democracy in communes. The issuance of the decree has been interpreted as a measure linked to episodes of rural protests in Thai Binh and elsewhere in Vietnam in the 1990s (UNDP 2006; Kerkvliet 2004). Thus, the decree’s references to the country’s social and political stabilization may be read as direct acknowledgement of social unrest that the government aimed to mitigate.

The Decree was also supposed to implement a direct democracy regime at the grassroots level (Decree No. 79/2003/ND-CP). Thus, the Decree pictures the role

24 Decree No. 29/1998/ND-CD and its revised version Decree No. 79/2003/ND-CP (GDD 1998; GDD 2003).

25 Among them was, for example, a Finnish-funded, bilateral pilot project, ‘Supporting the implementation of the grassroots democracy regulations in Quang Tri province’. According to the project document, dated April 2002, positive outcomes of the Democracy Regulations at commune level included that [the Decree] ‘has been highly appreciated, unanimously supported and actively practiced by the people’ while, at the same time acknowledging that ‘[p]eople have not got a very deep understanding of the Regulations’ and that ‘the Regulations [...] ha[ve] not been truly introduced into real life, nor [have they] been translated into a regular way of working at grassroots.’ (Pilot project document, April 2002: 5).

of ownership of the people in development taking place through giving them more voice in local decision-making processes. For example, according to the Decree, local (commune) authorities have a responsibility to discuss with the people those infrastructure and health care projects that require people's investment either in the forms of money or work. Furthermore, the people should be able to make decisions on the most important of such projects, and should also have a central role in deciding on village regulations. Moreover, the Decree gives the people the right to establish committees to supervise local infrastructure projects.

The Decree also defines tasks of local authorities that require being heard by the people, but where the decision-making power remains with the local authorities. These include long term development plans, annual socio-economic plans, plans for rearrangements of the local economy, and production and employment plans. This category also includes land usage plans as well as those concerning changes in the commune borders and nomination of candidates to the People's Committees. In the Vietnamese political system, People's Committees are responsible for implementing government plans at the local level as well as decisions made by People's Councils. Running day to day governmental affairs gives the chair of a People's Committee significant power and influence at the local level, not least because the People's Committee chair is nearly always a prominent member of the local branch of the Communist Party (Kerkvliet 2004).

The Decree also defines things that the people have a right to monitor which include the activities of local authorities, implementation of local decisions, the handling of people's complaints, land usage and the usage of funds received from the people or from the state. For donors (see e.g. UNDP 2006) the Decree seemed to raise new possibilities. In theory, it widened people's access to information held by local authorities concerning local development plans, but also created an official frame for the people to engage in local decision-making processes and to monitor the implementation of development activities, thus enhancing grassroots democracy. A careful reading of the Decree (1998), however, provides a basis for criticism. First, despite the enhanced role of the people in local development, the Commune People's Committees have a dual role in the implementation of the Decree. They are not just responsible for implementation of local development activities but, in addition, are responsible for handling people's denunciations on 'corrupt or negative acts committed by members of the People's Councils or the People's Committees' (GDD 1998, Chapter V, Article 12). Thus, according to the Decree, denunciations by the people are to be handled by the same authorities who were possibly the objects of the denunciations.

The absence of an independent entity responsible for resolving complaints and denunciations by the people, I argue, effectively vitiates the Decree's stated aim of overcoming the problems of corruption. The formulation as it stands, naturally, decreased the number of formal denunciations and complaints made as there was no guarantee of their objective and neutral handling: people were hesitant to lodge denunciations that might later turn local authorities against them. Furthermore, there is some evidence that denunciations were silently being left in the desk drawers of authorities (Tran Thi Thu Trang 2004: 145–147).

As a consequence, people increasingly appealed directly to the National Assembly with their complaints. For example, between October 2003 and October 2004, the National Assembly received over 17,000 complaints from the citizens, and the numbers have been increasing. The National Assembly, however, has no jurisdiction over the complaints; it can only forward them to the relevant ministries and ask that they be explored (UNDP 2006). In an attempt to control the increasing expressions of people's discontent with local authorities, Chapter V of the revised Decree (GDD 2003) states that 'people must not rally in large numbers, make petitions to authorities of levels higher than the prescribed ones, cause disorder and insecurity and resist persons on duty while their petitions are being considered and settled [...].'

Another key problem in the Decree relates to the people's monitoring role. Even though the decree, in principle, allows people to monitor individuals, mass organizations, people's committees and organs established for individual activities, it does not clearly define the monitoring mechanisms that can be used. Individual citizens have restricted possibilities to monitor the activities of the authorities as their meetings are conducted behind closed doors. Mass organizations as members of the Fatherland Front are in a better monitoring position as they usually have their own representatives within the local decision-making structures and, as stated in the Decree (GDD 2003), are invited by the commune Fatherland Front Committees to take part in a vote of confidence for key positions elected by the commune People's Councils. However, even the opportunities for mass organizations to intervene are limited as the leading officials are usually in high positions in the Party as well, and those leading the mass organizations are usually either Party members themselves or aiming at securing membership. This configuration does not encourage them to take up activities that can be seen to harm the image of the Party.²⁶ The monitoring committees also lack the potential to implement their

²⁶ Vietnamese researchers such as Pham Quang Minh (2004) have pointed out that local authorities often face contradictions in their work as the expectations and needs of the people may contradict the expectations of the authorities above them.

task efficiently as they do not have adequate resources or professional knowledge. Moreover, they are under the influence of the People's Committees, which have a decisive role in nominating the candidates for the People's Councils. As the division of the labour between the People's Committees and People's Councils is unclear, the Councils are not eager to monitor the work of the Committees (UNDP 2006).

To what extent the Decree is put into practice depends, therefore, on the willingness of the local authorities to expose their activities to public review. Unless such goodwill is in place, local people have very limited chances to increase their participation in development and to monitor activities, as suggested by Tran Thi Thu Trang (2004). Therefore, it is not surprising that the Decree calling for the exercise of democracy in communes has not deepened Vietnamese democracy in any significant way. For example, research indicates that local authorities did not necessarily see the benefits of people's participation and the state did not monitor the Decree's implementation (UNDP 2006). Furthermore, local authorities have limited skills in implementing grassroots democracy and the state has not allocated resources to upgrade them. Thus, according to the study conducted by the Ho Chi Minh National Political Academy in 2001, the Decree (1998) brought no great change to key institutions including the party apparatus, government agencies and social organizations (Tran Thi Thu Trang 2004). Moreover, according to a study by the National Administration Institute in 2002, 73 - 85 per cent of commune authorities had not received training connected to their work (Kerkvliet 2004). The problems related to the capacity of the local authorities impacted on leadership, decision making, the implementation of local activities and, naturally, the exercise of democracy in the communes. On the other hand, the gap between the Decree and local realities created space for the donor community to introduce participatory development interventions, arguably as ways to implement the Grassroots Democracy Decree by the state. Similar claims have been made by Defi since the issuance of the Decree, despite the great *de facto* differences between the Decree and the NGO's intervention model.

2.2 Introduction to the interventions studied

The selected case studies for my research consist of two development interventions by the already mentioned Finnish NGO, Defi. Development intervention here is understood in terms of intentional change that has identified development objectives as well as the technical means it is believed will bring about the wanted changes (e.g. Koponen 2007: 59; Hobart 1993: 1). Both intervention models by

Defi take place in northern parts of Vietnam not far from the capital city of Hanoi. The first intervention model – Savings and Credit for women – represents the NGO’s original intention to work with women and to support their livelihoods by offering them access to small loans. The Savings and Credit model was first introduced in two communes in the greater Hanoi region in 1996. The second intervention model – Village Self-reliance and Development – started in 1997 in two rural communes in mountainous Hoa Binh province in the northwest region of the country. By 2012, the two intervention models were already being implemented by the NGO in sixteen communes located in eight different districts in six provinces or cities of Vietnam. Altogether the project includes 33 villages among which 13 communes and 19 villages implement the Village Self-reliance and Development model while the rest are involved with the Savings and Credit scheme (2012 Annual Project Report).

I have chosen one commune from each intervention for closer analysis: Minh Son commune in greater Hanoi region for the Savings and Credit model, and Dong Xuan commune, Hoa Binh province for the Village Self-reliance and Development model.

Savings and Credit for women in Minh Son commune

The first intervention model investigated is a savings and credit project in Minh Son, located some 40 km north east of the capital city, Hanoi. The hilly commune locates three kilometres from the district centre. In 1996 when the first loans were distributed, Minh Son was one of the rural areas of the capital city Hanoi, while proximity to Noi Bai International Airport as well as the growing industrialization of the capital city have brought about changes that reach people in Minh Son today.

Minh Son commune consists of six villages with a total area of 1217.6 hectares. According to data in Defi’s project plan (1995), the commune had ‘2006 households of which 714 were classified as “poor” (seasonal food deficiency) and 419 “very poor” (chronic lack of food), totaling 56 % of the households’. The number of female-headed households was 205, considered to be exceptionally high by the local authorities.²⁷ The reason given by the WU and local authorities for the high

²⁷ At the time, female headed households made up 27 % of all households. It should be noted however, that the figure includes married women officially registered as household heads (spouse in house 33 % and spouse away 9 %), while divorced/separated women counted for 11 %, widowed women 41 % and never married women 6 %. (UNDP 1996: 9; also Desai 1995: 23). This also explains why some studies hold that ‘female-headed households are not significantly worse off (...) than male-headed households’ (Desai 1995: 1).

number of single mothers was the location of an army base in the commune. In the mid-1990s the district in which Minh Son is located was one of the poorest in Hanoi, and agriculture (mainly producing rice, maize and cassava) was the dominant occupation of the commune residents. Casual work in Hanoi and other districts constituted an additional source of income.

The rapid industrialization of Vietnam in recent decades has created new opportunities but also challenges for people in the commune. New factories in the district offer jobs, especially for the younger generation, but industrialization has also resulted in diminished agricultural land, forcing farmers to seek alternative livelihood strategies. Moreover, the modernization and industrial development that are knocking at the gates of the commune have also resulted in increasing levels of environmental pollution.

Project participants in Minh Son commune represent different age groups as well as different categories of single women. The majority of the women were under 50 years of age, though those over 50 comprised more than 40 per cent of the participants. Based on their marital status, the women fall into three groups: widows (68), divorced / separated (66), and unmarried (50). The family sizes of the women were as follows: 64 women had only one child, 47 women had two children, 29 women had three children and 44 women had at least four children. Since the beginning of the project, the majority of the participants have remained the same. During the first ten years of project implementation, 14 women withdrew from the project and 6 of the participants died. However, 32 new women joined the Minh Son single women's group in 2007 (Nguyen Le Hoa 2007; see also Nguyen T.T. 2007).

Defi's Savings and Credit intervention model was inspired by the introduction of small loans for poor women for income generating activities by the Grameen Bank.²⁸ The basic assumption behind Defi's intervention was that women, more than men, and poor women in particular, have difficulties accessing loans from existing official sources such as banks, meaning that they were unable to develop their income-generation activities. Consequently, easy access to small loans was seen as a solution to the defined development problem. In addition, the model emphasizes the importance of saving money, even if household incomes are small. Women were therefore required to deposit small savings over three consecutive months prior to getting a loan. Another central feature of the model is its goal of supporting women's organizing capabilities. Each project participant is therefore a member of a loan group that meets on a monthly basis to collect savings, distribute new loans and discuss other issues relevant to the women.

28 For an overview of the Grameen Bank, see e.g. Hulme (2012), Rushad (2009) and Khandker et al. (1995).

Among the locations in which the NGO implements the savings and credit projects, I chose to have a closer look at Minh Son commune which initially became one of the project sites partly by chance, though over the years it has received numerous domestic and international visitors thanks to its reputation as a successful project. My aim is not to confirm or challenge Minh Son's reputation as a 'successful project'. Rather, I am interested in the changes that have taken place and how they relate to ideas of democracy.

The first loans were distributed to women in Minh Son commune in 1996. In 2004 the entire loan capital was officially handed to the Minh Son single women's group as the project came to its end. I was personally present at the handing over ceremony and represented the 'Finnish side' as the project director was unable to travel to Vietnam. However, as the NGO still had some money left from the project budget, it entered into negotiations with the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the main project donor, with the end goal of using the remaining funds to assist the single women's group to institutionalize their group activities in order to secure their ownership of the loan capital and other assets in the long term. As the relationship between the NGO and the single women's group thus continued, it was soon decided that cooperation should be re-established. In 2006 a new project, this time under another Finnish NGO was implemented. The re-established cooperation between an NGO and the single women's group included new activities such as solar-cooker testing and sewing courses along with the continued implementation of the micro-credit scheme. The new project has secured the Ministry's funding till the end of 2014.

It is worth pointing out that even though the NGO responsible for the project changed in 2006, the main actors remained the same. That is, the Defi director responsible for Vietnamese cooperation continued her work under the new NGO. The change of an organizational frame was caused by the fact that the new NGO that took over the project was a bigger association than Defi and thus could offer greater resources to the project (e.g. income-generation activities to fulfil the necessary self-financing requirements).²⁹ The Vietnamese project officer who worked for Defi at the time of its official withdrawal from Vietnam in 2004 continued her work under the new NGO. Moreover, 'my' NGO that had partnered Defi in its Vietnam project was also invited to continue the cooperation, but this time under the

²⁹ Defi was described as 'a family-like' organization by its former chair (interviewed in 2009, name withheld) based on the fact that it was founded by two couples that were close family friends, one of whose sons later followed his father as a chair of the association; interestingly, the new NGO also has family-like features despite the bigger scale of its activities. For example, the persons holding the signature rights of the new NGO include the Defi director, her partner in life and her best friend. These suggest the importance of personal relations in the life of voluntary associations.

new NGO and without financial contribution. Therefore, I have chosen to consistently refer to the case study's NGO as Defi to emphasise the de facto continuation of the cooperation based on key actors rather than an institutional setting.

The Minh Son single women's Savings and Credit project is of particular interest to my inquiry for two reasons. First, it is targeted at women-headed households only: single (out-of-wedlock) mothers, separated or divorced mothers and widows with children. This particular composition and mix of women allows us to explore gendered norms, assumptions and practices that impact on women's lives in the commune. Second, the project management model in the commune differs from those adopted with married women's groups in other communes, as single women themselves comprise the project's Board of Management (BoM). This management structure, as I suggest in Chapter Seven, challenges some key assumptions in development practice and the usual role division between donors, local (institutional) partners and the beneficiaries. Moreover, it facilitates learning among the women that does not take place in Defi's Savings and Credit projects targeting married women. This factor allows us to consider the 'people's capacity' (Törnquist 2003, 2004) or 'capability' (Drydyk 2005) claims in democratization as well as any claim that democracy can also be promoted within projects that do not specifically aim to do so.

Village Self-reliance and Development in Dong Xuan commune

The Village Self-reliance and Development model was introduced to two communes in Hoa Binh province in 1997, only a year after the first savings and credit loans were distributed in Minh Son. Dong Xuan commune, which I have chosen for closer analysis, was one of the model's two pilot communes.

Dong Xuan commune, consisting of six villages, is a mountainous rural commune in Hoa Binh province, less than an hour's drive from the provincial capital. It is mainly populated by the Muong people, one of the largest ethnic minority groups in Vietnam, ethnically and linguistically close to the Kinh people. Vietnamese is commonly spoken, but in addition, Muong is widely used as a home language. Agriculture is the main form of subsistence; besides rice cultivation, many families grow sugar cane for additional income.

Defi's funds have been used, for example, to tackle problems with water sanitation, to buy rice seeds for the village and to build concrete floors for animal cages. For example, in Muong 1 hamlet (*xóm*),³⁰ 73 households benefit from piped

³⁰ Instead of using the real names of the hamlets, I have renamed them Muong 1, 2... hamlets for the sake of anonymity.

water while in Muong 2 hamlet concrete floors for animal husbandry were built for 86 households. The commune is not the most remote in the district, but is still relatively isolated from the provincial capital. Roads are narrow and some parts of the villages are difficult to reach by car especially during the rainy season. Surrounded by mountains, the views are idyllic, but living conditions demanding.

As with the case of Minh Son, Defi officially handed over the project to its local partners in 2004 after which the Village Development Boards (VDB) established by the project have continued working actively to implement different small scale development activities. In Muong 1, one of the model's two pilot villages where I conducted some of my interviews, the number of VDB members, a central body responsible for activities, was reduced from eight to three as soon as Defi handed the project assets to the VDB. This change was validated by claims of increasing VDB efficiency (VDB Group interview 5.11.2011).

One of the key objectives of the Village Self-reliance and Development Intervention model is to enhance local (village) democracy. Therefore, the model allows us to examine democracy promotion (as an explicit objective of the NGO project) within a specific (Vietnamese) context. As the intervention targets all households instead of women-headed households only, it adds insights to the questions of gender and equality, thus enriching our understanding of the complexities faced in aid practice.

The Village Self-reliance and Development model is based on coordination by the Village Development Boards that play a central role in project implementation. VDB members are selected at village meetings by participating villagers and are responsible for making village development plans based on the needs identified at the meetings. As the needs are identified and prioritized, the VDB makes detailed implementation plans, calculates the budget and mobilizes the necessary resources, in addition to the negotiated support from the donor NGO. The intervention model includes circulating the funds used – to repair house roofs, for example. Different kinds of training courses are also organized depending on identified needs. The core idea of the model is to provide decision-making power to villagers in small-scale village-level development activities thereby enhancing democracy in the locales.

3 METHODOLOGY: TOWARDS A BAKHTINIAN READING OF DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

In this chapter, I begin by situating Bakhtin against a short biographical background, aiming to contextualize his work in order to explain my motivation in my use of a Bakhtinian analytical framework. Then I move on to discuss selected concepts by Bakhtin and how I apply them in my study before briefly discussing the potential of Bakhtinian reading of development practice. Finally, I describe my methods of data collection and analysis.

3.1 About Bakhtin: biographical notes

Mikhail Mikhailovits Bakhtin (1895 – 1975) was a Russian philosopher and cultural theorist who, for reasons to be elaborated, is often associated in the West with literature studies. Nielsen (2002: 23) has pointed out that even though '[Bakhtin's] work is usually considered to speak most pertinently to audiences in literature theory or cultural studies [...] he himself did not see it this way'. Not surprisingly, therefore, it has been proposed that Bakhtin's work has significance beyond literature and cultural studies (see e.g. Emerson 1995; Vice 1997; Bauer & McKinstry 1991; Hohne & Wussow 1994; Hirschkop 1999; Mayerfeld Bell & Gardiner 1998).³¹ Holquist (1981: xv) went as far as arguing that 'Bakhtin is gradually emerging as *one of the leading thinkers* of the twentieth century' (emphasis added).

Bakhtin's texts reached Western scholars in the early 1980s when his monographs 'Rabelais and His World'³² and 'Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics'³³ were translated into English. The book on Rabelais was based on Bakhtin's dissertation, which caused such disagreement in the Soviet academic jury that Bakhtin was refused his doctorate. However, his ideas on carnival and the grotesque, central to his book on Rabelais, had a tremendous impact on research on the Renaissance and literature. In the 1990s increasing numbers of his works became available in English. Articles appeared on how Bakhtin (see 1995, 1996, 2000, 2002, 2003 and 2012) contributes, for example, to cultural theory, sociology, social psychology, anthropology, feminist studies, linguistics and semiotics (see e.g. Bauer & McKinstry 1991; Hohne & Wussow 1994; Henderson 1992; Mandelker 1995;

31 For a more comprehensive list of publications on Bakhtin, see Bakhtin 1995.

32 «Творчество Франсуа Рабле и народная культура средневековья и ренессанса», 1965.

33 «Проблемы поэтики Достоевского», 1963.

Mayerfeld Bell & Gardiner 1998; Hirschkop & Shepherd 2001; Nielsen 2002). The broad, cross-disciplinary interest shown in his work has been taken as a sign of ‘the enormous potential and adaptability of his theories’ (Thomson 1990: 2). For example, Bakhtin’s theory of intersubjectivity, central to which is Bakhtin’s concept of dialogue / dialogism, has been noted for its potential to contribute to our understanding of intercultural encounters (Nielsen 2002: 18-19). My own reading of Bakhtin supports the view that his concepts can add insights to even broader fields of academic inquiry.

During his lifetime, Bakhtin also remained relatively unknown in his home country, the Soviet Union. Besides the books on Rabelais and Dostoevsky, Bakhtin’s texts were mainly published posthumously when his theoretical and philosophical works were compiled into two books ‘Вопросы литературы и эстетики’ (*Vo-prosy literary i estetiki*, 1975)³⁴ and ‘Эстетика словного творчество’ (*Estetika slovnogo tvorchestvo*, 1979).

Bakhtin has sometimes been read as a Marxist scholar,³⁵ an interpretation that culminates in disputes over the authorship of ‘Marxism and the Philosophy of Language’³⁶ by V.N. Voloshinov as well as other ‘Marxist’ works by the so-called ‘Bakhtin Circle’.³⁷ A Soviet linguist, V.V. Ivanov, was, according to Morris (1994: 2), the first to propose that the writings of Voloshinov and Medvedev – another key member of the ‘Circle’ – were, in fact, written by Bakhtin, a position later adopted by scholars both in Russia and the West (e.g. Clark & Holquist 1984; Седов / Sedov 2010). Other scholars have put forward the argument that the book was written cooperatively by Bakhtin and Voloshinov, thus not entirely ruling out the latter’s authorship (e.g. Alpatov 2004). And finally, an increasingly influential group of researchers argue that ‘Marxism and the Philosophy of Language’ as well as other works by members of the ‘Bakhtin Circle’, including works by Voloshinov, a devoted Marxist, were influenced by Bakhtin³⁸ but not written by him (Morson & Emerson 1990: 105; Brandist 2002³⁹, 2004; Shepherd 2004: 19).⁴⁰

34 ‘Published in English in ‘the Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin’, edited by M. Holquist (1981).

35 See Shepherd (2004: 18-19) for discussion of Marxism and the Bakhtin Circle.

36 «Марксизм и философия языка», first published in Russian in 1929. The English translation published in 1986 by Harvard University Press (V. N. Voloshinov 1986).

37 See Brandist et al. (2004) for discussion of the Circle.

38 Bakhtin himself has argued the book was ‘written in the closest creative contact [with Voloshinov]’ (quoted in Hirschkop 1999: 129).

39 Brandist (2002: 53), for example, points to ‘the quality and quantity of footnote references’ found in the works published in the names of Voloshinov and Medvedev, differentiating them from the texts of M.M. Bakhtin who was known for the lack of references in his texts.

40 Hirschkop (1999: 129) has pointed out that the dispute was not so much about whether Bakhtin was Marxist or not as about his claimed authorship and also ‘the extent to which his theory was

My own reading of Bakhtin does not support claims of his Marxism. Even if he had been closely involved in writing ‘Marxism and the Philosophy of Language’, it is clear to me that, in the Soviet Russia, scholars who wanted to publish their work were commonly required to make references to Marx and Lenin despite the topic of their research. This, as such, should not be taken as evidence of the author being Marxist.⁴¹ Moreover, the fact that Bakhtin was arrested in 1929, accused of activities in an underground Christian group, lived in internal exile in different parts of the Soviet Union from 1930 till 1969 and, in 1937, and was dismissed from the institute where he worked due to accusations of ‘bourgeois objectivism’ in his teaching (Brandist et al. 2004: 269) do not, to me, point to an advocate of Marxism.

Dostoevsky’s work offered an interesting context in which Bakhtin could develop his ideas on a person’s consciousness, the importance of personal experiences and the nature of human acts – all of which had already been discussed in Bakhtin’s early philosophical writings. It is important to stress that even though Bakhtin later elaborated his conceptual ideas in the context of literature, this does not limit his relevance to literature studies. In the light of Soviet history, it becomes evident that literature, perhaps more than most fields of human activity, provided a channel for saying things which could not otherwise be said, thereby allowing Bakhtin to experiment with concepts such as heteroglossia (see below) and dialogue (as the opposite of the ‘authoritarian word’). In the Soviet context, literature became an important field of political contestation. I have no evidence, however, to support a claim that Bakhtin had a political agenda even though his ideas can be interpreted as political, particular when placed in the context of Stalinist state. Ultimately, whether or not Bakhtin meant to convey political messages, he can be understood as political, as art necessarily has connections to life (which cannot escape the political) just as politics is always linked to language.

Hirschkop (1999: x) has suggested that ‘dialogism’, one of Bakhtin’s central notions, should be interpreted ‘as a response to the historical problem of democratic culture’ though it is important to note that dialogism is different ‘from what we think of as dialogue’ (ibid.). Indeed, Bakhtin’s notion of dialogue as well as dialogism leaves a lot of space for various interpretations. Morson and Emerson (1990: 49), for example, use it ‘as “a model of the world”’. They remark that

informed by “external” social and political realities.’

41 Similar preconditions can be found in other socialist states. For example, a Vietnamese scholar once explained to me how to read Vietnamese scientific articles: ‘A person may write several pages referring to what Ho Chi Minh has said, as that makes the work [publishable]. The real message of the work can be hidden in only one sentence or a short chapter. You just have to learn how to find the critical content among all that nonsense.’ (Personal communication with a Vietnamese assistant professor of social sciences, name withheld.)

dialogue has been taken as ‘a synonym for interaction, or verbal interaction in general, and is thereby trivialized’ (ibid.). It is also worth pointing out that in my work, when referring to encounters between subjects, I mostly apply Bakhtin’s notion of a dialogical relationship – a particular kind of conceptual relationship that may involve real speaking subjects (Bakhtin 1996: 335), which differs from dialogism which, as pointed out by (Hirschkop 1999: 4), is a philosophical idea and ‘not a description of actual speech’. This choice, thus, may be seen as ‘trivialising’ Bakhtin, but even so, I argue that it may be justified by its instrumental value for reconceptualising development practice.

It was not until 1975, 1979 and 1986 that Bakhtin’s early philosophical texts, written in the 1920s, were published in Soviet Russia, introducing a new side of Bakhtin to scholars. For my own understanding of Bakhtin, and my interest in his thinking, a turning point was my reading of *‘K filosofii postupka’* (Bakhtin 2003) (‘Towards a Philosophy of the Act’⁴²). The text is deeply committed to discussion of being human and the grounds for human acts, a field which is arguably central to involvement in intentional social change – the core of ‘development’ practice.

Brandist (2002: 39) has suggested that ‘Towards a Philosophy of the Act’ ‘is of interest chiefly for what it tells us about Bakhtin’s later work’ as it is full of themes that recur in various ways throughout his writing career. Thomson (2012) offers a good overview of the English-language reception of the book, pointing out that it has received little attention because it is usually seen as a shortened compendium of Bakhtin’s later work. That is, when put in the context of Bakhtin’s other (later) texts, ‘Towards a Philosophy of the Act’ is seen as including ideas further developed in his later work, where they are ‘more worthy of our attention’ (ibid.: 176). While this seems to be the dominant view, Thomson also points out that other opinions suggest that Bakhtin’s early works should be approached ‘on their own terms and as (perhaps) radically different from what comes later’ (Thomson 2012: 176).

Bakhtin’s early philosophical writings manifest his interest in the self, in taking responsibility for action. The ethos ‘I for the other’ is a part of Bakhtin’s ethics which is based on the self-other relation. This responsible act towards the ‘other’ takes the form of creative acts in the ‘event of Being’. What strikes me about Bakhtin’s philosophical texts is that NGO activists like myself can appropriately place their own actions in the course of development cooperation into the framework of ‘responsible acts’ described by Bakhtin. Even though my initial motivation to enter the world of development practice was not about responsible acts or global solidarity, but rather a combination of coincidence and a general interest in

42 English translation by Vadim Liapunov (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1993/4).

Vietnam, the more I was involved in the practice, the more I saw ‘doing development’ as something I needed to do. That is, experience in the field and encounters with the poor, especially women, both significantly changed my experience of the world and urged me to re-evaluate my own being.

According to Nielsen (2002: 36), Bakhtin’s early philosophical writings reunite ‘the aesthetic (the shaping of meaning in action) and the ethical (a cognitive element of the act itself) in explanations of the act as a unified event’. Any act therefore, ‘is composed in a two-sided form of answerability that includes both a special reference to the uniqueness of the action and a more general moral reference that situates the act as an emotional-volitional orientation in the actors’ entire life history’ (ibid.).

Regardless of the gaps in our knowledge of Bakhtin’s life,⁴³ we know that he was familiar with German philosophy, especially Kant and neo-Kantianism which he frequently commented on, as well as European and Russian literature. Bakhtin has sometimes been accused of ignoring appropriate referencing practices (e.g. Brandist 2002) but it seems to me that this manifested Bakhtin’s indifference to the origin of ideas, rather treating the ideas of others as food for his own thinking. In Bakhtin’s own words:⁴⁴

Значимость того или иного теоретического положения совершенно не зависит от того, познано оно кем-нибудь или не познано. (Bakhtin 2003: 14).

The importance of any theoretical position does not depend on whether it is known by someone (translation MH⁴⁵).

For Bakhtin, literature was a reflection of reality, thereby providing suitable material with which to explore his ideas further:

Мы не знаем, в каком мире мы живем. Роман хочет нам его показать. (Bakhtin 1996: 139).

We don’t know in what kind of the world we are living. A novel wants to show it to us.

43 During the 1930s Bakhtin worked on his theory of the novel, while in the 1940s and 1950s he lived in an isolated province in a state of almost ‘non-existence’ (nebytija) with regards the spheres of science and literature (Bakhtin 1996: 379).

44 It is worth noting here that for reasons explained in the section on research methods, I provide the original text first followed by my translation. Readers not knowing the original language, may directly move on to read the English version.

45 All translations from Russian into English are mine. Thus, the possible mistakes are also mine.

These words, as I argue, show how Bakhtin positioned novels in the wider context of social inquiry, seeing them as material through which we may learn about the world. Similarly, Aronowitz (1995: 129) has identified Bakhtin as a social theorist. While it is true, as Brandist (2002: 29) has argued, that in his early work Bakhtin had a ‘pervasive tendency to transform all political questions into ethical ones’, in my reading of Bakhtin, the ethical is not isolated from the political. Rather, Bakhtin’s inclination towards the responsible act, and the ‘I and the other’ relationship, can be read as highly political concerns as, in everyday life, the political is manifest, not only in language, but also in small and bigger acts, such as the development interventions described in my thesis.

3.2 Towards a Bakhtinian reading of development practice

A Bakhtinian reading, as I argue in this section, allows us to approach development practice from a new perspective. It should be noted, however, that his work does not open up easily: challenges are manifold. For example, his texts are slow reading as only some were edited for publication by the author himself while most of his work was compiled and published after his death. Thus, many of the texts included in the Russian language edition of his ‘Collected Works’ (‘Sobranie Sochinenij’) that form the basis of my reading of Bakhtin, maintain the nature of sketches and notes. To give an example, I quote:

Проблема понимания. Проблема контекста. Границы контекста (Bakhtin 1996: 252).

The problem of understanding. The problem of the context. The limits of the context.

Reading these lines, I can almost see the author sitting at his desk jotting down ideas that he wants to develop further. Most of us do the same. The nature of his notes adds to the challenge faced by a researcher when choosing between the ideas that his texts contain. Bakhtin’s concepts may also change over time or can be understood differently in different contexts, while ‘at times [Bakhtin] simply contradicts himself’ as noted by Morson and Emerson (1990: 2).

Some of the constraints a researcher faces with Bakhtin are linguistic. For example, the Russian word ‘слово’ (*slovo*) is broad in its usage. When translated into English it can refer to a ‘word’ (a linguistic unit, the basic and most frequent meaning of *slovo* in normal speech), ‘discourse’ or ‘speech’ (e.g. in дар слова –

the gift of speech / the gift of the gab, Am.). Similarly the Russian word ‘смысл’ (*smysl*) can refer to a ‘meaning’, a ‘sense’, a ‘point’ or ‘importance’. This has created problems in translations as also noted in the ‘Bakhtin-dialogism’ e-mail list in February 2011 where it was concluded that mistaken translations of particular words used by Bakhtin may easily cause confusion over his ideas among scholars. In my view, the confusion may also be seen as productive of new understandings and thus applications of Bakhtin.

Despite the challenges faced, I propose that Bakhtin’s work (especially Bakhtin 1996 and 2003) may facilitate our inquiry into development practice in a productive manner. To me, his texts clearly show that when analyzing literature Bakhtin was simultaneously analyzing the world, or, more specifically, the acts of human beings. He was interested in topics such as the basis for acts (*postupok*), especially responsible acts (*otvetsvennyj postupok*) and the relationship between ‘I’ (*ja*) and the ‘other’ (*drugoi*), from which his concept of dialogic relationship clearly originates. What became important for Bakhtin were the moments in which one experienced world comes into contact with another experienced world, a fundamental relationship that can also be seen behind Bakhtin’s conceptualization of meaning. This brings the discussion of Bakhtin to a more detailed analysis of those of his concepts which are used in this study – in what I refer to as ‘my Bakhtinian reading’.

The working assumption applied to this research project, therefore, is that Bakhtin’s key concepts offer the tools to explore development aid practice in a fruitful manner. Indeed, they have already inspired social research: his notion of answerability has been read as situating action theory in moral philosophy, thereby assisting social theory in its understanding of actors in political communities (Nielsen 2002); it has been proposed that ‘Bakhtinian “otherness” is an integral part of the dynamic of social development’ (Zavala 1990: 78); and feminist scholars have applied Bakhtin’s concepts of dialogism, voice and heteroglossia (see Hohne & Wussow 1994) when exploring ‘feminist dialogics’ as a form of cultural resistance. The theme of resistance has also been central to other interpretations of Bakhtin’s work. Hajdukowski-Ahmed (1990: 161), for example, has suggested that ‘[t]he writings of Bakhtin provide us with a tool for analyzing and exposing all hegemonic forms, all authoritarian monologisms’. Furthermore, Bakhtin’s notions of heteroglossia and monoglossia (outlined below) have been used to reconceptualize gender (Francis 2012), thereby coming close (while not being identical) to my usage of the concepts.

My starting point with regards Bakhtin relies on his theory of meaning, which highlights the difference between words and meanings, thereby highlighting the limits of an assumption of ‘shared language’ (Tvedt 2006) in aid practice. Tvedt links the notion of shared language to ‘a strategic communication regime’ that is ‘a meaning-producing arena’ (ibid.). While Tvedt rightly hints at contested meanings within the arena, he pays little attention to the actual gap between the languages of different actors, perhaps due to the fact that his notion of the Dostango system focuses on describing the aid system along the lines of financial flows.⁴⁶ Yet the problematic nature of the development buzzwords that pepper development discourses has been pointed out by several researchers. Mosse (2005), for example, has noted the ‘ambiguity’ of development concepts, while Kurki (2013) has demonstrated how the different meanings attributed to the term ‘democracy’ produce variations in attitudes to aid practices among the actors involved. Perceptively, however, Cornwall (2007) has argued that ‘development buzzwords gain their [...] power through [...] their capacity to embrace a multitude of possible meanings, and their normative resonance’. Thus, buzzwords may also be understood as a mechanism that binds actors together (even if on a superficial level). As will be evident from Chapters Six and Eight of my study, such multitude of meanings is not necessarily a problem to development practice, but equally may be so.

Bakhtin’s insight that words and meanings are not the same is clearly not a novel idea in the social sciences. While the different meanings of development buzzwords have been analyzed in the past (see articles in *Development in Practice*, Vol. 17, No 4-5, August 2007), what Bakhtin can contribute to our understanding is to raise our awareness of the contextual nature of meaning construction and to guide our examination of meanings in concrete empirical cases.

Bakhtin’s notion of dialogue can help us to conceptualize aid practice as a space in which the meanings of development and its key concepts are necessarily subject to re-evaluation and change in the actors’ dialogical interaction. Therefore, a Bakhtinian reading facilitates a research process that is interested in meanings as they become manifest, and are contested, in aid practice; it can add to our understanding of the complexities of aid practice (and probably also influence practice itself). Thus, I take a pragmatic stance to Bakhtin in which a discourse or an utterance is seen as having practical consequences (see also Aronowitz 1995: 131).

⁴⁶ Tvedt uses the concept of Dostango system – a donor, state, NGO system – to refer to an international aid system in which donors, state and NGOs interact and in which the material boundaries of the system are delineated by the flow and transfer of funds (Tvedt 2006). While such theorizing makes a lot of sense and is descriptive of the aid system in the Nordic countries it nevertheless, in my view, fails to adequately pay attention to the fact that aid recipients / beneficiaries at the end of the system may be ignorant of the language they are assumed to share (see e.g. Hakkarainen & Katsui 2009).

Adding to the earlier scholarship of development as contested and non-technical that emphasize the importance of local contexts including history and cultural values (Ferguson 1994; Li 2007; Mosse 2005) – often ignored or poorly understood by development practitioners – as well as studies pointing to the juxtaposition of local vs. scientific / Western knowledge (Hobart 1993) in development practice, my Bakhtinian reading facilitates a similar inquiry through the Bakhtinian concepts that I now turn to discuss in more detail.

The main concepts and their implications for development practice

The main analytical concepts selected for this study from Bakhtin's rich legacy are:

- theory of meaning and re-evaluation of meanings
- dialogical relationship / dialogue
- monological / authoritarian dialogue / monologism
- heteroglossia vs. monoglossia
- centripetal vs. centrifugal forces in society

As already noted, application of the concepts to the analysis of my data constitute what is referred to in this study as '*my* Bakhtinian reading' thus underlining the possibility of different combinations of Bakhtin's concepts depending on the focus and intention of a researcher. In what follows I depict each of the concepts and reflect on its potentialities in analyzing development practice, gender and democracy promotion.

Bakhtin's **theory of meaning** is the foundation for the Bakhtinian reading applied in this research. Holding that words and meanings are not the same (Bakhtin 1996), Bakhtin argued that the meaning of a word can only be uncovered in a contextualized utterance (*vyskazyvanie*), or as Morris (1994: 5) phrased it: '[For Bakhtin] meaning is produced or realized only in a specific utterance of a communication event, that is, in a precise historical actualization'.⁴⁷ Thus, it should be stressed that the notion of utterance should not be confused with the notion of a sentence. An utterance is always situated and marked by 'eventness'. The following example aims to clarify my point here. Imagine a situation in which two persons are sitting in a room. One of them says: 'What fine weather!' Bakhtin's notion of utterance asserts that the meaning of assembled words can be under-

⁴⁷ In Hobart's terms (1993: 24), Bakhtin conceptualized speech as 'situated acts'.

stood only in relation to the context. Thus, the sentence, ‘What fine weather!’ can carry different meanings. The most obvious would be that the weather is fine and the speaker is happy about it, but the opposite could also apply. Imagine now the following situation. Two persons are sitting in a room. One of them says, ‘What fine weather!’ with an emphasis on the word ‘fine’ (expressed e.g. by intonation and the length of the first vowel). The other person then turns towards a window and sees sleet falling from the sky and notices that wet snowflakes, blown by the wind, are hitting the window. Knowing these contextual facts of the very event of the utterance we therefore understand that the meaning of the sentence is rather: ‘What awful weather!’ Thus, in Bakhtin’s conceptualization, a word necessarily carries its context with it.

Bakhtin’s notion of utterance implies that in order to understand a meaning, a researcher has to be conscious of, and knowledgeable about, the context, both in terms of time and space. The notion of utterance therefore highlights the non-essentialist nature of meanings. Any key concept in development, such as ‘participation’ therefore contains several potential meanings as understood by different actors. In the analytical chapters that follow, I show how key concepts of Defi’s development thinking are given different meanings by different actors as an outcome of different meaning-construction processes. My analysis also takes into consideration a wider web of other key concepts that constitute the NGO’s development thinking, as meanings of individual concepts cannot be understood in isolation. Moreover – given the dialogical nature of any utterance – informing my analytical process is the understanding that an utterance is always directed to a specific person / group in a particular situation, usually in reply to prior utterances: understanding the immediate context as well as the larger socio-political context became crucial issues in my knowledge-production process. The contextual knowledge of the researcher is, of course, always limited. However, the notion of utterance demands that the researcher attempt to relinquish ethnocentric interpretations and pre-defined value judgments in order to see different meanings given to, for example, ‘participation’ by local people as based on their lived experiences and rooted in the local socio-political landscape (see Chapter Eight).

In Bakhtin’s theory of meaning, time, space (*prostranstvo*) and personal experience play a central role in the construction of person’s understanding (*ponimanie*) of a word. Thus, meanings are highly contextualized and historical but not fully determined by time and space. According to Bakhtin (2003) space becomes more important than time as time cannot explain the actual formation of the individual’s consciousness because personal experiences play a considerable role in the meaning-construction process. Experiences contribute to a person’s con-

consciousness resulting in Bakhtin's (2003) claim that there cannot be two identical consciousnesses.

Bakhtin's theory of meaning links to his notion of coexistence (*sosuzhestvovanie*): an individual acts and experiences the world through other individuals' acts and experiences. Time and space for Bakhtin formed concrete, individual and unique worlds in which individual consciousness, through shared moments with other people and their consciousnesses, existed and acted. These encounters between 'I' and 'the other' are crucial in the development of a person's consciousness and understanding, either through physical, face to face encounters, or through other mediated forms such as texts; a reading act is a form of interpersonal encounter. Thus, according to Bakhtin, meanings are constructed in dialogical encounters. 'I' can never be isolated from 'the other' and does not exist in isolation from others. Bakhtin positions his idea of the human as one of interdependent self-construal.⁴⁸ He points out that, 'I always sit on two chairs' («Я сижу всегда на двух стульях»): 'I' should understand oneself simultaneously from inside («из себя») and from the perspective of the other («с точки зрения другого») (Bakhtin 1996: 68).

Bakhtin's theory of meaning bears similarities to feminist standpoint theory,⁴⁹ and a notion of 'situated knowledge' (Stoetzer and Yuval-Davis 2002), which both emphasize positioning while not claiming that there is a straightforward connection between social location and standpoint. For example, Stoetzer and Yuval-Davis (2002) note that 'in virtually all variations of standpoint theory, [...] the reduction of knowledge to a simple reflection of its social basis has been rejected', and stress that experiences, social practices and social values also facilitate the transformation of situatedness into knowledge: situatedness matters but does not determine a person's knowledge-production process. Similarly, we may see that Bakhtin's theory of meaning acknowledges the importance of experience. However, while standpoint theories point to the importance of social values and practices, Bakhtin stresses the importance of time and space in the meaning construction process, though social values and practices can be seen as representations of understandings manifested in a specific time and space. Moreover, both theories are based on a dialogical epistemology. That is, an individual self is understood as never isolated from the other or the collective of people, therefore, one's consciousness is always constructed in a dialogical process.

The nature of the meaning-construction process culminates in the notion of the dialogical; that is, encounters between my consciousness and the conscious-

48 For more on independent vs. interdependent self-construal see e.g. Kim 2002.

49 See also Bauer and McKinstry (1991: 2-3) who make the connection between standpoint theory and Bakhtinian 'dialogic consciousness', as both depend on context and condition.

ness of the other are central to the construction of meanings. How 'I' understand things may change only through exposure to how the other understands them. Dialogue, therefore, becomes a means for **re-evaluation of meanings** (*reevaluacija znachenie*).

Thus, the meaning-construction process takes place between 'I' and 'the other', and meanings expose themselves in specific utterances. Bakhtin (1996: 332) points out that a word (*slovo*) is, by its nature, something passing between individuals.

Слово нельзя отдать одному говорящему. [...] ведь ничьих слов нет.

A word cannot be given to one speaker only [...] as there doesn't exist a nobody's word.

That is, any word is part of earlier discourses that are embedded in its meaning (*smysl*). When somebody uses a word – for example, 'democracy' – it carries in it a specific meaning that correlates to the person's understanding of democracy. The same word 'democracy', however, carries a different meaning for 'the other'. The difference, according to Bakhtin, derives from different discourses contained within the word as well as different thinking and life experiences (in specific time and space) that have, via continuous re-evaluations of meanings, resulted in the current understanding of the word by a particular person. Construction and re-evaluation of the meaning is a continuous process that takes place over the course of interactions.

The notion of re-evaluation of meanings is central to my inquiry of aid practice for the following reasons. First, it argues for the open-endedness of meanings. That is, meanings are not closed or fixed but contested and subject to re-evaluation. As my consciousness is not isolated from that of the other, the interaction between the two consciousnesses has the potential to facilitate changes in meanings and thus my understanding. Second, as words and meanings are not the same, understanding alternative meanings given to key development concepts can add to our understanding of the challenges faced in aid practice. And third, aid practice can be understood as a process that aims at facilitating the re-evaluation of meanings in encounters and processes in which different understandings of key development concepts come up against each other.

As noted earlier, to Bakhtin meanings materialize in concrete utterances. However, as pointed out by Hitchcock (1992: xviii), subalternity also produces 'strategic silences'. This is important to remember. In my research I have conceptualized

such strategic silences as ‘a reply’ to an utterance as, according to Bakhtin (1996: 169), a reply⁵⁰ may take the form of words or action. Thus, silence and passivity are here understood as also comprising an active reply (see my analysis of participation in Chapter Eight). Moreover, development intervention *per se* can be seen as creating (or attempting to create) an alternative space that exposes participants to new experiences that facilitate changes in their understanding.

Bakhtin’s concepts of **dialogue** and dialogism have attracted perhaps more attention than any other of his formulations (e.g. Holquist 2002; Morris 1994; Brandist et. al 2004; Morson and Emerson 1990; Hirschkop 1999; Hohne and Wussow 1994; Bauer and McKinstry 1991; Bell and Gardiner 1998). I apply Bakhtin’s notion of dialogue as developed in his early philosophical work ‘*K filosofii postupka*’ (Bakhtin 1996; see also Bakhtin 1993) in which notions of dialogical relationships and authoritarian / monological dialogue were first discussed. With this choice I take the position that Bakhtin’s early work on dialogue, which he connected to ideas of responsible acts, has relevance on its own to development research and should not be read only as early sketches of his later versions of dialogism.

Here, dialogue is understood as a particular kind of a relationship between the speaker and the listener. It is always a two way communication.

Отношение между репликами диалога иное, чем между двумя предложениями монологического контекста или между двумя высказываниями на одну и ту же тему, не связанными диалогически. (Bakhtin 1996: 209).

The relationship between lines of a dialogue is different from between two proposals of monologic context or between two proposals on the same topic not linked dialogically with each other.

In Bakhtin’s (1996: 330-332) conceptualization, dialogue requires willingness to listen to the other, and an active attempt to understand the other and thus aims at understanding (*ponimanie*) the meaning (*smysl*) of the other. A relationship with a meaning differs from a relationship with a thing as the former is always dialogic because meaning is individually constructed and is subject to valuation, arguments and agreements (*soglasie*). Dialogue in Bakhtin’s vocabulary, thus, is polyphonic by nature. It recognizes equal truth within each individual consciousness and seeks for greater mutual understanding in which each participant re-evaluates the meanings (s)he has developed over time, thereby inevitably containing an element of contestation as part of the re-evaluation. It is important to note, however,

50 More precisely, Bakhtin uses an expression ‘*aktivno-otvetnoe ponimanie*’ (actively-replying understanding) to an utterance.

that there is no ‘final word’ in Bakhtinian dialogue: it is an evolving and unfinalized process – it starts as such and continues in the same manner. Meanings are not static as they are constantly being re-evaluated and change along with changes in a person’s understanding. This stance towards the social in the action is, of course, or should be, highly relevant to interpersonal interactions that seek change such as those which are fundamental to development practice.

A **dialogical relationship** thus refers to a form of dialogue in which the speaker does not merely express his / her view, but also understands that the other’s answer can change his / her own understanding of the topic. That is, a dialogical relationship is marked by anticipation of the other’s answer (in the form of words or action) and a readiness to accept the limitations of one’s own understanding.

If these requirements are not fulfilled, dialogue becomes monologic by nature. **Monologism** here refers to a refusal to acknowledge the other consciousness as equally right in relationship to the truth (Bakhtin 1996: 341, 350). In other words, monologic dialogue is perhaps an oxymoron, referring to a ‘pseudo’ dialogue in which one party treats the other as an object of consciousness (*soznanija*), not as another consciousness. **Monologic dialogue** is not interested in the other’s reply and strives for the possession of the final word (Bakhtin 1996: 350-351). In my thesis monologism becomes an important concept for a Bakhtinian gender analysis (Chapter Five) in which monologism is understood as an outcome of authoritarian dialogue.

My thesis is that Bakhtin’s conceptualizations of meaning and dialogue open up new ways of reading and understanding development practices. For example, the life experiences of key actors become relevant objects of study, as experiences have a role in a person’s meaning-construction processes. Therefore, if we limit analysis of development practice to the analysis of interventions *per se*, we fail to understand the choices made in the process of selecting between different modes of intervention. This leads to the problem that development is often understood primarily as requiring a planned social or economic change, a technical intervention, where a selection of tools to solve a concrete fixed ‘problem’ or ‘a condition requiring a cure’ (Hobart 1993: 1) become central to development practice. Such an approach easily leads us to believe, for instance, that poverty is about lack of money and that the solution therefore is to offer access to money. Fundamentally, I argue that treating development as an outcome of correct interventions largely ignores the roles played by the individuals behind the interventions.

The focus on actors within development practice is, of course, not a novel proposition. As convincingly argued by Long (2001), an actor-oriented approach can help us to understand different responses to similar structural circumstances in

relatively similar conditions. Both Long and Bakhtin thus suggest possibilities whereby the focus may rest on people rather than on economic or social structures in development research. Moreover, both emphasize the role of a person's everyday life experiences. However, Long is mainly interested in life experiences in connection with actors' behaviour while the Bakhtinian approach focuses on the role of life experiences in shaping a person's consciousness, thereby allowing the understanding of issues which contribute to their behaviour. Thus, a Bakhtinian approach allows us to go one step deeper into an inquiry into the importance of actors in development practice.

My claim is that, especially among small, voluntary NGOs, the role of individuals is central in concrete development projects. To support my argument, Chapter Six discusses, for example, the life experiences of the Defi Vietnam director and their manifestation in the NGO's development thinking. Furthermore, I explore how the NGO's development thinking transformed its development practices within the selected case studies, as part of dialogic interaction. Understanding the way Defi's development thinking has evolved is an important part of understanding the concrete projects as well. Moreover, unless we actively explore and analyze the development thinking associated with chosen interventions, we fail to understand what kinds of development those involved with the practice aim to promote.

My acceptance in this thesis of Bakhtin's formulation of meaning construction, and a focus on specific utterances that are bound to a certain time and space, leads to the requirement that the context of development practices be seriously considered. Time, for example, is never just present time, but also incorporates past times, while the environment constructs different actual spaces in which people may act. In terms of my research here, for example, it is important to see how the space for single mothers differs from that of women in 'standard' Vietnamese families. The emphasis on time and space also means that I, as a researcher, need to be conscious of different meanings of the same word. That is, instead of assuming similarities, or one 'true' meaning, it is necessary to analyze concrete utterances of a word to understand the meanings given to it.

Bakhtin's conceptualization of meaning, therefore, can be used (and is used here) as a frame that helps a researcher (and a practitioner) to seek out similarities as well being aware of differences between meanings. If this is acknowledged along with Bakhtin's claim that each individual consciousness is equally true, development practice becomes a platform for a re-evaluation of meanings in which donor staff members enter into a dialogic relationship with their partners. It must be noted that development practice can also be monologic by nature and use inter-

ventions to push forward donors' ideas that are treated as normative and assumed to be 'true' in an ethnocentric manner. That is, monologic development practice assumes, consciously or unconsciously, the inferiority of other views and understandings and does not show true interest in learning from the other. An outcome of such a relationship is an authoritarian approach that does not seek true dialogue in the Bakhtinian sense.

The notion of **heteroglossia** (*raznorechie*) is central to Bakhtin's (2012; Morris 1994: 15) understanding of society. All societies are by nature heteroglossic, that is, they consist of different consciousnesses and thus different voices. Bakhtin held that all voices are equal in the sense that they represent the individual's consciousness; different voices reflect different experienced realities that are 'true' to their carriers. This does not imply, however, that different voices are equal in terms of their power within a society: some voices are more authoritative than others in a particular socio-political context. We may see that Bakhtin's approach here is similar to a position taken by Drydyk (2005) and Cornwall (2003) when they separate a voice from an influence in the context of decision-making bodies.

Bakhtin argues that despite the heteroglossia present within all societies, **centripetal forces** aim to unify the heteroglossic reality. Those in power often represent centripetal forces (Bakhtin 2012: 24; Morson and Emerson 1990; see also Morris 1994: 15) thus defining the 'official', though even official is never truly unified, despite monologism having reasons to pretend it is. On the other hand, **centrifugal forces** (Bakhtin 2012: 25) represent heteroglossia within a society though, despite the fact that centrifugal forces challenge the official, this should not suggest a unified struggle against centripetal forces and thus, monoglossic accounts. Rather, centrifugal forces consist of different voices that do not have a joint agenda, so the struggle of heteroglossic voices against monoglossia is understood as fragmented rather than organized.

The notions of centripetal forces as 'official', and centrifugal forces as challenging the 'official', are central to Bakhtin's understanding of the dynamics between social forces. That is, we may see an attempted unity by centripetal forces, on the one hand, and the role of different voices rising from a heteroglossic society, on the other. The concepts can facilitate a novel reading of social norms, highlighting the fact that the 'official' is constantly under challenge despite power differences which render some voices more audible in society than others. These points are further illustrated in Chapters Four and Five where I use the notions of monologism and heteroglossia as well as centripetal / centrifugal forces to analyze gendered norms and practices.

In a Bakhtinian framework (as well as others), it has become important to analyze the nature of intervention and the relationship between donor and partner / recipient in exchanging ideas in aid interventions that aim at promoting democracy. Questions of whether democracy is supposed to be promoted within a dialogic or a non-dialogic (monologic or authoritarian) relationship should be of great interest. Following a Bakhtinian reading of development practice, we may assume that especially in democracy promotion, success has to do with how the project has been able to create spaces for re-evaluation of the notions of democracy, social equality, participation and other terms central to democratic culture. The coherence between utterances (what is said) by the donor and how the project is being constructed and implemented becomes highly significant. The project design should ‘speak the same language’ as the words spoken: that is, show in practice what kind of alternative interpretations are possible for the words. In Bakhtin’s terms, the project needs to offer new experiences that individuals can use to construct new meanings for words, whether those words are ‘democracy’ or ‘a single mother’ or anything else pertinent to project’s scope.

Development projects are thus transformed into spaces for communication between the donor and the project partners and beneficiaries. In this dialogic relationship, unlike in a monologue, there are no final words. Donor staff members enter the relationship in order to send out messages for the others to consider, and they emphasize the messages with concrete acts that help constitute the intervention. The others are expected to participate in the dialogue by sharing their understandings of the same issue and by answering / responding to the message in words or actions which may be immediate as well as delayed.

Bakhtin’s ‘I’ and ‘the other’ construction has at least two other interesting aspects that, I argue, help us understand development practice. First, the relationship between ‘I’ and ‘the other’ can explain why an individual is willing to engage in a development project on a voluntary basis with minimal or no salary. I shall come back to this issue when discussing the Defi director’s life history in Chapter Six. The ‘I for the other’ ethos that Bakhtin describes in ‘Towards a Philosophy of the Act’ (Bakhtin 2003; 1993) is not indifferent to the other. Here, we approach questions of ethics within aid practice. The consciousness of the other and encounters with the other may change the way ‘I’ choose to act. Even my thinking becomes my individual responsible act and my life consists of chains of my acts. For Bakhtin, living and acting are interwoven and inseparable:

Быть в жизни – значить поступать, быть не индифферентным к единственному целому (Bakhtin 2003: 40).

To be alive means to act, not to be indifferent to the whole.

This calls for personal participation and responsible acts. I argue that such a position of 'I' is not at all alien to development actors and is often particularly strong among volunteer workers in an NGO field.

Second, another aspect of 'I' and 'the others' allows us to alter how we analyze important social groups, especially marginalized groups. If the others are a mirror through which I see myself, as Bakhtin claims, my situation improves or worsens depending on how I am seen by the others. For example, being a single mother may or may not be a negative factor when the others look at me, depending on who is looking. The concrete importance to development practice of how Defi saw single women is further elaborated in my analysis in Chapter Seven. Depending on time and place different meanings of 'single mother' and subsequently different 'single motherhood' experiences can be found. This insight may be developed further; for example, the reference to others is arguably more binding in the context of Vietnam than in Finland, assuming that Kim (2002) is right in concluding that interdependent self-construal is dominant in Asian societies. In other words, how the others see me is more significant for Asians and in an Asian context, than perhaps for a Western person who, it is claimed, practices a greater level of independent self-construal. Of course, interdependent / independent are not opposite ends of a continuum, because both forms of self-construal take place in all societies.

3.3 Research Methods

After depicting the overall analytical concepts from which the research derives, this section describes the methods of data collection, the sets of data collected and methods of analysis employed in this interdisciplinary study (Moran 2010), thereby exploiting the synergies created by going beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. My work, in itself, is therefore a dialogue between the Humanities and Social Sciences: it is theoretically grounded in Bakhtin's ideas and concepts and adds methodological tools drawn from textual analysis, participatory observation, semi-structured interviews and self-reflexivity.

The research utilizes project documents gathered since 1995, first as an NGO activist and later as a researcher. The research data can be divided into three distinct groups representing, as Bakhtin would call them, different speech genres: (1) written project documents; (2) interviews and narratives; and finally, (3) my own observations from the project sites since 1997. The first set of materials includes

(A) project reports and documents; (B) correspondence between the Defi Vietnam director and the Vietnamese project officer(s) and other partners; and (C) correspondence between the Vietnamese project officer(s) and Defi's local project partners.

Due to my linguistic limitations and the fact that most of the documents in category C were hand written in Vietnamese, this set of data was not an object of an in-depth analysis. Instead, when going through such material in the project office in Hanoi during the summer of 2009, I was specifically looking for the rough content of documents written by the local partners. Not surprisingly, the documents reflected the reporting requirements of Defi, which, in turn, reflected those of the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. In other words, the majority of documents falling into this category reported calculable results of the project activities such as the number of women who had received loans, the repayment rates, how and what kind of training had been implemented and so forth. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the documents had significantly less to offer than the correspondence between Defi director and Defi's Vietnamese project officers.

In combination, the project documentation is of particular value. First, it shows how the material written for the main funding agency of the project, the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, reflects the built-into-the-system requirements of the donor with regards reporting on results – in terms of content, naturally, but also in terms of supervising mechanisms such as reporting frequency. Using the vocabulary of Tvedt (2002; 2006), such reports are direct reflections of the Dostango system of which Defi's project was part, due to the fact that the project received state funding. In a Bakhtinian reading, such reports represent a professional speech genre that requires knowledge of a certain style and way of expressing things, including prioritized key words that derive from international development discourses and more specifically from the Ministry's development policy papers. Second, material produced for the internal use of the project, such as the partners' reports and correspondence within Vietnam and between Finland and Vietnam is freer from outside pressure in terms of modalities and reflects the authors' levels of knowledge of development discourses. This internal correspondence is seldom accessible to researchers and comprises an especially valuable source of information in this study.

Defi's project organization produced a rich body of correspondence because of the organizational model used. The NGO's Vietnam director was based in Helsinki (Finland) while the Vietnamese project officer(s) had an office in Hanoi (Vietnam). Therefore, Defi's internal communication was mainly conducted via faxes and e-mails. Such material from the early years of the project is especially

interesting from my research point of view as it includes discussions in which the Defi director explains her individual understanding of how development can take place. In addition, her faxes actively place the project within a wider context of international development aid – while the frame of reference in the utterances of Defi’s project officers is usually shaped by local realities, including the Vietnamese state. They link the NGO’s internal discussions (as I do, in my own reading of them for this thesis) to debates on the role of NGOs in development as well as to the gap between intention, aid practice and the outcomes of development interventions. The correspondence thus articulates how Defi’s development thinking should be understood and applied in practice by the Vietnamese staff. Naturally, had the Defi Vietnam director been based in Hanoi, these kinds of discussions would have been conducted in an oral form and thus the specific utterances would have been impossible to study. However, the very idea of sending an expatriate staff to Vietnam was contrary to Defi’s development principles, allowing the project documents to offer a unique possibility for a researcher to build on. Chapter Six will examine more closely the construction of meanings in Defi’s development thinking, utilizing both project documentation as well as in-depth interviews of Defi’s Vietnam director and the NGO’s Vietnamese staff.

Interviews have been conducted and narratives gathered over a number of years since 2004, that is, since I made the decision to research the project. A few words concerning my particular position as an insider to the project are needed here. Being an insider⁵¹ to the project significantly helped me to access project documentation as well as the interviewees for my research purposes. As a long-term project donor, I was already known by many key people in the two communes, which saved me lengthy explanations of who I was and why I was interested in the project. Thus, even though I did not stay long in the field when conducting my research interviews, my earlier presence in the communes gave the interview situations some of the qualities of an ethnographic interview (Tolonen & Palmu 2007: 91). Given that my research was inspired by ethnographies of aid, and considering similarities my methodology shares with ethnographic research, I consider my study to be ethnographically oriented rather than comprising ethnography as

51 Chavez (2008: 479) has pointed out that while researchers have reported the advantages of being an insider, there are also challenges involved such as ‘selective reporting’ and ‘breaking or maintaining relationships with participants when leaving the field’. Dwyer and Buckle (2009: 60) have suggested that instead of seeing a researcher as insider or outsider they should be seen as both. Despite the seemingly dichotomous positions, I consider ‘insidedness’ and ‘outsidedness’ not as fixed positions, but as shifting positions (see Naples 1996) which are not fully up to me to define but also depend on how I am seen by my interviewees.

traditionally understood in anthropology.⁵² On the other hand, being an ‘insider’ in the project being studied can provide other obstacles. For example, switching one’s role from NGO activist to that of researcher is not only a challenge to the researcher’s own self-understanding, but it may also cause the interviewees some confusion. In my experience, even when I explained the purpose of my research visits to the communes, I was still seen by many as a former project donor. Consequently, I was sometimes treated as someone who might bring new funding to the communes, and there was no escaping expressions of gratitude on the part of those whom I now sought to interview who knew me from the past or who had simply heard about my earlier visits to the commune as an NGO representative. Neither could I totally avoid direct requests for more support for the communes. Even though I repeatedly communicated my changed position, potentially I was still seen more as a donor than a researcher in the eyes of my interviewees. Clearly it was out of my power to unilaterally define myself as a researcher given that one’s identity is equally constructed by the people one encounters.

I started my research interviews in 2004 with the first interview with the Defi Vietnam director and the NGO’s Vietnamese project officers as well as selected project participants in Minh Son and Xuan Dong communes. These first interviews with project beneficiaries and partners conducted in 2004 were conducted by a Vietnamese research assistant,⁵³ tape recorded, transcribed and translated into English. They were primarily used for other purposes than this study, but offered valuable background information for my thesis as well. Other interviews in 2004 I conducted myself in English, tape recorded and transcribed for analysis.⁵⁴ In 2009 and 2010 a new set of interviews included a second in-depth interview of the Defi

52 ‘Ethnography of aid’ (see Ferguson 1994; Li 2007; Mosse 2005) investigates the workings of development aid policies and practices drawing on –among other sources of data - documents produced by aid practitioners. It is this type of ethnography that has inspired my work – as I share with it an interest in aid policies and practices. Yet, my application of a Bakhtinian reading in my data analysis process differentiates my study from ethnographies of aid by turning the focus of my analysis to language in ways that rather link it with the research traditions of literature studies than ethnography production. It is worth noting that traditionally the term ethnography is used to refer both to a particular form of research based on fieldwork over an extended period of time (characterized by the personal involvement of the researcher in the everyday lives of those studied) and to its eventual written product - an ethnography – that draws its data from the fieldwork experience and is rich in descriptive details (e.g. Davies 2008: 4-5). It has also been argued that ethnography ‘cannot be reduced to a set of standardized techniques that any practitioner can implement’ (Ceronwka and Malkki 2007: 20, 164). I shall briefly return to possibilities offered by ‘traditional’ ethnographic research in my concluding chapter as seen against my Bakhtinian reading framework.

53 The title ‘research assistant’ used here is a bit of a misnomer as the person has a Ph.D. in the social sciences and was far more experienced in conducting field interviews than I was at the time.

54 The interviews in 2004 were also used as part of a comparative study including a wider set of NGO actor interviews (Hakkarainen & Katsui, 2009; Katsui & Hakkarainen 2006).

Vietnam director (in Finnish), a long-term chair of Defi, and a second interview with Defi's first Vietnamese project officer.

Interviewees in 2010 also included the current chairwomen of Minh Son commune WU and the former chairwoman of the district WU who played a key role in planning and introducing Defi's project to the area. Furthermore, seven project beneficiaries of the Minh Son single women's group were interviewed: a semi-structured group interview with the BoM of the Minh Son single women's group (six women), and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with one BoM member and one ordinary (non-BoM member) project beneficiary. The main interviews in Xuan Dong commune, Hoa Binh province took place in November 2011 when I conducted ten semi-structured interviews in total with groups and individuals of key actors in and around the project: the commune People's Committee, the district and commune WU's, members of the Village Development Boards (VDBs) and 'ordinary' project participants (for a detailed description of the interviewees, see Chapter Eight).

In the case of the single women, further data collection also took place in the framework of an exhibition project by the Vietnam Women's Museum in Hanoi. In December 2010, the museum collected information and narratives of the lives of the single women, using a data collection method in which the single women documented their lives by taking photographs of their everyday activities. The visual material as well as the women's life narratives presented in the exhibition increased my understanding of the changes that had taken place in their lives and offered another context against which I could reflect my own interview data.

The interviews were conducted with the help of a Vietnamese research assistant who interpreted the questions as well the answers during the interviews and transcribed the full content of the interview tapes:⁵⁵ English sections (my questions and her interpreted answers) in English, and Vietnamese sections (her interpretations of my questions to the interviewees and their answers) in Vietnamese. Judging on my observations, this kind of interview transcription does not seem to be common among researchers. For example, some researchers transcribe only the translated parts (often into English) and some just listen to the voice records and transcribe only the parts that they believe to be relevant for their research topic. However, both techniques have clear shortcomings that are illuminated by a Bakhtinian perspective. For example, transcribing only the translated parts assumes that the translations are accurate and faithful to the original utterances of the interviewee. Most likely this will not be the case. One-way translations, where

⁵⁵ Due to time limitations, some of the final interviews were transcribed by another assistant who had not accompanied me to the field.

a bilingual person translates the original text / speech into the target language(s), which is the most common translation method used by researchers – and the one adopted for my research as well, as it is the quickest, cheapest and most commonly available – raises problems that affect the quality of translations. Most importantly, the method is dependent on the translator's / interpreter's skills, experience and knowledge and, thus, often results in low levels of validity and reliability, including problems in cultural as well as linguistic equivalencies (Weeks et. al 2007; Peña 2007; Erkut et. al 1999).

Thus, there are several factors that may compromise the value of research material based on such transcription techniques. Very seldom, if ever, do researchers have the opportunity to use a trained interpreter as their research assistant in the field. In my own case my assistant was a native Vietnamese speaker who possessed very good English skills. However, despite her fluency in both languages, she was a non-professional interpreter using consecutive and summarizing techniques of interpretation. Thus, a long answer of one page could easily take the form of a few lines in English, often containing the main idea or argument put forward by the interviewee but omitting what my assistant perhaps assessed as non-relevant to my research interests. Thus, a lot of information offered by an interviewee may be disregarded if the researcher does not have access to the original utterances. When looked at from this point of view, we may see how much power a research assistant possesses if the language of origin is totally non-accessible to the researcher. This necessarily limits the researcher's own power over the research process and may even influence research outcomes. This point is particularly relevant for our call for contextualized research. What I noticed in my own interview transcripts was that non-translated parts often contained detailed contextual information that is of particular value to a researcher coming from a different socio-political and cultural context. Such information, however, may seem too evident for a local assistant who therefore fails to see its relevance for the researcher. Moreover, a lot of data that does not serve the researcher's original interests but might potentially change the direction of research may be totally overlooked by the researcher. These challenges, of course, can be avoided or at least minimized if the researcher has a level of language competency that means (s)he does not need to conduct interviews through an interpreter, but my oral Vietnamese skills do not suffice for such a task. Fortunately, I could partly compensate for what I missed during the interviews by a thorough reading of the original interview transcripts in Vietnamese because, thanks to my past linguistic studies, it was possible to develop sufficient reading skills in Vietnamese to serve my research. I also used a native

language informant to go through the sentences that I could not reliably figure out alone.

For the reasons elaborated above I felt it important to base my research on the utterances in Vietnamese whenever that was the language used by an interviewee in order to enter into a dialogue with my interviewees (so as to re-evaluate my own understanding of them and the issues at hand). To me, it made a difference to know what my interviewees actually said without any mediating interpretations that already included someone else's judgment of what I might find valuable information. For the same reason, my study contains quotations first in the original language (Vietnamese, Finnish, Russian) followed by my translation of them in English. This practice seems less common in social sciences than in humanities (for an example of a similar choice, see e.g. Thomson 2002), but given the problems involved with translations there are reasons to keep the originals in the study. Moreover, my application of textual analysis is also significant here: as soon as one accepts a translation such as that provided by my research assistants the author of the text changes. Again, it is worth stressing that even if the translations are of high quality and accurate, they are never identical with original utterances, as different languages are structured in different ways and use culturally specific expressions that are not readily translated into another language (e.g. Peña 2007).

Analysis of texts: description of the method

The main method used to deal with the research data in this study is textual analysis, which derives from literature studies, augmented by issues arising from cross-cultural interactions; it has also been applied by other disciplines in forms including discourse analysis and content analysis. There is no single school of textual analysis but rather a variety of approaches to 'texts' as objects of analysis – texts to be understood in a broad sense, to the extent that transcripts of interviews are also texts (Fairclough 2003).

In my practical application of a textual analysis method I followed two important steps: first, I identified key words, concepts and meanings in the material. For example, when reading Defi's project reports and correspondence, I searched for development concepts that were repeated elsewhere. Thus, the frequency of usage of a concept, particularly in the NGO's internal correspondence, was taken as a mark of its importance in the NGO's development thinking. This resulted in a list of words such as participation, sustainability and self-reliance that, as I argue in Chapter Six, were central to Defi's development thinking and formed a net of interrelated and interdependent semantic constructions.

However, textual analysis is not just a method of identifying issues within texts, but is also a tool in a researcher's meaning-making process. So, a second step was to treat other key concepts as a context against which I explored the meanings of the identified key terms. Moreover, once the key words had been identified, I looked at, and for, issues addressed in the texts and the position that the author⁵⁶ had taken on them, the main thesis or claim expressed, the reasoning used by the author to support the claims, and evidence given to support the claims. For example, I looked for arguments presented by the Defi director when she stressed the importance of limited outside financial support by a donor agency, drawing on examples of responses by Indian civil society organizations as part of her reasoning (see Chapter Six). And finally, textual analysis explicitly demands that researchers place the text in a new context that they analyze how the text under study relates to other texts they have been reading and, by implication, how the text could be used. In other words, the researcher has to overtly contextualize the text within relevant discourses which often requires attention to possible intertextuality, such as clear or hidden references to other texts.

Intertextuality can both construct and limit possible interpretations of the text (as, in fact, contextualization also does). As a concept it was first introduced in the late 1960s by Julia Kristeva on the basis of Bakhtin's theory of dialogism (Keskinen 2008: 109). Fairclough (1992: 84), also drawing from Bakhtin, has defined intertextuality as 'the property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated or merged in'. Intertextuality sees each text, one way or another, as embracing other texts to the extent that it may no longer be possible to point out a clear connection between them or to identify the original sources of impact (Keskinen 2008: 110).

In Bakhtin's own conceptualization, all words have their origins in earlier discourses which may be oral or written. Therefore, texts carry a history of other texts. For a researcher, this poses new challenges in terms of analysis and how to define 'good' analysis. We may assume that every text includes traces from different discourses, different ideas and different contexts which means that one role of the researcher is to follow the vague or not so vague linkages and decide whether they are relevant to the research topic or not. Intertextuality, therefore, is not just about evident and easily verified connections, but a far more complicated and demanding research challenge. For example, the Defi director's references to the responses of Nepalese and Indian CSOs may be read as including intertextual references to discourses on aid dependency (see Chapter 6).

⁵⁶ I use the term author to refer to the person who actually wrote the text (e.g. fax or report) and the person who uttered the words in the text (e.g. interview transcripts in the original language).

The intertextual nature of texts (and utterances) thus places high expectations on the researcher's knowledge of different discourses and contexts. This leads me to the point where I see the research process in human sciences as a hermeneutic circle: I approach a text not in a vacuum but in the awareness that my interpretation is always shaped by my individual social and cultural contexts, from my specific standpoint, which challenges an understanding of research as an objective process. Moreover, an interpretation of a text / interview (concerning Vietnam in this case) calls for knowledge of the 'other' culture and society being studied in order to be able to ask what alternative meanings the text might contain besides those which derive from my culturally biased perspective. In this process I needed to judge critically between a variety of possible meanings in order to hear the different voices – rather than just the terms of my own initial questions – in their answers. An interest in hermeneutic knowledge that aims at understanding required me to exercise self-criticism in terms of seeing my values and practices as cultured and steering – if not actually critical – with my interpretation of data, thereby silencing the voices of the other (those that I was not willing or otherwise prepared to hear) (Mikula 2008: 87; Ruusuvuori et. al 2010: 20; Gadamer 2004; Mikkonen 2008: 68-69).

Research thus becomes a dialogue between the text and the researcher. In my case, deepening dialogue with the text significantly altered my understanding of the questions that are important for me to ask in the process of analyzing the text. For example, my research plan did not originally include questions on gender. Even after working for over a decade in projects for women, I failed to see how gender might play a role in my inquiry into grassroots democracy. However, the research process challenged my understanding in significant ways. First, in interviews, women generally failed to answer those questions where I most looked forward to hearing their views; as noted in Chapter One, for example, many women (except the WU staff) had no knowledge of the Grassroots Democracy Decree by the Vietnamese state. On the other hand, many women were ready to describe either their experiences of participating in public meetings, or why they had not even been attending them. They also constantly narrated their own lives, focusing on their personal experiences while seldom touching upon structural issues in society. However, when analyzing their interviews, I realized that the boundaries between personal and public⁵⁷ were blurred and non-separable in their percep-

⁵⁷ Boundaries between public and private spheres have been widely criticized within feminist scholarship. I do not intend to go into that debate. However, it is worth noting that as part of the debate it has been argued that the historical legacy of citizenship rights continues to restrict women's practice of citizenship as well as democratic practice as exercise of citizenship is culturally associated with men. (See e.g. Lister 2003; Baker and van Doorne-Huiskes 1999).

tions: social structures were part of the context that contributed to the women's experiences.

Second, the more I read my interview transcripts, mining the utterances in Vietnamese that had not been fully translated during the interview sessions, the more I became aware of how irrelevant or, rather, distant some of my questions must have sounded from the women's perspectives; instead, what they actually told me about during the interviews was what they found important in their lives without my even asking them. I began to see the need to incorporate gender as an integral part of my interpretation if I wanted to understand democracy at the level of the individual in society. Moreover, along with gender, I started to see how issues of power were manifest in language, while often dismissed in literature as 'culture' (see in particular Chapter Four). These realizations, produced through my dialogue with the data, insisted that I ask how knowledge and knowing, as well as knowledge production and the standpoint of the one who knows, are interrelated. In addition, I started to ask how norms and values could be approached and interpreted simultaneously from inside and outside: how I could understand gendered norms, for example, as historical and socio-cultural constructs, but at the same time understand how norms reflect power positions and different interests within society. I had arrived at questions central to feminist knowing (Liljeström 2004: 10-11) without any prior intention to do so.

Textual analysis, combined with an interest in hermeneutic knowledge, does not just provide a frame and discipline for looking systematically at the rhetorical context of texts but also guides the process by which their reading entails placing them into a new context, such as the researcher's analytical framework – in my case, my Bakhtinian framework. Rhetorical context analysis is an important part of positioning the text; for example, in my research, some of the texts are written out of a requirement produced by aid practice. Project annual reports belong to this category and come with a predetermined structure that significantly impacts on the content of the texts.

Textual analysis also allows multiple voices to be heard. The first concern of a researcher should be to understand who is speaking through the text and how the authors position themselves within the context. Furthermore, the method allows researchers to utilize their knowledge of particular contexts when beginning analysis of the texts and positions taken in them. Country-specific cultures are seen as a continuum of values and beliefs that are manifested in everyday practices and have had different forms at different historical points. Gadamer (2004: 74) stresses that the hermeneutic approach includes self-criticism. The researcher must permit her 'truth' to be tested, thus abandoning the idea of a view that is

above comparison. Here, we see striking similarities with Bakhtin's notion of dialogical relationships and the re-evaluation of meanings as an outcome of a dialogical encounter.

Qualitative analysis that results from textual analysis can hardly be value free when it is accepted that our values guide our interpretations. The quality of research in this approach is therefore not to be assessed on a true-false continuum, but rather in terms of the reasoning of the arguments presented. It does not pretend to present a 'final word' but rather expects the reader to respond to the claims put forward in a dialogic interaction, and is, therefore, consistent with its premises.

It is also worth pointing out that an oral interview as research data produces texts that contain different types of sub-texts such as narratives, explanations and descriptions. An interview situation seldom produces a unified narrative but, rather, a narrative consisting of fragmented pieces occasionally interrupted by the interviewer (Hyvärinen 2010: 90). In the study of a narrative the story becomes the object of an analysis. Here, a narrative is understood as a story in which a person presents, interprets, constructs and conveys 'reality' in an interviewing situation (Aaltonen & Leimumäki 2010: 119). The narrative reflects the experiences of the narrator in a particular situation which bind the story of past events to the narrator's current life (*ibid.*: 124). As discussed further in Chapter Five, I approached the single women's life stories as narratives that say something important about past events in their lives. Such stories, however, are always subjective 'reports' that escape true-false evaluation. They are significant not because they are accurate and exhaustive descriptions of events, but because they expose a lot of the context in which they are lived and later narrated.

In each empirical chapter that follows I analyze my data – the texts – emphasizing different Bakhtinian concepts in different chapters. In Chapter Four I re-read earlier gender literature on Vietnam through Bakhtin's notions of monologism and centripetal forces. In Chapter Five I analyze single women's stories (transcribed interviews) of their past lives, conceptualizing them as narratives in the framework of life experiences in a particular time and space, which, according to Bakhtin, are central factors in a person's meaning-construction process. I approach the narratives of the single women as manifestations of Bakhtinian heteroglossia, representing centrifugal forces in Vietnamese society. In Chapter Six I analyze Defi's development thinking based on project documents and the NGO's correspondence, aided by Bakhtin's notions of meaning construction and re-evaluation of meanings. I therefore explore the meanings of key terms in the NGO's development thinking as developed in the intersection of time, space and actors' experiences. In Chapter Seven I again use Bakhtin's notion of meaning

construction to analyze how, for example, the changing meaning of ‘single women’ as understood by Defi, contributed to actual changes in the NGO’s development practice. Moreover, I explore meanings given to ‘success’ in terms of the project as it shows in detail how meaning-construction processes are contextual and based on interpretations rather than facts. The main data in the chapter consists of interviews with Defi staff, project partners and beneficiaries of the NGO’s micro-credit intervention in which I approach development practice through a notion of dialogue aimed to facilitate re-evaluation of meanings. And finally, in Chapter Eight, I explore different meanings given, for example, to participation in Defi’s Village Self-reliance and Development Intervention through my analysis of interviews with Defi staff as well as partners and beneficiaries of the model.

4 GENDERED NORMS AS STATE MONOLOGISM

In this chapter, I further contextualize Defi's development interventions through my reading of previous literature on gender and Vietnam, on the assumption that gendered norms not just impacted on, promoted or interfered with Defi's objective of empowering women, but also contributed to the NGO's understanding of women in Vietnam (as will be discussed in Chapter Six). My objective has been to interpret the context of the NGO's interventions from a gendered perspective and, in particular, to investigate expectations and meanings attributed to 'woman'. This line of inquiry is further developed in my detailed analysis of single women's life stories in Chapter Five.

It should be stressed that my objective is not an exhaustive analysis of earlier studies on gender in Vietnam. Rather, my aim is first to show the central role assigned to Confucianism by gender scholars in the production of gendered inequalities in Vietnam. Second, drawing on previous studies, I construct a picture of an ideal Vietnamese woman as it helps to understand, I argue, behavioural norms attributed to women. And finally, I propose an alternative interpretation of Confucian doctrine vis-à-vis gender through a reading of early Confucian texts.⁵⁸ It is particularly in this context that my approach departs from much of gender literature, with outcomes discussed in the chapter.

The selected literature contains accounts of gender that discuss or investigate the norms attributed to women, most of which display a common theme that references Confucianism as a central reason 'explaining' women's subordinate position to men in Vietnam (e.g. Nhung Tuyet Tran 2012; Khuat Thu Hong 1998; Bui Thu Huong 2010; Rydstrom 2006; 2010; Ngo Thi Ngan Binh 2004; Dang Thi Anh Tuyet 2002; VWU et al. 1989; Jayakody & Pham Thi Thu Phuong 2013; see also Liljestrom & Tuong Lai 1991). In some cases Confucianism is not directly mentioned but, rather, a narrative of women as bound by 'traditional' gendered norms (sometimes seen as an antithesis to new norms created during the (pre)socialist period) is offered. Despite the ideological frame, gendered norms typically treat women and men differently in some key areas of life – sexuality being an often

⁵⁸ The choice to revisit early Confucian doctrine (as compared to later versions of it) enables us to see how 'cultures are scenes of debate and contestation' as pointed out by Nussbaum (2001: 13). Approaching Confucianism not as a static cultural heritage but as dynamic is, in my understanding, vital for any feminist project, and also requires specific tools to track changes in the doctrine over time.

mentioned one. It is worth pointing out that earlier literature communicates an understanding of gender within the frame of late Confucianism. This is a matter to which I return in the latter part of the chapter.

My interest here is twofold. First, I explore how gendered norms have been described in the literature in different historical periods: I am interested in how these norms are identified and the main conclusions which have been drawn. Second, I test the ‘Confucianism’ claims repeated and, I argue, reproduced by literature. By reproducing the claims, I refer to a situation in which Confucianism is discussed in essentialist terms with no alternative interpretation being offered. Such an approach is highly problematic as it seems to confirm the unity of Confucian doctrine, treating ‘traditional (gendered) values’ as an unchallengeable part of the Vietnamese social milieu.

For an alternative understanding of Confucianism, I analyze how ‘woman’ is discussed and positioned in early Confucian texts, that is, in the ‘Analects’ and ‘The Great Learning’ by Kongzi⁵⁹ (the founder of Confucianism), and in the ‘Mencius’ by Mengzi (the most important follower of Kongzi). Here, I take a similar position to Li (2000b: 34) who, based on his historical examination of development of Confucianism, concluded that ‘to a large extent Confucius and Mencius, the founders of Confucianism, are not responsible for its history of oppression of women’.

The books that I examine are part of the so-called Four Books that provided the basis of the civil service examinations developed and used in China from 1313 to 1905. The exams were also adopted in modified forms in Japan and Korea as well as in Vietnam, which started to imitate Chinese imperial examinations during the Lê Dynasty (1428–1788). According to a history of the Lê Dynasty (Liu 2007), in March of 1472, for example, twenty six people passed a national exam that included a section on the Four Books. The last of such examinations were held in Vietnam in 1919. The Four Books were selected and canonized as the core of Confucian doctrine by the most prominent Chinese Neo-Confucian scholar Zhu Xi (1130-1200) in order to take Confucianism back to the orthodox ideas developed by Kongzi and Mengzi (Chan 1969: 588-589). It has been argued, however, that besides the Four Virtues and Three Submissions and ideas of filial piety and loyalty, the Vietnamese lacked a wide appreciation of the Confucian classics (McHale 2002: 401) and that the great doctrinal disputes that took place between Neo-Confucian scholars in China were not part of Vietnamese Confucianism. In-

⁵⁹ I have chosen to use the pinyin form of Chinese names when referring to actual persons. Thus, I use Kongzi to refer to the founder of Confucianism, also known as Confucius, and Mengzi for Mencius. However, when the names are part of the title of a book, they appear as in the original title (e.g. Mencius, translated by D.C. Lau).

stead, Vietnamese Confucianism was more active in producing detailed rules of behaviour through so called ‘orthodox culture’ (*tu vǎn*) associations in Vietnamese villages (Woodside 2002: 128).

My reading of the above mentioned Confucian classics shows that, unlike the texts that dominate Vietnamese understanding of Confucianism (and subsequently researchers’ accounts of gender in Confucianism), the early Confucian texts offer an important reference point to critically review later interpretations of Confucianism from a gendered perspective. Unlike late Confucian texts that are cited for their teachings on proper female behaviour, the early Confucian texts were centred on the notion of a ‘noble man’ (Chinese: *junzi*), placing strict moral norms on *male* behaviour. Women’s subordination to men entered Confucian texts in a later phase in the history of the doctrine, radically changing the focus of gendered norms that became known as ‘Confucian’. To interpret the development, I argue that Chinese gendered norms that called for women’s subordination to men were a later incorporation into Confucian thought (see also Li 2000a) to serve patriarchal interests; in the process, the idea of reciprocity across age and gender hierarchies that is central to early Confucian texts gave way to discourses emphasizing the one-sided obedience of women to men. Revisiting early Confucian texts thus allows us to challenge the accounts of gender in ‘Confucian doctrine’ as manifested in gender literature.⁶⁰

To facilitate my account of earlier gender literature, I draw on Bakhtin’s concept of ‘monologism’, using it along similar lines as Bakhtin’s early concept of ‘monological/authoritarian dialogue’ (Bakhtin 1996): a form of dialogue in which utterances aim at conveying a message to a certain (group of) recipient(s), marked by a lack of interest on the part of the speaker in the recipient’s views on the subject matter. Bakhtin associates monological dialogue with the state, thus pointing out that it often, but not exclusively, takes place in hierarchical relationships in which one actor has power over the recipient of the message. In such a hierarchical construction, the state sees the group of individuals as objects of its messages rather than discussants of the subject matter. This is not to suggest that the recipient(s) completely lack power, but it does highlight the fact that those with relatively more discursive power may use it for goals that serve their particular interests – whether to strengthen a patriarchal social order or in the cause of a state, to name a couple.

Another key conceptual tool that facilitates my reading in this chapter is the notion of ‘centripetal forces’ (Bakhtin 2012: 24 also Morson & Emerson 1990: 30)

60 I am fully aware of the depth and complexity of the Chinese studies literature that addresses the issues I am but touching upon here, yet I feel that the argument I advance in this chapter is useful and valuable.

that enables a critical reading of normative ideas on Vietnamese women. That is, I approach notions such as ‘traditional values’ and ‘Confucian influence’ in gender discourses as monoglossic language representing the interests of dominant social groups, motivated by sex-based differentiation, religion / world-view, or political objectives. Thus, gender monologism is understood as a tool that aims at providing strict norms for female behaviour, and not as culturally given facts or ‘natural’ features of the Vietnamese social milieu. Therefore, I read the notion of the ideal woman as a manifestation of centripetal forces that ‘seek to impose order in an essentially heterogeneous and messy world’ (Morson & Emerson 1990: 30). Thus understood, centripetal forces produce a meta-narrative of the ideal woman as an attempt, perhaps unsuccessful, to make a heterogeneous reality look homogenous and to control female behaviour. Thus, I conclude that the notion of the ideal Vietnamese woman that occupies a central role in my analysis is a socio-historical product of centripetal forces that is politically motivated and seeks to serve the interests of those in power. Along with changes in the socio-historical context, notions of the ideal woman are also subject to transformations, but the attempt to control female behaviour remains essentially the same.

Facilitated by Bakhtin’s concept of ‘meaning construction’ as a historical process in which meanings are not static but subject to change over time, I revisit Confucian classics to see what kind of gendered ideas are present in the early Confucian texts. This exercise, I assert, is important to reveal the ‘heteroglossia’ within Confucianism in ways that may facilitate the feminist gender project of which I consider myself a part.⁶¹ Moreover, Confucian classics underline the central position of a notion of filial piety in Confucian doctrine. This leads me to stress that loyalty to family is central in understanding how gendered norms are negotiated in women’s lives (as I shall further discuss in Chapter Five).

It is worth pointing out that a Bakhtinian reading is not an entirely novel approach to gender. Bakhtin’s notion of dialogue / dialogic has inspired entire books by feminist researchers (e.g. Bauer and McKinstry 1991; Hohne and Wussow 1994). It has been proposed, for example, that ‘Bakhtin’s theories of the social nature of utterance [...] provide a critical language that allows [feminists] to pinpoint and foreground the moments when the patriarchal work and the persuasive resistance to it come into conflict’ and that ‘a feminist dialogics produces occasions for the disruption and critique of dominant and oppressive ideologies’ (Bauer and McKinstry 1991: 3). Moreover, Bakhtin’s concepts of monoglossia and

61 I do not claim a fixed position within feminist theorizing. Rather, my approach to the feminist gender project is to challenge a reading of gendered norms as essentialist cultural (Confucian) values and, instead, promote a view that any reading has to consider the workings of power within such values.

heteroglossia (and monologism and dialogism) have been proposed on the basis of their validity in facilitating feminist gender analysis (Francis 2012). In particular, Francis (2012: 7) points out how ‘gender monoglossia [produced through language] appears to be able to present itself holistically, masking contradiction and dissonance even where these are evident’. My analysis departs from Francis’s in taking gendered ideas and norms and not the notion of gender itself as the topic of my enquiry. Furthermore, it is important to note that my discussion in this chapter should not be taken as a sign of theoretically narrowing gender to concern only women. Most gender literature that facilitates my analysis, however, discusses women (instead of men⁶²). This can be seen to limit the analysis to some extent but, at the same time, may reflect the interests of researchers.

A few further remarks are needed concerning my discussion in this chapter. First, I acknowledge that ‘women’ as an analytical concept when looking at gender relations is problematic as it proposes a belief in sameness and homogeneity. It is worth pointing out that ‘feminists of colour’ have played a key role in deconstructing the unitary notion of woman. They have stressed the existence of different kinds of women as well as differently oppressed women thus bringing an issue of representation to the core of feminist discourses (e.g. Mohanty 1991 and 2003; Spivak 1988; Hooks 1984; Crenshaw 1991; see also Lister 2003: 74-75). I join Yuval-Davis (1997: 8) who argues that ‘not all women are oppressed and / or subjugated in the same way or to the same extent, even within the same society at any specific moment’. She further claims that ‘women are not usually just passive recipients and non-participants in the determination of gender relations’ (Yuval-Davis 1997: 8). Inherent to the responsibilities allocated to women, such as bringing up their children, are the reproduction of gendered norms as part of women’s attempts to earn respect from their husbands, relatives and other people directly relevant to their wellbeing. Therefore, it is important to note that understanding gender is not just an issue of patriarchy or positioning women in opposition to men, but a socio-cultural construct that is not immune to factors such as poverty or power, among others. Therefore, as the term ‘Vietnamese women’ refers to women of different ages, ethnicities, educational and family backgrounds, occupations and income levels, not to mention an urban / rural divide, a gendered analysis should also consider how these factors become meaningful in women’s everyday experiences. Such diversity calls for rejection of any ‘essentialist’ categories (Lis-

62 Research on men, however, seems to be on the rise. For example, Jayakody and Pham (2013) study fathering in the context of rapid social changes taking place in contemporary Vietnam, while Horton & Rydstrom (2011) explore heterosexual masculinity as configured by young men. In addition, there is a body of literature mostly in the framework of HIV/AIDS discourse on homosexuality in Vietnam (e.g. Blanc 2005; Ngo Duc Anh et. al 2009; Preston et.al 2004).

ter 2003: 75), rather requiring analytical tools that can facilitate an inquiry into a range of different womanhoods and women. Biological sex is therefore not a sufficient precondition for assuming similarities amongst women that are suggested by categories like ‘Vietnamese women’.

The body of research that has most contributed to scholarly discourses on Vietnamese women is mainly based on data collected in the northern parts of Vietnam⁶³ (e.g. Werner 2009, 2004; Rydstrom 2006; Khuat Thu Hong 1998; Belanger & Khuat Thu Hong 1998, 1999; Phinney 2005; Pettus 2003). Data collection from the North also dominates Vietnamese language gender research as noted by Scott and Truong Thi Kim Chuyen (2007). Yet the differences between the ‘north’ and the ‘south’ of Vietnam are a repeated source of informal discussions amongst Vietnam scholars, and research on (northern) Vietnamese women features different norms and realities than those found in the south (Earl, personal communication 2012; see also Leshkowich 2014: 23). Consequently, findings from data collected in the northern parts of the country evidently should not be treated as the ‘truth’ on gendered norms and practices in Vietnam, but rather as a situated knowledge that may or may not apply beyond the data collection area.⁶⁴ This contradicts the fact that researchers feel pressured to generalize their claims for geographically restricted data as publishers seek to attract as wide a readership as possible. From the perspective of my research, however, the body of gender literature based on data from the north of Vietnam is of course relevant, as Defi’s project activities, and therefore my case studies, are located near the capital city of Hanoi; it therefore reveals what is ‘known’ about thinking patterns and gendered norms and attitudes encountered in the area of research.

4.1 Centripetal forces and the making of the ideal woman

Literature from different cultural contexts has revealed similarities in ideas on women across different historical moments and, in addition, the central role of the state in the construction of gender ideology in society (e.g. Komulainen 2002; Blackburn 2004; Wieringa 2002). Generally speaking, gender literature is related to the notion of the ideal woman, either through moralistic utterances (that can be still found to some extent in Vietnamese research) or through description of gendered norms at different times (perhaps the most typical approach). Gender

63 Earl and Leshkowich (see e.g. Earl 2014; Leshkowich 2014) belong among those (few) researchers whose studies are based on data collected from the South of Vietnam.

64 Besides the differences between the North and South of Vietnam, there are also significant differences between rural and urban areas that are reflected in women’s lives.

literature on Vietnam is no exception to this. I approach the discussion of the notion of the ideal woman as an embodiment of gendered norms, carrying key ideas of how to be a ‘good’ woman in a particular society in a particular historical time, as manifestations of (state) monologism actively produced by centripetal forces in society. As I shall argue, the main function of the notion of the ideal woman can be seen as an intentional attempt to control female behaviour in a society.

Despite the disputes on the role of Confucianism in Vietnam more broadly,⁶⁵ there is general agreement among gender scholars that Confucianism has contributed significantly to gender inequality in Vietnam, commonly being referred to as a key framework when explaining behavioural norms central to the notion of the ideal Vietnamese woman (Rydström 2010; Drummond et al. 2004: 2; Khuat Thu Hong et al. 2009; Nghia M. Vo 2008; Lynellyn et al. 2000). Indeed, it has been argued that ‘in governing people’s perceptions and behaviours, Confucianism [...] does not just provide general guidelines; instead, Confucianism *dictates* specific codes of conduct for men and women’ (Khuat Thu Hong et al. 2009, italics added). This literature points out that the most important Confucian norms attributed to young girls and women include the Three Submissions (obeying the father when not married, obeying the husband when married and obeying the son after the husband has died; see e.g. VWU et al. 1989: 17) and the Four Virtues (*tứ đức*). The Four Virtues consist of requirements for women to be skilful in cooking, making clothes and housekeeping (*công*); to possess the ability to present themselves as feminine and physically attractive, but not inviting to men other than their husbands (*dung*); to have a humble and submissive habit of speaking and to avoid rough and opinionated language (*ngôn*); to maintain female integrity, behaviour which is interpreted as being faithful and obedient to seniors and husband (*hạnh*) (Khuat Thu Hong et al. 2009; Marr 1981; Ngo Thi Ngan Binh 2004).

My intention is not to argue against the role of such late Confucian texts in the historical making of the profile of the ideal woman and gender inequality in Vietnam. However, following critical views of norms set by ‘culture’ (e.g. Vuola & Vuorisalo-Tiitinen 2014), I suggest that instead of reading the notion of the ideal Vietnamese woman as an essential part of the country’s cultural realm, it should be approached by taking into consideration social hierarchies and power structures

65 It has also been argued to the contrary: that Confucianism had only a limited impact on Vietnam. This interpretation mainly draws from interpreting Confucianism as a dominant state ideology – a position that, historically speaking, it only held for a short period of time in Vietnam (Taylor 2002) – or that the Vietnamese ‘lacked a wide appreciation of the Confucian classics’ which made their Confucianism ‘a hollow shell’ (McHale 2002). However, it has been pointed out that if Confucianism in Vietnam is understood in terms of a ‘Confucian repertoire’ – a set of cultural practices that can be traced to Confucianism in China – Vietnam appears more Confucian than when defined in the narrow sense of the word (Kelley 2006).

in society. Based on my Bakhtinian reading, I argue that the notion of the ideal woman communicated by the Three Submission and the Four Virtues within the late Confucian frame (or any other later ideological frame for that matter) aims at disciplining female behaviour through gendered norms. At the same time, the construction of the ideal woman serves the interest of the state in unifying inherently non-unified cultural practices, including female behaviour within the society. The ideal woman is, therefore, to be understood contextually – as a representation of women: not as ‘real image’, but as something aiming to produce what it seeks to represent (Gordon 2002: 39; for social construction of gender see Butler 1990).

A new socialist woman in the service of the state

In my reading of literature that discusses ideas concerning women produced by the Communist Party-led Vietnamese state I approach the notion of the ideal woman as a monologic construct by centripetal forces to serve the needs of the state. In other words, the ultimate goal of the unity of ‘women’ is not coincidental, but is related to a particular historical time and space and the real or imagined roles attributed to the female sex.

Much research has argued that the birth of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam significantly contributed to gender equality in the country. Even during the French colonial period in the 1930s, the Indochinese Communist Party had promoted an idea of gender equality in revolutionary discourses. Nhung Tuyet Tran (2012) has pointed out that for some young radicals the oppression of women signified the country’s weakness, while for others it primarily reflected the evils of the capitalist system. Both groups, however, shared a view that women played an important part in constructing a new Vietnamese society.

The ‘father of Vietnamese nationalism’, Phan Boi Chau, expressed his ideas on the centrality of women’s participation in the creation of the nation, while at the same time picturing them as ‘nurturing devoted mothers’ and as ‘loyal wives’ (Nhung Tuyet Tran 2012). Phan Boi Chau (1864-1940) is an interesting figure. He was an anti-colonial, late-Confucian scholar who both called for women’s active participation in the service of the nation and, simultaneously, perceived women through their roles as a mother and a wife, thereby combining traditional ideas of ‘domestic’ women with new ideas of politically active women who would serve the nation. As Werner (2009) has pointed out, Phan Boi Chau’s ideas affected later developments in the notion of the ideal woman: he promoted an idea of the country / nation of Vietnam as a single family to which individuals had to subordinate their own interests. Moreover, he urged women to step out of their homes

into the public sphere to serve the national cause. His vision thus bound anti-colonial struggle to a depiction of women as self-sacrificing mothers and wives (ideas deriving from late Confucian gender roles attributed to women); this was then incorporated into Marxist-Leninist ideology by the Indochinese Communist Party and became central to gendered ideas of the socialist state (Werner 2009: 20). The socialist state of Vietnam passed new laws that replaced older ones that had discriminated against women, achievements at the expense of 'the traditional society' that are discussed, for example, in a book 'Vietnamese women in the Eighties' by the Vietnam Women's Union and the Centre for Women's Studies (1989). The socialist state of Vietnam has a clear record of legislation to raise the status of women within society, also witnessed in other socialist states such as China and the Soviet Union.

Interestingly, Ireson (1992) has argued that in the context of neighbouring Laos, socialist ideology recognized the importance of women's roles and influence in the reconstruction of the country and in the transition to socialism. In practice that meant that women were 'liberated to work harder' (ibid.). Similarly, socialism 'liberated' Vietnamese women from subordination to men at the level of legislation, if not in practice. A new socialist woman was 'liberated' to contribute her labour to the national independence project: first to fight French colonial rule and then the South Vietnamese regime backed by the United States. Therefore, a discourse on the 'liberated woman' is here a political discourse embedded in socialism. Liberated women are often discussed in terms of women's socio-political emancipation in which national liberation is seen as a precondition for it (see e.g. VWU et al. 1989: 19). Yet despite the changes in rhetoric, the literature suggests that even 'liberated' women could not escape the established stereotype of the ideal Vietnamese woman as a self-sacrificing and all-enduring figure, thereby differing from feminist ambitions in the West that, for example, challenged the notion of a traditional division of labour within families.

The liberated woman became a central idea for the nationalistic forces during the French colonial period when revolutionaries saw a badly needed resource in women in their struggle against the French (Werner 2009: 17). As men were increasingly recruited as soldiers, it was thought necessary to mobilize women to support the front as well as to take care of the children, farming and other central tasks. In such a context, women's maternal concerns, asserted to be 'natural' in women, were redirected to defend the country (Werner 2009: 19). However, nationalist notions also emphasized women's important role as 'faithful wives' in order to uphold the moral strength of men in the armed struggle. In this line of

rhetoric, therefore, war opened up social space for women to the extent deemed necessary for national survival.

As a result, the new socialist discourse on women which portrayed them as liberated independence fighters coexisted with older, late Confucian discourses on the ideal woman. Similar attributes that had attached to the ideal 'traditional' woman continued to be attached to the ideal liberated woman. Both assumed a woman's readiness to sacrifice herself for a higher cause like the country, meanwhile maintaining social harmony within the family. Combining the ideal of women as caring and sacrificing with a call that they join the national struggle to fight the colonisers sought to mobilize women as freedom fighters during the war and, when the war was over, to work towards the reconstruction of the socialist nation state. In other words, the asserted recognition by the state of women's labour contributions accompanied a continuing perception of women as primarily responsible for household work, caring for children (and the elderly) and being responsible for family happiness, ideas that remained much the same as prior to socialism. In addition to their domestic responsibilities, women were now encouraged to step outside their homes to construct a happy socialist nation, notionally doubling their burden.

The rise of 'traditional' values for women

The renovation period (*đổi mới*) that officially started in 1986 has produced perhaps more gender-related research than any time before it. It also forms the key body of secondary sources for my inquiry as it describes gendered norms just prior and during Defi's development interventions. Literature that informs my discussion on changes in women's roles and lives during the *đổi mới* period includes Werner 2009; Pettus 2003; Drummond & Rydstrom 2004; Nguyen-vo Thu-huong 2010; Ha Thi Phuong Tien et al. 2001; Tran Thi Van Anh et al. 2000.

There is a further wide body of work that discusses changes in gendered labour distribution as an outcome of a market economy:⁶⁶ due to women's family responsibilities, their comparative status and position within households have decreased as wives tend to stay at home and engage in production work for consumption while husbands join the competitive labour market that delivers cash incomes (see e.g. Le Ngoc Van 1997). Moreover, it has been noted that as men increasingly seek jobs outside their villages, the burden on women, especially in terms of

⁶⁶ Emerging class differences within Vietnamese society enable urban middle class women to hire domestic workers as a growing number of rural women seek employment in the cities (Nguyen 2015). That is, despite the changes in urban middle class women's educational level as well as economic status, the gendered division of labour within a household has demonstrated its persistence.

agricultural work, has increased (Tran Thi Van Anh 1995). However, a shortage of agricultural land has also increased rural women's 'spontaneous migration' to cities in search of jobs (Ha Thi Phuong Tien et al. 2001: 31, 40; see also Nguyen 2015:5). Research from other Asian contexts suggests that traditional ideas of family (Chow and Hsung 2002), as well as assumptions of women's low labour capacity (Leng and Sim 1997), effectively position women as 'peripheral' in the labour market, as compared to men, in the context of a market economy.

A common feature in the literature is to contemplate gendered norms as connected to wider socio-economic changes in society. In the case of Vietnam, the economic liberalization that is a core feature of the renovation period saw changes in the state's expectations of women. A Vietnamese society that was 'opening' to the outside world was increasingly seen to be under the threat of 'social evils', commonly explained as unfavourable foreign influences, and images of the ideal women remained a crucial part of official narratives of the Vietnamese nation. The state discourse in the *đổi mới* period framed women primarily as mothers, wives and increasingly domesticated compared to the pre-*đổi mới* period. Phenomena such as HIV / AIDS and drug abuse were increasingly identified by the Vietnamese state as forces threatening the nation, and highly moral women dedicated to their families were again asserted to be key to national survival. Secondary sources suggest how an understanding of the family as the core cell of society – also central to Confucian doctrine – was strongly evident in *đổi mới* state discourses on family and society. Thus, the *đổi mới* period is marked by state utterances on women that highlight women's 'great responsibility in the building of the family, the education of children, the preservation and transmission of national cultural and moral values to their children' (Nguyen Thi Binh 1995). This remained the main message even though it was also acknowledged that 'many mothers are overcharged with work both in society and in family' (VWU et al. 1989: 27), suggesting that women suffered from 'time poverty' (Lister 2003: 132) with its implications about their ability to play a role outside their domestic spheres, something also apparent in my own data (see Chapters Seven and Eight).

As in the era prior to socialism, women are again urged to perform their central role within the family rather than outside it, and are seen as the main caretakers and educators of children. In addition, women are held responsible for the emotional wellbeing of the family, and, by implication, the actions of their husbands. For example, it has been argued that prostitution – one of the 'social evils' that flourishes within a market economy because business fraternizing calls for sexual entertainment to close business deals and demonstrate social status – enhances certain gender roles (Nguyen-vo Thu-huong 2010; Horton & Rydstrom 2011). Of-

ficially announced concern for social evils has paralleled the approval by censors of self-help books⁶⁷ by quasi-state entities urging women to become more sexually knowledgeable to ensure their husbands' sexual satisfaction (ibid.: 57). This arguably sends the message that women's (low) performance in their marital beds results in men's adultery and an increased demand for commercial sex. We may see how the burden of better sexual performance is thus put on women's shoulders even though men's incentives to buy sexual services are more plausibly linked to business practices (Nguyen-vo Thu-huong 2010). Moreover, state discourses that emphasize female morality are in sharp contrast with accounts reporting that male state officials form a significant part of the prostitutes' clientele (ibid.). We may argue that in this case the discourse on (harmful) 'foreign influence' may be seen as a strategic choice by state propagandists to maintain the official narrative of the state as benevolent and good.

The rhetorical (re)invention of traditional roles for women, sited within the domestic sphere of society, positions women as 'carriers of tradition' (Yuval-Davis 1997), expected to safeguard the nation in times of rapid socio-economic changes. Werner (2009: 75) argues that from the early 1990s, the state's concern was to find ways 'to strengthen the family as a bulwark against the disintegrative effects of market change'. Thus, preserving 'the traditional family' became a topic around which the state initiated cultural campaigns addressed primarily to women as 'the soul of the family'. In the following, I explore the role played by the Vietnam Women's Union in informing women of their appropriate role within Vietnamese society. The WU, as we shall see, played a central role in the Defi project and thus, understanding the Union's role in production of gendered norms is highly relevant to this inquiry.

The Vietnam Women's Union and state monologism

The Vietnam WU, established in 1930, was and remains to date the largest mass organization in Vietnam directly led by the Party. It is in charge of women's issues and, in practice, acts 'as the government's voice for gender policies.' (Waibel & Glück 2013). That is to say, whenever the state has a message for women, the WU is used as a tool to reach them, and it has national coverage down to the sub-commune village level. Its working structures mirror the state apparatus, giving it a strong top-down approach that enables it to disseminate messages from the upper levels of the state down to the grassroots 'branches' (*chi hội*). This usually

⁶⁷ Leshkovich (2012: 109) has pointed out that one brand of self-help books is 'designed to help wives maintain proper morality and hence protect themselves from the negative impact that materialism and individualism can have on emotional and familial relationships.'

means that the WU reproduces monologic accounts of women which serve the interests of the Party and the state which seeks to articulate unified womanhood to the service of the country.

In the early 1990s, the Party issued a new resolution⁶⁸ defining women's equality in the era of renovation. As part of implementation of the resolution, the WU set up a programme that showed how women's emancipation was seen as primarily a state act linked to economic realities that aimed at improved 'material and spiritual life' for women. Thus, programme activities such as job creation for women were identified as important because they meant that 'women can fulfil their two functions, namely social labor and bearing children and raising them.' (VWU, Programme 1, quoted in Werner 2009: 74). Meanwhile, the WU's Five-Year Plan (1992-1997) advised women to 'fulfil their functions as wives and mothers' and clearly communicated the state's wish to see women focusing on family life. Even goals such as improving women's economic management skills and knowledge of credit and techniques associated with new crops were incorporated into the goals for a national economic development that now depended on the success of family units. Reminiscent of Confucian doctrine, the leaders of the country adopted a view in which stable families were said to be a requirement for a prosperous state: developing and maintaining family happiness became one of the central official requirements addressed to women (Werner 2009: 74-75). Therefore, at the same time as gender equality remained one of the key goals in the WU agenda, it also played a key role in propagandizing the 'Happy Family' – deriving from the state's policy of preserving 'national traditions' concerning family life – which emphasized women's roles as mothers and wives and encouraged women to focus on their domestic lives (Phinney 2005; Leshkowich 2012) thus promoting a particular moral politics within families (Rodger 1996: 92).

In Vietnam's official gender discourse, women's emancipation and gender equality are understood in terms of equality between men and women in the eyes of the law while it is sometimes acknowledged that what is written in legal texts does not always translate in reality (VWU et al. 1989: 31). As the concept of gender is based on innate 'natural' differences between the sexes, women's emancipation as a legal issue does not seek to challenge traditional ideas of women as homemakers, rather the reverse. Thus, the WU promotes an idea of women's responsibilities towards the nation and the family and, during *đổi mới*, women have been taught that the best way to serve the nation is to focus on their families. The Union, therefore, does not rhetorically challenge the traditional gender roles now

68 Party Resolution No. 04-NQ/TW 'Renovating and Strengthening the Women's Movement in the New Situation' (1993).

promoted by the *đổi mới* state and acknowledges women primarily through their roles as wives and mothers.

This is the rhetorical, or doctrinal, position. A closer look at the work of the VWU, however, reveals heteroglossia within seemingly monoglossic accounts of women. For example, even though the notion of the Happy Family is based on an idea of a family with both a husband and a wife and their children, the issue of women-headed households has been raised by researchers close to the Union and the Party / state (e.g. Le Thi Nham Tuyet 1989). Nonetheless, women-headed households are not, perhaps, seen as proper families as is suggested by the concept '*gia đình phụ nữ thiếu vắng chồng*' (families of women missing / lacking husbands) introduced by influential Professor Le Thi, referring to women who had lost their husbands for one reason or another or women who had 'asked for a child' when they had passed a marriageable age (Phinney 2004), but not unmarried mothers.

In addition, as I have witnessed myself, the Vietnam Women's Museum under the WU has manifested its determination to raise social issues concerning women in ways that break the monologic account of women. For example, the museum's exhibitions concerning single mothers (in 2011), and an earlier exhibition foregrounding (female) street vendors in Hanoi, disseminated voices from women generally considered to be at the margins of the society. This, perhaps, represents an arguably broader shift of mass organisations 'towards the position to represent and protect the interests of their members' as a reply to social changes due to the market-based economy (Le Bach Duong et. al 2003: 95). In any case, such heteroglossic messages by the Vietnam Women's Museum have often been made possible by foreign support, which, for its part, communicates its belief that the position of the WU is situated between the state and the donor community rather than purely comprising a part of the Vietnamese state. The exhibitions also suggest that monologic accounts of women promoted by the state are only attempts to impact on women's behaviour; 'in reality', even within the WU there is space for heteroglossia concerning women.

Motherhood – the 'noble function' of women

Three important dimensions of womanhood listed in the literature all relate to the notion of the ideal woman: female sexuality, marriage and motherhood⁶⁹. In the

69 Naturally, seeing women primarily as mothers or would-be mothers is not only a Vietnamese phenomenon. Kabeer (1994: 188), for example, has pointed out how motherhood as women's principal 'role' is manifest in policies concerned with family welfare and family planning, which tend to be targeted at women. Clearly, there is no similar tendency to see men through a role of fatherhood.

following, I shall explore how earlier literature on motherhood reflects demands for female morality.

Women in Vietnam are largely seen through the lens of their ‘natural’ and ‘noble function’ of giving birth to children and caring for them (Le Thi 2001: 5). Motherhood, however, is assumed to be performed within wifehood.⁷⁰ This indicates an understanding that human reproduction should be limited to the context of ‘family’ in which the notion of family represents a highly normative form of social organization (Robertson 1991: 154). It has been argued that in Vietnam ‘female sexuality is ideally restricted to marriage and motherhood’⁷¹ and that traditional sexual norms are particularly persistent in rural areas (Rydstrøm 2006: 283). Despite the ideal, the literature suggests that pre-marital sex is increasingly a part of contemporary sexual behaviour.

Research indicates that to maintain their images as ‘good women’ and to secure the respect of their future husbands, their reputation, status and their futures, women feel pressured to hide their sexual experience from their friends and family even in the case of an abortion (e.g. Rydstrøm 2006; Bélanger & Khuat Thu Hong 1999⁷²). What is rather clear is that even though centripetal forces use the concept of the ideal woman in an attempt to unify and influence female behaviour, the ideal does not coincide with reality. The impact of the notion of the ideal woman can be seen, however, in women’s attempts to hide premarital sexual experiences, thereby conforming to the prevailing gendered norms by *performing* as ideal women rather than actually embodying the ethos. Again, though, care must be taken to avoid premature generalization about the actual incidence of behaviours, because, for example, not all women choose to hide their out-of-wedlock pregnancies as will be seen in the following chapter.

The pressure experienced by women in conforming to the tenets of moral behaviour is partly due to the fact that similarly strict moral norms are not applied to men,⁷³ while social punishment for premarital or extramarital sex is commonly

70 According to the World Values Survey 2001, only 16% of Vietnamese approve of a woman being a single parent, while at the same time 86% of the sample population claimed that a woman needs to have children to fulfill her role (Dalton et.al. 2001).

71 The single women show how mothering is, in fact, an arena of political struggle that is not limited to unequal power relations between spouses (Glenn 1994: 17) but is also subject to social control at large.

72 It is worth noting that even though the data used in the study is rather old, it is still relevant to my inquiry as it describes the situation in northern Vietnam at the time of Defi’s first interventions there. Moreover, the change in sexual norms has been swifter in big cities than in more conservative rural areas where my own data comes from.

73 As will be noted later in this chapter, Mengzi clearly denounced premarital sex for both men and women (Mencius IIIB: 3) and named ‘indulgence in sensual pleasures to the shame of one’s par-

meted out to women.⁷⁴ In contrast, Vietnamese scholarship on gender and sexuality that largely follows the notion of the ‘ideal woman’, acknowledges some cases in which sexual intercourse outside marriage can be assessed as (partly) acceptable or at least understandable for a woman (Le Thi 2008). Such views do not however, represent the main official position concerning female sexual behaviour.

These tensions are worth exploring. I observe a tendency among some Vietnamese scholars to discuss womanhood in terms of motherhood, which is understood as a biological need of every woman (see especially works by Le Thi). Moreover, as already stated, normatively motherhood should locate within wifehood. This is consistent with views that, if a woman is ‘unfortunate’ enough to be forced by circumstances to live in an area with a significant gender imbalance, or if a woman is unable to attract a man in order to get married or is considered too old to find a husband, she should at least be able to fulfil her biological call to motherhood. Loving and caring for a child are seen as the natural needs of any woman and thus, it has been argued, single mothers should be understood and pitied rather than being condemned by society (Le Thi 2008). As an explanation for deviation from the norm it has been pointed out that a woman without a child is a woman without social security when ageing (*ibid.*), thus raising the practical need to have a child in a society that locates responsibility for the elderly within the frame of the family (Constitution 2001, Chapter V, art. 64). As we shall see, it is useful to be aware of this ‘turn’ in official thinking better to understand the single women’s experiences which are analyzed in Chapter Five.

Nonetheless, gender literature in Vietnam shares the view that the female body is an object of moral disciplining to a greater degree than the male body;⁷⁵ and the ideal woman is a woman of high moral standing who abstains from premarital sex. As motherhood is assumed to take place within marriage, public contraceptive advice is thus targeted at married women. Research data from the 1990s suggests that unmarried women were mostly unaware of contraceptive methods and, while the literature could be considered outdated, it is valid for my research as the Defi project with Minh Son single women started in 1996.

Despite the existing moral norms, a survey conducted in 1994 among university students reported that 14.8 per cent of men and 2.4 per cent of women had experienced premarital sex. A similar study a few years later in a rural environ-

ents’ (Mencius IVB: 30) as one characteristic of an undutiful son, along with indulgence in games and fondness for drink.

74 The poet Ho Xuan Huong has been held up, however, as an example of a Vietnamese woman who has ‘fought [with her poems] for freedom of sex for women and castigated the backward mandarins and hypocritical Confucianists’ (VWU et al 1989: 14).

75 It should be noted that there is a growing scholarly interest in how ideas on masculinity and gendered norms for men manifest in lives of men in Vietnam (e.g. Horton & Rydstrom 2011).

ment suggested the rate of premarital sex for single young people to be 30-37 per cent (Bélanger and Khuat Thu Hong 1999: 72). The differences between the two results suggest that the numbers are only suggestive at best – as also pointed out by Rydstrøm (2006). The problems of data reliability also concern abortion rates in Vietnam. Research based on government statistics estimated that the total abortion rate in Vietnam in 1996 was the highest among developing countries (Bélanger, Khuat Thu Hong 1999) – revealing that abortion is commonly used as a birth control device. Moreover, health workers in two of the biggest Vietnamese cities, Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) and Hanoi, estimated that abortions for single women accounted for 20-30 per cent of all pregnancy terminations in the mid 1990s (Bélanger, Khuat Thu Hong 1999: 71). It is important to note that even though contraceptive advice is targeted at married women, abortion services are widely available and inexpensive and women can make use of them anonymously (Bélanger, Khuat Thu Hong 1999: 73; see also Rydstrøm 2006). It is clear that there are probably gaps, possibly very large gaps, between official gendered norms and people's actual behaviour. My interest here, however, is more directly focused on the experience of being a single mother and in particular, how single motherhood affects women's access to communal life (as will be analysed in Chapter Five).

We may argue that earlier research communicates a contradictory attitude towards sex, especially when it concerns unmarried women. A sex survey conducted in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and Danang in 2012 by the Institute for Social Development found that over 53 per cent of participants said that the goal of sex is to maintain the human race. Just over 11 per cent of men and 4 per cent of women reported having sex for its pleasant sensations.⁷⁶ We may, however, question the reliability of such surveys as, due to cultural norms, people may attribute a lower importance to sex as a source of pleasure than is actually the case.

The official construct of the ideal Vietnamese woman portrays a self-sacrificing woman, a romantic and gentle virgin, as well as a faithful and caring wife and a mother. The narrative of the relationship between the sexes is one of romantic love (see e.g. Le Thi Nham Tuyet 1989: 31): a once-in-a-lifetime affection between a man and a woman; a story of longing rather than sexually expressed love.⁷⁷ Therefore, a female strategy of pretending inexperience in love and sex can be understood as a form of conformity to existing sexual norms, particularly as sexuality is viewed as being a male characteristic. Unlike women, men are asserted to have an

76 (<http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/society/25747/half-of-vietnamese-women-unsatisfied-with-sex-life.html>, visited 15.8.2012)

77 Premarital sex is defended by young women mainly in terms of its being an expression of deep love and commitment to the relationship (Bélanger, Khuat Thu Hong 1999).

inherent need for sex and the ability to enjoy it, though it has been argued that associating sexual needs with the male rather than the female body makes it difficult for Vietnamese women to express their sexual needs (Ghuman 2005: 97). In fact, a recent study on sexual communication among educated urban Vietnamese couples suggests that Vietnamese sexualities are shifting and that sexual communication within marriage is coming to be understood as an expression of modern identity. The study also suggests that women's passiveness in sexual matters is only partly due to traditional cultural norms. Other issues such as the challenges of balancing work and home responsibilities when already a mother, physical exhaustion, and women's fear of a new pregnancy may be more important factors in women's sexual passiveness (Bui Thu Huong 2010; see also Gammeltoft 1999:163).

Official sexual norms are thus stricter for women than for men. In some circumstances, extramarital sex is socially approved for men, on condition that it does not disturb the man's family life; extramarital relationships by men are tolerated as long as the man fulfils his duties as a husband and a father. Furthermore, as men are understood to have an inherent need for sex, they are believed to have a greater requirement for extramarital sexual relationships. Moreover, a married man can 'help' a single woman to have a child without social condemnation if that is the only way for a woman to achieve motherhood. Fathering a child in such a case is considered a benevolent male act as long as the act remains incidental and sexual – that is, no feelings are attached to the woman or the child thus fathered (Le Thi 2008).

The review of the existing literature thus suggests that gendered official norms in Vietnam are heavily enmeshed with ideas concerning family and sexuality (Rydstrøm 2010; Drummond & Rydstrøm 2004; Khuat Thu Hong 1998; Vo et. al 2008; Lynellyn et al. 2000; Werner 2009; Pettus 2003). It is also the case that the main body of gender literature discusses women, instead of women *and* men. It should come as no surprise that gender is conceptually defined by biological sex rather than, for example, concepts of femininity and masculinity that need not obey the lines of biological sex.

In the following section, I shall test the claims of gendered norms described and referred to in the literature as deriving from 'traditional' Vietnamese culture in general, and Confucianism in particular, by revisiting early Confucian texts to investigate the kind of gendered norms that can be identified there.

4.2 Heteroglossia within Confucianism: Gendered norms in Confucian classics

Following the idea of heteroglossia within monoglossic accounts (Bakhtin 2012; Francis 2012: 9), I suggest that it is possible to read Confucianism in a manner that challenges the mainstream reading of it as the foundation of women's subordination to men. In this section, I revisit three of the Four Confucian classics⁷⁸ – 'The Confucian Analects', 'The Great Learning' and 'The Works of Mencius' – to explore gendered ideas in early Confucian thought and investigate the kind of utterances concerning women that are to be found in the classics. In addition, I ask whether there are grounds for arguing that factors beyond Confucian philosophy also played a role in the formation of gendered norms in Vietnam. My objective is to explore whether Confucian ideas that became interpreted in monologic terms also allow alternative interpretations of the doctrine. This will facilitate my analysis of interview transcripts in Chapter Five.

Reading Confucian classics reveals that Kongzi hardly mentioned women in the 'Analects'. Only later did his followers, especially Mengzi, develop the idea of proper social relationships as a foundation of social harmony. Kongzi's interests lay in state issues, understood as a domain solely pertaining to men. One of the rare references to women in the 'Analects' states:

Of all people, girls and servants are the most difficult to behave to. If you are familiar with them, they lose their humility. If you maintain a reserve towards them, they are discontented. (Confucian Analects, XVII: XXV in Legge)

However, as Legge points out, *nūzi*, the Chinese word for women used in the utterance, referred to girls (i.e. concubines) and not women in general (see also Li 2000a: 3).⁷⁹ Instead of showing interest in gender issues, the focus of Kongzi's work is on the construction of a philosophy that aimed at making China a har-

78 The Four Classics include: 'The Great Learning', 'The Doctrine of the Mean', 'The Confucian Analects', and 'The Works of Mencius'. My analysis of 'The Great Learning', 'The Confucian Analects' and 'The Works of Mencius' are based on authoritative bilingual (Chinese-English) editions with translations by James Legge and to some extent to the versions of D.C. Lau ('The Analects' 1992; 'Mencius' 2003).

79 It is worth noting that researchers have controversial views on the quoted section. For example, it has also been mentioned in reference to the same section that 'From Confucius down, Confucianists have always considered women inferior' (Chan 1969: 47). However, this was presented as a general statement without any supportive evidence such as references to texts by Kongzi or Mengzi. Meanwhile, according to Golding (2000: 138), referring to the same section, 'it is indisputable that Confucius placed women at the very bottom of the domestic hierarchy'.

monious, righteous and prosperous state. The ‘Analects’ can be read as a moral philosophy in which moral obligations apply to all people in society, including state officials. The ultimate goal of Kongzi was a tranquil and happy kingdom. In order to achieve an ideal society ‘noble men’ were required to investigate things to complete their knowledge:

[Noble men’s] knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified. Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated their *families were regulated*. Their families being regulated, their states were rightly governed. (‘The Great Learning’, The Text of Confucius, 5; italics added)

The quotation can be read in two distinctly different ways. Late Confucian reading of this stretch of text emphasized the role of a man as head of the family and the subordination of wife and children to his orders. This represents a reading in which male interests are forcefully underlined. However, my reading of the quotation is significantly different. In my view, the emphasis is placed on a necessity for men’s self-cultivation through enhanced knowledge to result in rectified hearts. Therefore, even though Kongzi acknowledges man as the head of a family, he paints a picture of a cultivated man who can regulate his family through example and not by force. Thus the greatest moral demands are placed on men and not women. Therefore, in Kongzi’s writings, the notion of *junzi* (a ‘noble man’; Vietnamese - *quân tử*) plays a central role in the making of an ideal society. Women are mostly ignored, which can be read as a reflection of Chinese gender norms of the time that prescribed state administration as a male domain.

Thus whilst early Confucianism showed almost no interest in women (see also Sin Yee Chan 2000) much space was devoted to different roles of a man as a son, a father and a state official or a ruler. ‘The Great Learning’, ‘Confucian Analects’ and ‘The Works of Mencius’ offer considerable material for an analysis of the ideal man, a factor that is widely ignored in later discourses on Confucianism and gender, especially those relevant here. For example, in sharp contrast to later gendered norms that sought to impose sexual morality on women, Mengzi attributed the duty of sexual morality to both sexes:

If *the young people*, without waiting for the orders of their parents, and the arrangements of the go-betweens, shall bore holes to steal a sight of each other, or get over the wall to be with each other, then their parents and all other people will despise them. (The Works of Mencius, Book III, Part II, Chapter III: 6 in Legge; italics in original)

One of the rare instances in which Mengzi directly discusses women does, however, imply the subordination of a wife to her husband:

At the marriage of a young woman, her mother admonishes her, accompanying her to the door on her leaving, and cautioning her with these words, '*You are going to your home. You must be respectful; you must be careful. Do not disobey your husband.*' Thus, to look upon compliance as their correct course is the rule for women. (The Works of Mencius, Book III, Part II, Chapter II: 2 in Legge; italics in original)

The quotation shows how 'the rule' of obedience and compliance were directly addressed to women as wives and also demonstrates Mengzi's agreement with the caution of the mother to her daughter. Here, we may see how the mother plays a central role in sustaining gendered norms that demanded a wife's subordination to her husband, indicating that the mother is 'not just passive recipient' but an active participant in the 'determination of gender relations' (Yuval-Davis 1997: 8).

The question arises as to how much weight should be given to this particular paragraph within Mengzi's entire work. Some researchers ignore it completely and suggest instead that what we find in 'The Analects' and 'Mencius' is limited to a view of men and women as complementing each other (Sin Yee Chan 2000). This observation nevertheless does not overrule the possibility that we may also find in the quoted paragraph by Mengzi support for a wife's subordination to her husband being 'the rule'. The two framings of 'women and men as complementing each other' and 'female subordination to man' do not necessarily exclude each other. However, I suggest a reading of Confucian classics that postulates 'reciprocity as the norm', as I shall point out later.⁸⁰ (Note that Lau uses the term 'the norm' while Legge prefers 'the rule', both however carrying the same idea of a binding practice that is addressed to female sex.)

My point is that despite the interpretation given to the quotation, this one paragraph alone does not suffice to explain the weight that the idea of female subordination was later allocated among Confucian scholars. The paragraph is only a small, almost a tiny, part of Mengzi's works. Moreover, it is possible to read the paragraph merely as an acceptance of Chinese gender practices at the time rather than a call for women's subordination to men originating with Mengzi. It should be remembered that Chinese traditions and history were Kongzi's main sources of inspiration; early Confucianism sought knowledge about harmonious society from earlier generations. The paragraph can be interpreted as a logical empha-

⁸⁰ Li (2000a: 14) presents a similar reading when he uses the concept 'principle of mutuality'. Moreover, elsewhere he points out that when asked about a thread that ran through Kongzi's philosophy, his disciple Shen had replied: 'loyalty and reciprocity' (Li 2000b: 28-29).

sis on the maintenance of social hierarchies taking concrete forms, such as in practicing ‘the names’.⁸¹ It is important to note that rules for subordination communicated in the analyzed Confucian classics do not only concern the relationship between males and females, but more importantly the relationship between parents and children. According to Mengzi, the most important duty is one’s duty towards one’s parents:

There are many duties one should discharge, but the fulfilment of one’s duty towards one’s parents is the most basic. (Mencius IV:A, 19 in Lau)

This duty towards one’s parents, conceptualized as ‘filial piety’⁸² (*lòng hiếu thảo*), concerns both male and female children; differentiation is not accorded on the basis of sex but rather on age hierarchies within a family. Yet very little attention has been addressed to the notion of filial piety in gender literature on Vietnam, even though, as I shall argue in Chapter Five, it seems to be a highly relevant factor in young women’s lives.⁸³

As the Confucian Four Books formed the basis of elite education in China, and in Vietnam when dominated by China, the educated classes adopted Confucianism as the main doctrine in public life even though privately they might also have practiced Daoism (Taylor 1983: 83). There is some evidence that the influence of Confucianism was not, however, limited to elites. For example, McHale (2004: 76) has drawn attention to popularized versions of Confucianism in women’s newspapers and primers between 1920 and 1939, at a time when Confucianism had already lost its formal position. It has also been argued that, in fact, Confucian ideas penetrated Vietnamese society through Buddhist texts (Taylor 2002). Even though Confucianism was mainly a state project promoted by certain emperors in Vietnamese history, remaining relatively unknown to the Vietnamese populace, some key Confucian ideas did reach the common people. As the main Buddhist influence came to Vietnam through China, access to Buddhist texts required knowledge of Classical Chinese – a competence to be found among mandarins. Consequently, vernacular Buddhist texts directed to people in the villages were

81 Kongzi talks about ‘rectifying the names’ as an essential part of a harmonious society. Rectifying the names calls for the recognition of different, specified social roles for each person within the net of social encounters. An ideal society, according to Kongzi, could be achieved when ‘a son is a son, a father is a father’; that is, when everyone acts in accordance with their specific role in a society (Confucius 1992).

82 Chinese: 孝道 *xiàodao*.

83 A study on gay men in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City by Paul Horton, however, interestingly shows the relevance of filial piety in the lives of homosexual men in Vietnam (Horton 2013, personal communication).

shot through with ideas of filial piety and sexual purity that were not to be found in the originals (Taylor 2002). In addition, late Confucian scholars in Vietnam (as in China) were involved in producing a body of 'orthodox Confucian texts' (Marr 1981) that 'particularly aimed at training girls to become virtuous women and desirable matches for marriage' (Ngo Thi Ngan Binh 2004: 49).⁸⁴ It is worth mentioning that Xunzi, a prominent Confucian scholar after Mengzi, was of the opinion that both Kongzi and Mengzi were wrong in their belief that a man was good by nature. Instead, Xunzi claimed that the nature of man was evil, which made him an advocate for external control as means of personal cultivation (Chan 1969: 128-129). This may, at least to some extent, serve as a reason why Confucianism turned from self-cultivation towards an emphasis on the social control of people's behaviour.⁸⁵

I have discussed a transformation of Confucian philosophy from a central interest in the construction of an ideal state by virtuous men into a doctrine marked by texts emphasizing gender hierarchy as an integral part of a harmonious society. The gender categorization here is based on the biological sex of a person and can also be found in early Western feminist theorising.⁸⁶ A person's sex, therefore, marks and defines wanted and unwanted behaviour. The high moral values and reciprocity that were a central part of early and original Confucian thought was later replaced by various subordinations (such as a wife's subordination to her husband) that contrast with Kongzi's view of the reciprocal good society (Hakkarainen 2002). One should be careful, therefore, in using the term 'Confucian' to imply a unified value system as there are significant differences between early and later versions of Confucian doctrine as I have shown through my reading of the Confucian classics.

84 Books that aimed at 'training' girls reflect, to some extent, a phenomenon similar to a 'morality book movement' that began in Southeast China in the sixteenth century, reaching its peak in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the support of Neo-Confucian scholars. The morality books, heavily influenced by Buddhist and Daoist ideas of 'fate', defined and listed good and bad deeds thus creating a programme of merit accumulation. Self-cultivation was not presented as taking place through study (leading to moral cultivation), but through certain actions (Brokaw 1991: 19, 25, 61).

85 McHale (2004: 35) has noted that the Vietnamese elite felt obliged to enlighten and teach the populace.

86 African gender scholars have criticized Western conceptualizations of gender for taking biological sex as a theory-forming assumption. Oyewumi (2002) convincingly argues that Western feminist concepts (at least those of second-wave feminism) are rooted in the social institution of male-headed, two-parent family that is not applicable to African realities. The Confucian idea of family and gender has similarities with Western conceptualizations in its rootedness in the idea of a patriarchal family order, a central point of Oyewumi's criticism of Eurocentric gender conceptualizations.

4.3 Chapter conclusions

My analysis of earlier gender literature revealed the continuation of ‘traditional’ gendered ideas about women from pre-socialist through socialist periods. In all periods under scrutiny, the notion of an ideal woman – marked by transformations as well as continuities – has been central to gendered norms targeting women. Drawing from the body of literature on gender and Vietnam that describes and analyzes gendered norms in Vietnam, I approached the notion of the ideal woman as a manifestation of ‘centripetal’ forces (Bakhtin 2012: 25; see also Morson and Emerson 1990) within Vietnamese society.

At all times, the notion of an ideal Vietnamese woman may be understood, in relation to state monologism, as serving the interests of those in power and being communicated to the wider society in order to set norms for appropriate female behaviour.

Moreover, I have suggested that the ‘Confucian influence’ on Vietnamese society, as communicated in gender literature, is based on late Confucian ideas that contrast with ideas presented in early Confucian classics, where both Kongzi and Mengzi emphasized norms for proper *male* behaviour. Importantly, I want to stress that my purpose was not to challenge claims presented in gender literature that Confucianism has significantly contributed to gender inequality in Vietnam. Rather, I want to emphasize that early Confucianism offers a greater quantity of material relevant to gendered norms and those mainly concern men. In addition, I have shown how Mengzi endorsed strict sexual norms for *both* young men and women. Thus, early Confucianism offers an alternative textual basis for reading gender in a Confucian frame. My analysis of early Confucian doctrine, therefore, reveals heteroglossia within Confucianism and opens up possibilities for challenging the normative reading of Confucianism which is present in gender literature. It is important to note that within Confucianism we may find ‘orthodox’ Confucian texts such as the Four Books discussed here and, in addition, a body of texts such as ‘morality books’ on which very little research has been done in the Vietnamese context, and which may have been important in construction of gendered norms unfavourable to women. To what extent it is possible or meaningful to discuss them concurrently can be subject to differing views. However, my point here is that essentialist notions of Confucianism and gender can and should be challenged and for this purpose, it is necessary to revisit early Confucian texts. Later transformations within Confucianism can be approached as creating monoglossic accounts of gender that serve male interests, produce gender-imbalanced

discourses and mask heteroglossic discourses within the doctrine by providing a façade of fixity and stability.

In the following chapter, I deepen my discussion on gender in Vietnam through analysis of single women's life narratives. My purpose is to explore, aided by Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia and centrifugal forces, how gendered norms as identified by literature and discussed in this chapter manifest themselves in the women's experiences.

5 COPING WITH GENDER MONOLOGISM: SINGLE WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

This chapter continues and deepens my discussion on gender through analysis of the life stories of single women in Minh Son commune in the greater Hanoi region. These are treated as narratives (see Riessman 1993): as a woman's own account of her life told in a particular situation (an interview) and at a particular moment. Such narratives are not subject to a true / false assessment, but to be understood as stories through which interviewees identify important events in their lives and attempt to make sense of them; they represent a meaning-construction process tied to a particular place and moment. Were I to go back to the same women, some time later, their stories might have changed: some information might be missing and some added, or some new explanations or reasons may have appeared. Narratives offer a valuable source of information for a researcher as they reflect the world as constructed by the narrator. This being the case, the narratives become important not only because they talk about these particular women, but because they turn women into subjects through whom we may access the world around them. My interviewees are therefore treated here as 'aesthetic subjects' in which 'their movements and dispositions are less significant in terms of what is revealed about their inner lives than what they tell us about the world to which they belong' (Shapiro 2013: 11).

Moreover, I treat the women's narratives as stories that potentially reveal the heteroglossia of gendered norms within Vietnamese society, therefore I am particularly interested in the extent to which single women's narratives depart from, or challenge, the normative ideas of women. As discussed in the previous chapter, the centripetal forces that aim to unify female behaviour to produce gendered norms that arguably serve those with relatively more power do not necessarily succeed in determining women's actual behaviour, and the single women's narratives offer us insights into centrifugal forces that challenge the centripetal forces within the society. However, it is important to restate what I have already mentioned: centrifugal forces in Bakhtin's conceptualization do not suggest a unified struggle against the centripetal. Rather, they consist of individual voices that may or may not have something in common with each other. What joins them together is the fact that they challenge monoglossic accounts of them – of single women.

In the process of analyzing the single women's narratives, I paid particular attention to references to other persons (such as a boyfriend or a family mem-

ber) who are understood to represent the 'social'. A narrative as a sense-making process is assumed to include references to normative ideas or 'shared' cultural values by both confirming their existence and possibly, at the same time, challenging them. Abstaining from pre-marital sex, for example, is understood as a norm (as defined by the literature discussed in Chapter Four) and any narrative that describes breaking with the norm is therefore understood as representing a heteroglossic account of gender vis-à-vis the norm.

The data consists of eight in-depth, semi-structured interviews with single women who have a long history of participating in the micro-credit project set up by Defi. The interviews were conducted in late 2010 and early 2011 and each lasted around two hours, except for one that was cut short due to the interviewee's (an elderly widow) severe headache that made it difficult for her to concentrate and respond to the questions asked. All but one interview were conducted in the interviewee's house,⁸⁷ which had several benefits. First, it allowed me to learn more of the woman's life than covered by the questions as observing the house told me a lot about its owner's life, economic status and sometimes even special skills. For example, one of the women interviewed had a strikingly well-ordered and lush garden (as compared with other gardens seen so far) with a variety of vegetables and fruit trees. In some cases conducting an interview in the woman's home gave me a chance to see her children or other relatives (in two cases I met the mother of the interviewee) or at least their pictures. It is common practice for a house to contain an ancestor altar bearing photographs of the deceased and some women had arranged pictures of their dead husbands and / or parents on them. Second, interviewing women in their own homes made it easier for them to feel relaxed during the session.

The interviewees were selected to represent all three types of single women (*phụ nữ đơn thân*) among the participants of the Defi project. That is, widows (*goá phụ*, 3), separated / divorced (*ly hôn*, 2) and single mothers (*nuôi con một mình*, 3).⁸⁸ The other selection criteria used included age and identification of the woman as a successful / non-successful loan taker. The women also formed a heterogeneous group in terms of age. Two interviewees were born in the 1950s, three in the 1960s and three in the 1970s. The ages of their children ranged from 3 (the youngest) to 31 years of age. All single (out-of-wedlock) mothers had only daughters.

⁸⁷ One interview was conducted in the house of an interviewee's sister as the interviewee felt too embarrassed by her poverty ('not even a seat to offer') to let a foreigner see her house. She was also clearly nervous at the beginning of the interview, but relaxed during the course of it. It turned out that the interview was her first face-to-face encounter with a foreigner, which made her 'half happy, half worried' (Int. 2, transcript, p. 39). However, when the interview was over, she admitted that it had made her happy ('*khi các chị đến em lại thấy mừng*').

⁸⁸ Literally this means to 'raise a child alone', that is, a single-carer.

Women who were widows or separated had both daughters and sons. Moreover, the interviewees represented women who had joined the project at different times though most had joined in 1996, the first year of project implementation. Three of the interviewees had joined the project several years later (one in 2002 after separation from her husband and return to her home village, and two in 2005: one of whom was a single mother who had learned about the project and the other a newly widowed mother of one daughter). The interviewees lived in four different villages in Minh Son commune.

In addition to the eight individual interviews, I conducted one group interview with six women who had all participated in the project since 1996. Three of the women were members of the BoM and the three others had started as project beneficiaries but had later been selected as group leaders. Two women in the group interview were also interviewed individually. Both were single mothers whom I had met several times since 1997, which – I suppose – made it easier for them to open up about their lives during our conversation.

The two types of interviews (individual and group) were to some extent different in their content, the group interview only touching on the women's personal life when they voluntarily provided such information. However, even during the group interview it was evident that the central concern and pride of the women were their children. If a woman failed to provide me with information about her offspring, the other group members made sure that I was told about the fine school performance of each child. In particular, children who had made it to university were a source of shared happiness, as were those who had been among the top in their classes.⁸⁹ In addition to the project participants, my data contains an interview with a former WU staff member who is herself a widow and who played a key role in supporting Defi in setting up the project the way the NGO wanted. Even if she does not represent the project beneficiaries in the same way as the other interviewees, her story adds to the other narratives, having in common the personal experience of raising a child alone in harsh circumstances which allowed her an understanding of the difficulties faced by the single women in the commune. Thus, our long discussion together significantly contributed to my overall understanding of the context in which the women lived when their children were born and the project was established.

In the following, I analyze the single women's narratives against the gendered norms discussed in the previous chapter. The analysis shows how concepts such as

⁸⁹ According to my observations, good school performance is often interpreted as a mother's success in tasks that include ensuring their children are not only provided with food and clothing, but also go to school. Women in this sense are seen to represent 'the level of civilization of the nation' – a task in which they can be assessed as successful or unsuccessful (see Le Thi 2001: 5, 9).

marriage that are central in understanding gendered sexual norms are contextual and subject to interpretation. As my data suggests, 'marriage' has several meanings: for example, it may be constituted by a legal framework (marriage law) or be a social issue controlled by the family institution. The overall aim of the chapter is to contribute understanding to my second research question: how gendered norms manifest themselves in the single women's lives and how they relate to the issue of democracy. This is approached through the women's narratives, allowing me to explore how (if at all) these norms are related to women's possibilities to participate in communal life in order to practice democracy.

5.1 Marriage as a social contract within the family institution

Thuy (born in the late 1950s) was only 15 years old when her parents forced her to marry a co-villager of the same age, a boy selected by her parents whom Thuy did not know before the marriage. Without going into the specifics of the years spent with the husband, Thuy recalls that she was 21 years old when she returned to her natal home with her daughter. At the time, she was pregnant with a second child, a boy born some months later.

Thuy's marital status became a relevant issue when she later moved out of her parents' home, which was already occupied by seven people in addition to Thuy and her two small children. Encouraged by a relative, Thuy approached local authorities to ask for a piece of land to live on in order to sustain her family. To fulfil the required formalities Thuy was asked to submit a divorce document. As Thuy had been a minor when entering into marriage, the relationship had never been legally registered. Learning of her situation, the authorities instructed Thuy to go back to her own parents and the parents of the husband and ask them to sign a letter confirming that the marriage-like relationship between Thuy and her husband had actually taken place and that the couple now lived in separation. Doing as advised, Thuy returned to the two families, got the letter and submitted it to the local authorities, whereupon they recognized Thuy as officially divorced and, therefore, entitled to a piece of land. Three months after submitting the required documents, Thuy was allocated 600 m² of land that enabled her to settle down with her children.

Thuy's story of her marriage and separation illustrates how marriage as an institution is understood as a social contract between two families. Moreover, the process of applying for a piece of land after her separation reveals that local authorities also acknowledge marriage as an arrangement between families even though no formal

legal action had been taken to register the relationship according to the law. Moreover, the narrative shows how Thuy's sexuality and choice of partner were subordinate to her parents' decision. It also suggests that parents' authority over their children supersedes state laws when interpreting whether a marriage has taken place.

Linh's narrative of her marital life similarly shows the centrality of a woman's family in defining her marital status. Linh, nearly 40 at the time of interview, was in her early 30s when she noticed she was pregnant to her boyfriend, who served in an army base near her home. Having recently lost her father, Linh turned to her mother to ask for permission to live with her lover. She informed him that should her mother oppose the relationship, she would end it and abort the baby, a course of action strongly opposed by her lover. Linh broke the news of her pregnancy to her mother, who decided to consult relatives concerning her daughter's case. Linh being already pregnant meant that a decision had to be made about how to deal with the situation. The problem was that for reasons never explained to Linh, her boyfriend refused to tell his parents about her so it was out of the question to discuss the issue amongst the two families involved; a solution had to be found without involving the man's parents. As her boyfriend was committed to the relationship and wanted Linh to keep their baby, Linh's family decided to organize a small 'wedding' party for the young couple, thus publicly demonstrating their acceptance of, and support for, the relationship. As Linh's boyfriend came from a different province, it was possible to ignore the absence of his family members from the party.

Even though the couple was never officially married – as despite the fact that Linh's boyfriend had come of age, the Army refused to endorse his marriage application without the consent of his parents – Linh's wedding party established her as a married woman in the eyes of much of the community. Moreover, even though she was not the legal wife of her daughter's father, she was nonetheless seen as his wife by the Army, as became evident when she lost her husband in an accident.

Linh's narrative again shows how marriage is understood as a social contract within the family institution and how an identity as a married woman may be established by virtue of a wedding party organized by the young woman's family for the couple.

The narratives of Thuy and Linh suggest that a sexual relationship outside marriage does not necessarily lead to social condemnation. First of all, marriage is understood as a social contract in which parents rather than state laws play a central role. Furthermore, even if official sexual norms have been broken prior to the family's consent to the relationship, as was the case with Linh, critical social

judgment of the woman can be avoided if a marriage-like relationship can be established and acknowledged by the community, which the state then accepts.

Moral norms negotiated through the norms of filial piety

Already noted is that official moral norms rejecting pre-marital sexual relations may confront and differ from an interpretation of the notion of marriage in which the woman's family plays a central role. Thus, a woman can be married in the eyes of the community even though the relationship is not registered in legal terms. Children born to such a relationship are considered born within a marriage. Two factors seem important in such cases: first, the role of the family in arranging or formally establishing the relationship through a socially accepted and recognized ritual such as the wedding party; and second, the presence of the 'husband' and thus, the father of the woman's child(ren).

In the following, I explore three other cases that deepen our understanding of gendered sexual norms from the women's perspective. As the analysis shows, breaking with official sexual norms and becoming pregnant out of wedlock are not sufficient factors to explain the experiences that follow a woman's pregnancy in these conditions. Instead, broader contextual factors, as well as the role played by the woman's family, are the key to predicting whether or not the woman will face moral judgment by the community.

Diep, born in the mid-60s gave birth to an out-of-wedlock baby girl when she was 23 years of age. The father of her child was from the same village which, according to Diep, was common knowledge among the villagers as it was impossible to keep the relationship secret in a small community. However, as Diep put it, the lovers broke up 'out of misunderstanding' and she was left to deal with her unplanned pregnancy alone. As soon as she broke the news to her father and his new wife (her parents were separated and both lived with their new spouses, Diep staying with her father and her siblings from the father's two marriages), they told Diep to abort the baby.

Bố tôi bảo là tôi sinh con như vậy sẽ rất vất vả, sau này sinh con ra thì khó lập gia đình vì sẽ phải lấy những người già hoặc những người đã ly hôn [...].

My father told me that if I give birth to the baby it will be very difficult for me. After having a baby, it will be difficult for me to set up a family, and I would have to marry an old man or someone who has divorced. (Int. 7, transcript, p. 8)⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Translations from Vietnamese to English are mine. However, I owe special thanks to Pham Thi Oanh, who patiently explained the meanings of individual words and structures of sentences when

Despite the fact that her father painted a gloomy future for Diep when persuading her to abort the baby, she refused to follow her father's advice. Finally, she was given an ultimatum. Her parents informed her that should she disobey them, she could no longer live with the family. In addition, Diep's elder brother told her that if she kept the baby and disobeyed her family, she would only have herself to rely on; he would not help her in any way. Diep would not, however, obey her family:

Tôi không biết tại sao, chỉ biết lúc đó mình không muốn bỏ.

I don't know why, I only know that at that time I did not want to give up. (Int. 7, transcript p. 9).

Diep's insistence on keeping her baby, for reasons she could not express, meant that she was forced to move out of her family home and start her life in social isolation. Abandoned by her family, she now became an object of moral condemnation by other villagers. In her desperation Diep turned to her biological mother who showed pity for her but was unable to help as, according to Diep, she feared the reaction of her new husband if she did so.

A somewhat similar story was told by Trinh who is almost the same age as Diep. Trinh joined the army in 1980 at the age of 16 and had a love affair with a fellow soldier. On realizing she was pregnant, she left the army and returned to her home village. Her return was not a happy one. Her parents felt ashamed of her and the other villagers looked down on her, labelling her a 'bad woman'. Trinh stayed with her parents until the delivery of her baby, then, having no money to establish life with her newborn daughter, Trinh turned to local authorities to ask for a piece of land. At the time there was still excess land available and she was allocated a plot in another village. Here we see local 'official' norms operating perhaps less harshly than those of the local community.

Trinh's father passed away just before she moved out of her natal home with her baby. Her relationship with her mother remained weak and tense due to her being regarded as a daughter who had shamed the family so she only visited her natal home when her mother was sick or for a special event – a situation compounded by the physical distance between the villages and Trinh's urgent need to earn living for herself and her daughter. Thus, Trinh established her independent life in

I could not satisfactorily decipher them myself. I also wish to thank Professor Adam Fforde for his help in finding suitable expressions in English when I struggled to find them myself, and for pointing out how certain words may open up worlds of their own. Mistakes in translations, if any exist, are all mine.

social isolation and poverty. According to Trinh, getting pregnant outside marriage meant that she was considered immoral by villagers and authorities alike, a reputation that came between her and her old friends:

[...] người ta đã lập gia đình hết rồi, ai cũng có chồng có con, [...] mình không có gia đình nên ngại đến, sợ đến nhà chơi rồi có khi lại quan hệ với chồng con [...].

They all had a husband and children [...]; they were afraid that if I visited them, I could start a relationship with their husbands [...]. (Int. 5, transcript, p. 8)

Being a sole caretaker of her child and lacking friends, Trinh's life was a repetitive one:

Ngày đi chợ đi làm đồng tôi về chỉ có 2 mẹ con thôi, cứ đóng cửa từ tối đến sáng, chẳng đi đến chơi nhà ai và cũng chẳng có bạn.

In the daytime, I went to the market and worked in the fields; in the evening I returned home to be with my daughter keeping the door closed from the evening till the morning, I didn't go to anybody's house and had no friends. (Int. 5, transcript, p. 8)

Trinh's difficulties were not limited to social isolation, for she also had to face economic hardship. Having no money to build a house, she made the bricks for the house herself, meaning that her house was actually a brick frame with no cement. The walls were made more solid by soil, which also made up the house floor.

Trinh's narrative of the hardships she encountered due to her out-of-wedlock pregnancy and baby show how motherhood, even if considered a biological need for any woman, is *a priori* restricted to marriage or at least a socially accepted arrangement parallel with 'marriage'. Moreover, the idea of once-in-a-lifetime romantic love that may culminate in a sexual relationship before marriage (accepted if leading to marriage once the woman gets pregnant), does not apply in Trinh's case as she returned home alone without the promise of marriage that could have protected her from people's moral judgment. Trinh's narrative reveals that she was hoping for the baby's father to come and marry her and he did visit her once when she was eight months pregnant, but he never returned to see his child after she was born. A hint of bitterness visits Trinh's voice when she mentions the man who let her suffer the consequences of their affair alone.

We may conclude that both Trinh and Diep became objects of moral judgment as they were left to cope with their babies alone. Neither Trinh nor Diep managed to present the fathers of their babies to their families and to the community as their future husbands. In such a context, their pregnancies were regarded as the result of a sexual relationship with no true love involved, bringing shame to their families. These two cases most clearly reflect the story line developed by the earlier gender literature: premarital sexual relationships compromise a woman's moral reputation, bring shame to her family and ruin her future prospects for a good life. However, as Linh's narrative showed, gendered norms are contextual and subject to interpretation. I shall further illustrate my argument with the story of Hanh's life.

Hanh is the mother of three daughters – all born out of wedlock. Hanh had her first daughter at the age of 26, that is, after passing marriageable age according to local custom. Her two other daughters, who have not yet reached school age, are some ten years younger than the first daughter. Yet, against all expectations, Hanh has not been subject to negative moral judgment because she is considered to be a single mother as a result of 'special circumstances'. Hanh is the seventh daughter of nine girls. After nine daughters, her parents finally produced a son who became seriously ill as an infant. Trying to save their only son, Hanh's parents sold everything they could to cover his medical costs. After a year, even the youngest daughter was taken out of school (after grade 2) as the family could no longer afford the school fees. The son's life was saved but he never fully recovered and even as an adult, he is unable to work and is dependent on his family's care.

When Hanh's father was dying, he asked her to take care of the family. Hanh loved her family deeply and promised her father that, according to his wish, she would remain at home and look after her elderly mother and sick brother and take care of the ancestor cult – a task that normally passes to the eldest son. Coming from an impoverished family, Hanh understood that this promise meant she now had little chance to marry; it was very unlikely that any man would find her so attractive that he would be willing to move into the house of his in-laws and accept the responsibilities involved. Doomed to remain single to respect her father's wish, Hanh realized that without a son in the family to take over her responsibilities, their lives would become very difficult when she grew old. Therefore, she turned to her family and relatives and asked for their permission to try and have a son who would look after the family when grown up. The permission to 'ask for a child' (see Phinney 2005), was given by the family and in 1998 Hanh gave birth to a daughter. Her plan having failed, she continued to take care of her mother and disabled brother plus her daughter. When she had passed 35 years of age, Hanh decided to try again to produce a son. Her second daughter was born. Giving the

family one more chance for a boy, she became pregnant again. Her third daughter was born.

Unlike Trinh who lost her friends due to her out-of-wedlock child, Hanh has been able to maintain her old school friends; despite her three out-of-wedlock daughters, her morality has been judged acceptable, if not exemplary. We may understand this as a manifestation of norms that rank more highly than sexual norms in the local value system. Despite her illegitimate children, Hanh's life story can be read as an example of a woman who first sacrifices her own happiness to obey her father and then compromises her morality in order to secure the family's future by giving birth to a son. As a result, rather than being judged by the villagers, she has excited their pity for her misfortune. The most important background to understanding the narrative is that Hanh has behaved according to the norms of filial piety, that is, as a child's duty towards her parents:⁹¹ she has followed her father's wishes and, within the limited possibilities at hand, she has tried to improve the future of the family by 'asking for a son'. It is important to note the fact that prior to 'asking for a child' she consulted her family and relatives to get their opinion of, and approval for, her plan. What followed can be interpreted as stemming from her self-sacrificing nature (*hy sinh*), a highly valued characteristic in a woman in Vietnamese society.⁹² Thus, as the interests of Han's family were always put first in her major life decisions, she was treated by her family and the community more broadly as a 'special case' and not as a 'bad woman' despite the fact that, as with Diep and Thuy, the father of her children was not present.

Filial piety was also addressed in Linh's narrative. Not only did she seek her mother's consent for her relationship, but there is also some space to argue that her husband's refusal to tell his parents about her can be understood as manifestation of his filial piety. Linh herself named the cultural difference between the two families as a possible reason for the husband's decision to keep the relationship from his parents. Her husband came from an intellectual family while she was 'just a country girl', the youngest daughter of a big peasant family with eight children. As marriage is considered a contract between two families and not just a relationship between two individuals, the difference in the families' wealth and social status can be interpreted as an obstacle for lovers of different social status.

McHale (2004: 29) has pointed out that in the past, a poem in which the male protagonist fell in love with a woman other than the one his parents had already

91 According to the World Value Survey 2001, 99% of Vietnamese respondents said that parents have to be respected regardless of their qualities or faults, thus ranking the highest among East Asian nations in terms of this attitude (Dalton et al. 2001).

92 Shohet (2013) has suggested that the Vietnamese ethic of sacrifice (*hy sinh*) overlaps and intertwines with practices of filial piety.

chosen to be his wife was considered inappropriate reading for men. This suggests an acknowledgement that a possible conflict between a young man and his parents should be avoided. Interestingly, however, the ‘Works of Mencius’ offer a solution that can save both a man’s relationship with the woman he loves and, apparently, his relationship with his parents:

Wan Chang asked, “The *Odes* say,
How does one take a wife?
By first telling one’s parents.

Of men who truly believes in these words surely no one can surpass Shun.
Why then did Shun marry without telling his parents?”

“Because he would not have been allowed to marry if he had told them. A man and woman living together is the most important of human relationships. If he had told his parents, he would have put aside the most important of human relationships and this would sour relationships with his parents. That is why he did not tell them.” (Mencius 5A: 2, Italics added).

It is, of course, impossible to prove that Linh’s husband chose not to tell his parents about her as he feared their disapproval of her. However, considering Linh’s statement that he came from an intellectual family while she was just a poor country girl, the explanation can be supported by cultural practices that assess possible spouses in terms of their families’ social status, wealth and thus the potential (dis) respect that may be brought to the family through a marriage. Moreover, the citation from Mengzi shows how a man can negotiate such a contradiction in his life without harming the relationship with his parents or having to give up the woman he loves. Not telling his parents is seen as a culturally acceptable way to cope with the situation according to the norms set by the notion of filial piety, communicating a view that not telling one’s parents is a lesser evil than openly disobeying them. This explanation is also supported by the fact that, contrary to the suspicions of Linh’s family and friends, her husband did not have a marital engagement back home, which could have equally explained why he did not tell his parents about Linh. Against the advice of her friends, Linh refused to go to his home village to investigate the possibility of another wife. Linh says that as he treated her well, it did not matter to her if he had another wife somewhere. Instead, she considered it important to respect his decision not to tell his parents about her whatever the reason behind it.

5.2 Failed marriage and life after separation

An oft-told narrative by the women is that divorce is considered a failure on the woman's part; as a woman is considered responsible for the family's happiness, it is often the woman who is blamed if the marriage fails. I have encountered a number of women in Minh Son who have repeated such views. Based on the stories heard, it seems that separation is especially difficult for a woman who has been left by a husband who later sets up a new family elsewhere. Although my interview data does not contain such a case it offers alternative perspectives on marriage and life after separation. Earlier in this chapter I introduced Thuy, who was forced to marry when 15 and who left her husband at the age of 21 when pregnant with her second child.⁹³ She never commented on how her parents received her when she returned back home beyond saying that she felt the need to move out of the already crowded house as quickly as possible. But the very fact that she was told by her parents to marry when still a minor suggests that the familial relationship was very hierarchical, leaving her little space to participate in decisions over her life until she left her husband.

Le's narrative, however, reveals how marriage is understood as an institution that is expected to secure a woman's life and that a woman without a husband does not easily fit into the idea of the good life. Being the youngest daughter of a big, poor family, Le married at the age of 19 and moved to another province to live with the husband's family. Without going into the specifics of a marital life that lasted five years, Le said that her parents warmly welcomed her back home when she left her husband. Despite her two children, Le had not yet passed marriageable age and soon a young man came to meet her parents with a marriage proposal. Le's parents supported the idea of her having a new husband, but Le decided otherwise. She explains:

[...] *mình không đi thêm bước nữa bởi vì bước một bước là mình khổ rồi, sợ rồi đâm ra em hối.*

I did not remarry as I had been married already, had been miserable already, had feared already. (Int. 1, transcript, p. 27).

93 It is interesting to note that according to the Marriage Law (December 29, 1986), Chapter VII, Article 41: 'In case the wife is with child, the husband can ask for a divorce only one year after the wife has delivered the child. This restriction does not apply in case it is the wife who asks for a divorce.' (VWU et al. 1989; Wisensale 1999: 610).

Le recounted that as she was still young and healthy and there was a young man willing to marry her, her parents believed a new marriage to be the best solution in her situation but, frightened by her earlier marital experiences, Le firmly refused to remarry. Her parents then threatened that should she not accept the man's proposal, she could no longer stay in her natal home either. Like Diep, Le offered an interpretation of her parent's ultimatum as concern for her future and her future difficulties if their advice was not followed – though in Diep's narrative at least, feelings of anger on the part of her family were also mentioned. Le found support from the Defi micro-credit project which helped her to establish an independent life. After refusing to remarry, Le borrowed money and bought a piece of land. According to Le, her parents were initially against her joining the single women's loan programme as, in their view, it was detrimental to be associated with women without husbands. They later changed their minds when they saw the benefits accruing from the project loans and how, despite the economic difficulties still present, Le was able to show that she could support her children.

Le's narrative departs from the oft-heard version wherein broken marriages are the result of a woman's failure to create and maintain a happy family. There is no element in her story that would support a narrative that points to the woman's shortcomings in the case of marital break-down. Le's utterances – such as, '[I] had feared already' – draw a picture of a violent husband who made her marital life miserable. Moreover, unlike some women left by their husbands to whom I had earlier talked and who had told me about the anger of their parents upon their failure as wives, Le indicated no condemnation on her parent's part for the fact that she had left her husband. Instead, when returning home, her 'parents warmly welcomed' her. Moreover, when learning about the difficulties Le had faced in her marriage, her parents did not try to convince her to return to her husband and try harder – advice commonly given to women in order to save the family.

5.3 Widows devoted to their children

Three of the interviewed project participants identified themselves as widows. Earlier research indicates that widows seldom remarry, while widowers often find a new wife (Le Thi 1995); there seems to be a clear gendered difference in how widows and widowers live after losing their spouses. A traditional cultural norm for widows expects them not to remarry, but to stay faithful to the memory of their late husbands, while remarrying is also considered to endanger the happiness of the children (*ibid.*). In addition, decades of war in Vietnam resulted in a significant gender imbalance. In 1989, there were 18 million more women than men between

the ages of 15 and 60 (Le Thi 1993: 19). The narratives of my interviewees suggest that, in particular, considerations of their children's happiness play an important role in women's decisions not to remarry. As one of the interviewees put it, she did not trust a man to be readily capable of loving another man's child, so re-marriage was seen as potentially harmful for the child's emotional wellbeing.

One of the widows interviewed was Linh whose marital status was discussed earlier. Even though unable to officially marry her soldier-lover, she was considered a married woman by her family and the community as her family had organized a wedding party to publicly show their acceptance of the relationship. Linh's 'marriage' lasted for eight years before she lost her husband in an accident. Unlike the other women I interviewed, Linh was seemingly happy to discuss her relationship with her late husband. Interviewing her in her small house where she lived with her 13-year-old daughter, I had the opportunity to observe things which had everyday relevance in the room. As her front door faced directly onto the street, with no garden in front of it, Linh kept all her belongings inside the house: her old bicycle and a pile of bananas that she sells in the local market both occupied a corner of her living room. In addition, photos of her late father and her husband hung on the wall over an ancestral altar. As Linh narrated her love story with the father of her daughter, my eyes kept returning to the photo of a handsome young man on her wall. From the very beginning of my encounter with Linh, it was evident that her story was one of love, not a record of crime and punishment.

The narrative of Linh's widowhood starts from the day when she was informed by the Army that her husband had been seriously injured in an accident and she hurried to the hospital with her daughter. The hospital also became the scene of her first encounter with the husband's parents who, like Linh, had been alerted to hurry to see their son. Despite the long relationship and the life Linh had shared with her husband, his parents were unaware of their son's family. Thus, when arriving at the hospital, the parents were puzzled and asked an Army official about the woman and child crying next to their son's bed. To the astonishment of the parents, the official replied that they were their son's wife and daughter.

Even though many years have passed since the death of her husband, Linh is emotional when talking about the time after her husband's death. She was devastated by the loss of a man she deeply loved. 'We were a happy family,' she says. Linh emphasizes that despite the fact that he did not tell his parents about her, he always treated her well. They lived on the husband's small salary that barely covered the necessary living costs.

Lúc anh còn sống thì lương chỉ được có mấy trăm thôi, bà ngoại⁹⁴ cho đất này thì anh chị làm được căn nhà lên, nói chung điều kiện không có, mình thì làm ruộng, chỉ sống nhờ đồng lương của anh. Cháu lúc ấy đẻ ra thì cũng yếu chứ không khỏe, ốm đau, phải mua sữa... cho cháu.

When he [husband] was still living, his salary was only some hundreds, my mother gave us this land so we built a house. Generally speaking we didn't have a good condition, I cultivated land; our life was dependent on his salary. That time our daughter was not well, had headaches, had to buy milk... for the child. (Int. 4, transcript, p. 18)

When her husband died, the life of Linh and her daughter became very difficult. Linh lost her will to live but carried on because of her daughter.

Lúc đó chị nghĩ nếu như không có đứa con thì chắc chị không sống được, (---), lúc đó chẳng nghĩ được gì, làm ăn cũng chẳng nghĩ gì.

That time I thought that if I didn't have my child, I couldn't have lived (---). I couldn't rest, I worked to get food and could not have a rest. (Int. 4, transcript, p. 34)

To support her child, Linh started to work in a production unit where she carried waste and scrap for two years. She says that she was exposed to hazardous materials and started to sniff due to dust at work. She realized that the work could seriously affect her health which would leave her daughter very vulnerable. She had already lost some 7-8 kg in weight as she worked hard and mourned her husband's death. Linh understood that her mother was already too old to take over responsibility for her daughter and that she had to be there for her. So she quit her job at the production unit and started to cultivate land and sell bananas to earn her living. She recalls how everybody was concerned about her as she had difficulties getting over her husband's death. Invited to her husband's funeral by his parents, Linh visited his home village for the first time. The parents confirmed that their son had

94 Language note: *bà ngoại*, here translated as 'my mother', is a term used to refer to the grandmother of the family on the mother's/wife's side. Thus, depending on the context, it may refer e.g. to the speaker's mother-in-law or grandmother (mother of my mother). Here, it is used to refer to the speaker's own mother thus emphasizing her relationship to the speaker and her husband as a family unit. Similarly, *cháu* in the same interview extract is used to refer to the child of the house, here referring to the speaker's own child. Again, use and semantics and thus translations of the words (in Vietnamese particularly those related to family relations) are highly contextual and depend on the particular situation (e.g. to whom the speaker is speaking). For example, should the mother address her child directly (instead of the interviewee as is the case here), she would use a word *con* to address the child.

never told them about his wife and daughter; however, after meeting them, they accepted her as their son's wife. Linh said that she was particularly happy that her daughter now knew her father's family and that they supported her in paying her school fees. 'She looks so much like her father,' she says smiling.

Linh, soon to turn 40, has a warm smile and a pleasant appearance and it is not a surprise that after she lost her husband, she was approached by several men in her village with marriage proposals. According to Linh, all of the men were already married and she turned them down, telling them that their wives would be jealous and their children would no longer respect their father should he start a relationship with her. Linh's family and her in-laws suggested that she remarry, but she always refused. Concerned about her wellbeing, her in-laws even suggested that she should have another child, hoping that it would help her to get over the loss of her husband but, instead of remarrying or having another child, Linh decided to get back on her feet and devote herself to her daughter's wellbeing. Linh's story has fascinating elements that show that despite the traditional ideal according to which a widow should not remarry (Le Thi 1995), people around Linh actively suggested she remarry in order to get over her loss. Linh, however, refused all proposals, apparently because she had deeply loved her husband and found a new meaning for her life in looking after her daughter.

Nga, born in the early 1960s, joined the project in 1996 when just widowed. She does not reveal the particulars of her husband's death but, having two grown up sons, she had better prospects in life than those single women who only had daughters. Nga has recently moved to a new house which she shares with her older son, her daughter-in-law and her two grandchildren. Her younger son is studying at a university in a different province and visits his family during holidays.

Hien, born in the mid-1950s, joined the project in 1996, three years before she was widowed. Her house was very poor and she did not have the means to do anything besides cultivating the land (6 *sau*, around 3,500m²) allocated to her household. They received some more land when her husband returned from the army, but that was not enough to improve their living standard. The family of parents and four children lived in a small house with no furniture or even a separate kitchen. Therefore, when Hien heard about the Defi project that offered small loans for single women, she decided to say that she was separated from her husband so as to get money to invest in animal breeding. Knowing about her poor economic status, other single women in her group agreed to take her in and keep her real marital status from the WU as well as the donor NGO. When her husband died three years later, Hien's eldest son was sixteen and could already contribute to the family's welfare. Even though Hien's life is now easier as she is living with her eldest son,

her daughter-in-law and their child, she suffers from chronic headaches that she attributes to the constant pressure of raising four children alone.

In Nga's and Hien's narratives, remarrying after being widowed is not even mentioned. Their concerns all communicate the economic difficulties that they tried their best to solve even at the expense of their health. A new husband was not on their agenda and perhaps out of their reach anyway; Hien, for example, was already in her 50s and the mother of four children, which did not make her a likely object of marital proposals.

Madame Van,⁹⁵ a retired staff member of the district WU, shares a story that partly explains why women hesitate to remarry even if they are able to. Madame Van lost her husband in the late 1970s, only three months after giving birth to their son. She admits that she could have remarried, but chose not to. 'Each person has her own circumstances,' she says. For her, working in the WU demanded a lot but, at the same time, offered her a way to escape her loneliness. The war was barely over and she shared a great deal with many other women who had also lost their husbands.

Mình còn có con, có rất nhiều người hoàn cảnh giống mình nhưng còn không có cả con nữa.

I still had a child; there were a lot of people in a similar situation who didn't even have a child. (Int. 6, transcript, p. 4)

When asked why she did not remarry, she replies:

Còn một vấn đề nữa là không biết họ có yêu con mình không?

There is still a question of knowing whether he [a new husband] would love my child? (Int. 6, transcript, p. 5)

Not being able to answer the question, Madame Van decided against remarrying, in order to secure the happiness of her son. She now lives with her son's family and enjoys the time spent with her two grandsons. Her narrative suggests

95 I chose to use 'Madame' when referring to Van to indicate her higher social status compared to the rest of the single women whom I interviewed. In addition, in my experience, senior WU staff members (usually chairpersons) are often referred to as 'Madame' when introduced to foreigners. This, again, is to register the status of the person and is considered a polite term of address. I am not trying to suggest, however, that her views are somehow more salient than those expressed by other single women.

that her decision not to remarry was not based on the social norm praising faithful widows, but rather on her consideration for her son's emotional well-being. Thus, motherhood becomes a driving force that affects the women's decisions concerning their lives after being widowed.

5.4 Chapter conclusions

This chapter was motivated by Defi's concern with problems facing single mothers in Vietnamese society. Through the single women's narratives, I have examined how gendered norms manifest themselves in single women's lives and how (if at all) such an analysis can contribute to our understanding of available possibilities for the practice of democracy by single Vietnamese women. I have used the narratives of the single women's life experiences in Minh Son commune to let them enter into a dialogue with the earlier gender literature discussed in Chapter Four. A careful reading of my data suggests that even though gendered norms (understood here as monologic accounts of women promoted by centripetal forces in society) fail to determine women's actual behaviour, they are significant for women's experiences as they are used in different ways to assess women's behaviour.

However, my data indicates that despite their normativity, gendered norms are subject to contextual interpretation – a process in which a woman's family plays a central role. Moreover, my Bakhtinian approach, with its interest in meanings, showed how 'marriage', a key concept in gendered norms, does not necessarily mean a legally registered relationship but may also (and quite commonly if judged by my data) mean a relationship between a man and a woman that is constituted by the open support of the relationship confirmed by marriage rituals such as organizing a 'wedding' party for the young couple, by (at least) the woman's parents and her family. Thus, the defining factor contributing to social outcomes of out-of-wedlock pregnancies in the light of my data is a woman's likelihood of securing a husband (and a father to her child) rather than breaking the norms as such. A Bakhtinian reading, therefore, allows us to see beyond the generalizations of gendered norms as well as the consequences for the women who break them. My analysis illustrates how norms are actually interpreted in concrete time and space.

Another key finding of my analysis of the single women's narratives is that the Confucian notion of filial piety is more important than gendered sexual norms. That is, my data suggests that out-of-wedlock pregnancy alone does not necessarily constitute an offence that would condemn a woman to social isolation. Rather, openly disobeying one's parents' decision on how to deal with the situation significantly increases the likelihood that the woman and her child will be isolated

first from her family and, in consequence, the rest of the community. Moreover, as shown by the case of Hanh, the single mother of three out-of-wedlock daughters, the notion of filial piety can also help us to understand how actions that transgress the sexual norms may be interpreted as benefitting the family and, therefore, provide an example of good rather than bad behaviour. Thus, even if gendered norms manifest themselves as unified in state media, the women's narratives demonstrate that the outcomes of breaking them depend on several contextual factors. Ultimately, reality is heteroglossic, which renders the norms flexible rather than fixed, thereby escaping essentialist interpretations of them.

The question then arises of what this all means for an inquiry into grassroots democracy. It certainly means different things for different single mothers. Two defining factors arise from the data. First, one way or another, all women reported on hardships they faced raising their offspring alone. In particular, women reported on the struggle involved in getting their child(ren) fed and clothed, a task which occupies all of the women's time when children are small. Single women thus suffer from 'time poverty' (Lister 2003: 132) and physical exhaustion. Second, most out-of-wedlock mothers who raised their child(ren) alone, also suffered from social isolation. This led them to avoid contacts with other villagers (also a way to escape other people's moral judgments and their active avoidance of unmarried mothers) thus shrinking their world to the minimum. Both factors mean that single women, especially those with small children, were unlikely or even unable to participate in communal meetings and other events wherein they could take part in local decision making. I shall return to the issue of these women's position in the commune and their agency in Chapter Seven by analyzing reported changes addressed to the Defi project.

Meanwhile, the next chapter begins my exploration of Defi's Vietnam project. In the analysis of Defi's development thinking that follows, I return to the issue of gender, but this time from the perspective of the NGO's understanding of it. In addition, the chapter will analyze the NGO's development thinking as a web of key concepts and investigate the meanings attributed to the concepts in Defi's utterances.

6 THE CHANGING MEANINGS OF KEY DEVELOPMENT PROBLEMS AND THE NGO'S SOLUTIONS

This chapter analyses the growth of Defi's development thinking from the project planning stage through to the years of project implementation. The term 'development thinking' is used here to refer to a set of ideas on development that inform the NGO's choices concerning 'What should be done?' to achieve changes that have been valued as beneficial in the frame of a development practice rooted in interventionist logics (See Hobart 1993). It should be noted that 'What should be done?' is not always identical with 'What can be done?' as the latter necessarily has to take into consideration possible contextual restrictions. An NGO needs to decide whether to settle for what can be done, based on what is said to be possible or has been done before, or to strive to change the boundaries of the 'possible' by means of negotiation, persuasion and other means.

The development thinking of NGOs may be understood as an outcome of meaning-construction processes in which time, space and personal experiences play a central role. Meanwhile, changes in the meanings of key concepts are understood to take place within dialogical processes of re-evaluation of the terminology that constitutes an NGO's development thinking (Bakhtin 1996). It is important to point out that the process of re-evaluation of meanings does not automatically suggest transformations in a person's understanding; rather, it references a potential for change when new knowledge, arguments or experiences come to be considered more valid than previously constructed meanings.

The data for my analysis in this chapter consists of project reports, Defi's internal correspondence and interviews with Defi's director and project officers, as well as my field notes.⁹⁶ The chapter contributes answers to my first overall research question of how development ideas, manifested as words with specific meanings, transform into intervention models. To answer this, the following questions became central in my reading of the data: (1) What are the key development concepts in Defi's utterances? (2) What kind of development ideas do the concepts communicate and what development problems do they address? (3) How are solutions to the problems defined? (4) How were the problems and, consequently, their solutions transformed in the NGO's internal and external dialogues? I analyze the

⁹⁶ These are notes written during my project monitoring visits to the project sites since 1997. Thus, they were written not as a researcher but as a project partner.

meanings and their changes in association with actors' experiences, international development discourses and changing theoretical perspectives that all contributed to the dialogue. Analysis shows that Defi's development thinking can be understood through two types of general problems: (1) unequal power relations within Vietnamese society; and (2) problems connected to aid modalities.

In addition to solving these problems, a notion of participation is perhaps the single most important idea in Defi's development thinking. This is not surprising as enthusiasm for participation was perhaps at its peak during the 1990s. Alongside influential works by Chambers (1994, 1995, 1997), different aspects of participation became one of key topics in development literature (Holland & Blackburn 1998; White 1994; White 1999; Servaes et al. 1996; Burkey 1993). We may argue that, during the 1990s, the idea of participatory development was mainstreamed along with its acceptance by powerful development actors such as the World Bank (Bhatnagar & Williams 1992). Thus, 'participation' can be understood as an integral part of development dialogues at the time. However, as will be shown in this chapter, the meanings given to participation by Defi evolved along with changes in the NGO's understanding of the key development problem.

6.1 Unequal power relations within Vietnamese society

This section analyzes Defi's understanding of key development problems it wanted to address in its Vietnam project, demonstrating that these were understood in terms of unequal power relations within Vietnamese society. In the following, I shall explore the forms this problem took in the NGO's development thinking and its re-interpretation soon after the project had begun, that is, when Defi had entered into a dialogue with the 'other' (the single women) and the context and actors around them.

Gender inequality

Women and women's groups were defined as the key groups Defi was committed to work with in developing countries (Defi brochure, no date). The brochure, according to the Defi director, was written after the Vietnam project had started and thus, the development objectives of the NGO defined in the brochure were designed to fit the project's focus. Thus, the NGO's Vietnam project represented the making of the NGO's development policy priorities. A focus on women is evident

in all the documents discussing a new Vietnam project that the NGO started to plan in 1994, soon after Defi's Vietnam director had joined the association.

Defi's understanding of women in Vietnam reflected, on the one hand, the NGO's understanding of the Vietnamese context and, on the other, development discourses concerning women. For example, there are direct references in the project documentation to the Confucianism claim that was, and remains, highly visible in gender literature as already discussed in Chapter Four. According to the NGO's Project Plan 1996-98: 'Confucianism forms a strong undercurrent to Vietnamese social values. It emphasizes [...] the subordinate status of women in the society and at home.' A similar assessment of women's position in Vietnam was expressed by other development donors. It was claimed, for example, that '[t]he influence of Confucianism on the lives of women has been a key factor by which to measure women's status. (---) Legal pronouncements on the status of women and the equality of husband and wife are distant from the realities of most women's lives. Women are subordinate [to men] in the homes despite having responsibility for the care and income of the family.' (Unicef 1994: 27; see also UNDP 1996: 14).

Another key reference to the Vietnamese context in terms of women's subordinate position in Vietnam occurred in connection with *đổi mới*. According to the Project Plan, *đổi mới* increased 'gender disparities' due to 'the practice of men owning the property' (Defi, Project Plan 1996-98), a position which reflected the views of influential development donors such as Unicef (1994: 28). Defi argued that men were able to control the household economy, for example, through the mechanism of land-use certificates that, at the time, were usually in the name of the household head; women, on the other hand, were seen as lacking access to official loans. This concrete development problem was communicated in the NGO's Project Plan:

[...] women in both project communes indicated that VBA⁹⁷ cannot provide credit to all needy and that it 'draws a lottery' to select the ones who will get the loans among those guaranteed by local authorities. Even the ones having had a 'winning number' reported that they had not received loans. (Defi, Project Plan 1996-98: 10)

Women's lack of access to official sources of loan capital was understood to hinder women's economic activities. Similar views were expressed by other development actors (Unicef 1994: 35) as well as by gender scholars who described women's access to credit as 'an acute problem' (e.g. Do Thi Binh 1997). Thus,

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Defi's understanding of women as defined by their subordinate position to men reflected views of other relevant actors operating in Vietnam at the time. This is not surprising as the Defi director met with several representatives of the donor community, especially INGOs, and WU staff members during her project-planning visits.

The project plan identified unequal gender relations as a general problem Defi wanted to address, with the specific problem being defined as a lack of access to loan capital by women. In light of this, micro-credits were believed to offer a solution. Here, the Defi director's inspiration derived from the Grameen Bank model.⁹⁸ The idea of micro-credit interventions as a solution to the identified (general and specific) development problems was supported by the NGO's commitment to enhancing women's entrepreneurship. The development assumption made here was that women would use the loans for income-generating activities: for example, animal husbandry projects such as buying piglets to be raised and sold for profit, which would positively increase the household economy. Interestingly, it has been argued that the pursuit of women's equality through improved access to material benefits such as land and credit was typical of the 'Women in Development' (WID) approach (Parpart 1993: 448), to which I shall shortly return. It is also important to note that although not present in the project documents, the Defi director had an *a priori* commitment to start a micro-credit project in Vietnam which shaped the agenda of her planning visits to Vietnam, something expressed clearly in preliminary funding negotiations with an NGO that I myself represented. This can be interpreted as supporting earlier claims that 'identification of a problem is intimately linked to the availability of a solution', which in turn links to 'what experts have to offer' (Li 2007: 7; see also Ferguson 1994).

The early project documents picture the women's problem as an outcome of a male cultural bias, more specifically pointing to local control of resources that favoured men – thereby, it was assumed, leaving women little or no resources with which to develop their own economic activities. The analysis found in the construct of this general development problem is at an individual level – that of a woman – instead of, for example, seeing women as part of households in which members have shared economic interests. Thus, men are implicitly allocated a particular role as gatekeepers and believed to prevent women from developing the household economy. In the original Defi project design men did not have a place: they were seen as part of the problem, but not of the solution (see Cornwall 1998: 46 for critics of the approach). Thus, the project adopted, in essence, a 'Women in Development' (WID) approach (Davids et al. 2014: 398; Humble 1998: 35; Mat-

⁹⁸ See Hulme (2012) for an overview of the Grameen Bank model.

tila & Vuola 2007: 205-206) responding to women's needs which were perceived as fundamentally different and isolated from men's needs (Gardner & Lewis 1996 : 122). As a result, the NGO produced an analysis wherein women's voices were seen as inferior to those of men's but, at the same time, the gender relations causing the problem as the NGO saw it were not addressed.

The WID approach entered international aid discourse in the 1970s when women's issues became a common concern in development projects as the modernization agenda interpreted as 'economic development' did not proceed as expected in developing countries. According to Parpart (1993: 448) a landmark study that raised the awareness of development planners and policy makers to the role of women in economic development was Ester Boserup's (1970) study 'Woman's Role in Economic Development'. It has been concluded that 'until then women had been seen as "objects" of support and measures [of development interventions]' but now they began to be seen as 'actors in relation to many development goals and aspirations' (Pietilä 2007: 37).

This shift in general thinking has been attributed to the feminist movement and Women's Studies as a new academic discipline as well as to the initiatives of NGOs (Pietilä 2007: 37-38). WID approaches were thus heavily influenced by Second Wave feminist theorizing, central to which was the presupposition of difference between men and women; consequently research in the field took the difference between sexes as a starting point, assuming a privileging of one group over another in society (Harding 1987; for problematizing of such views see e.g. Freed 2003: 703; Mills and Mullany 2011: 14-15).

Such intertextual features are visible in Defi's development thinking regarding both international development discourses at the time and Second Wave feminism in particular. This is not surprising considering the Defi director's personal history. Her earlier career in the United Nations Development Project (UNDP) had made her well aware of international development discourses while her exposure to Women's Studies at the University of Helsinki in the 1980s had familiarized her with academic feminist discourses.

Second Wave feminism, however, was later challenged by a new generation of feminist researchers in the 1980s which partly addressed the problems of a particular notion of 'woman' that was central to Second Wave theorizing. For its critics, the concept of woman 'seemed *too* fragile to bear the weight of all contents and meanings ascribed to it' (Gillis et al. 2007: xxi, italics in the original). The challenge of universal womanhood came from a number of directions, particularly from black / coloured feminists who pointed out the importance of race, colour, colonialism and related issues as sources of women's inferior position in addition

to their sex (e.g. Crenshaw 1991; Hooks 1984; Mohanty 2003). This postmodern turn in gender theorizing provided space to search for the *voices* of women, rather than a (unified) *voice* of women. Moreover, the WID approach and the theorizing it involved was increasingly challenged by the 'Gender and Development' (GAD) approach, that focused on the social construction of gender roles as well as gender relations (e.g. Parpart 1993: 450; Humble 1998: 35-36; Mattila & Vuola 2007: 207-208), though this shift in theorizing was not yet visible in Defi's early approach to gender. The Fourth World Conference on Women that took place in Beijing in 1995 marked an important turning point in discourse on gender and development. For the first time, Pietilä (2007: 76) argues, 'the concept of gender became accepted UN language'. Moreover, new understandings of gender relations acknowledged that 'men also have gender, which influences their thinking, attitudes and behaviour' (Pietilä 2007: 76).

As the correspondence between the Defi director and the NGO's Vietnamese staff shows, a significant change in the NGO's gender theorizing entered the project via the project officers who started to challenge the NGO's early reading of 'women' in two distinct ways. First, they repeatedly underlined the diversity amongst the women they aimed to help by stressing, for example, that the poorest women had found it difficult to benefit from the credit and savings funds (e.g. Bi-monthly Report, dated 12.11.1996; faxes from POs, dated 21.3.1997 and 25.8.1997). Responding to the messages from Hanoi, the Defi director's initial reaction was that 'we still have to work very hard with the poor women to try to find solutions together' (fax dated 18.3.1997). However, she later stated that 'it is not the project's responsibility to take care of the few [in numbers] poorest' (fax by DD, dated 21.9.1997). The issue of inclusiveness, however, continued to be addressed in project documents and in partner meetings where the significant differences in women's possibilities to take part in, and to benefit from, the project were stressed.

Second, the project officers raised concerns regarding the exclusion of men from the project design. For example, I was once told about a case in which a woman who vaccinated the pigs of other project participants had been beaten by her husband as he did not like her spending time on such project activities. The incident showed how women's issues were interrelated with, rather than isolated from, those of men. Male attitudes were also discussed during my first visit to the project site in July 1997. According to a district WU staff member, 30 % of men supported this kind of project for women (personal field notes, dated 2.7.1997). In other words, a huge majority of men did not support the project in the district. Having entered into dialogues in the project communes that touched upon the re-

relationship between men and women Defi started to re-evaluate its WID approach and eventually adopted the GAD approach in which women and men were both taken into account. This happened less than a year after the first project loans were distributed to women.

Women's empowerment was defined as a long term objective of Defi's Vietnam project. The Defi director (DD) thought it necessary to find tools to strengthen women's position within households, in their communities as well as in Vietnamese society at large (fax by DD, dated 10.8.1997). It was believed that the savings and credit project would work in this direction. The loan groups did not just offer women access to money but, in addition, were seen as a tool to advance women's networking within the project. Women's groups were considered important for their empowerment, as the voice of a group – it was argued – was louder than the voice of an individual.

When the Defi director arrived in Vietnam for the first time, she already envisaged the Vietnam WU as a potential principal project partner for the NGO. She believed the WU to be among the best local choices for the NGO as it officially represented the voices of women in Vietnamese society and had, for example, been assessed positively by SIDA. The assumption made was that the Union represented the interests of women, no matter their economic or social status. If gaps were perceived between women and the Union, they were assumed to be caused by a lack of resources or knowledge rather than a lack of will or interest. Consequently, Defi set two objectives for its Vietnam project, both offering a key role for the WU. First, the WU was identified as Defi's main partner and it was planned that the commune and district WUs would run and supervise the savings and credit programmes funded by Defi in the project communes. Moreover, Defi envisaged for itself a role in helping the local WUs (at district and commune levels) to increase their capability in running the micro-credit programmes in order to better respond to the loan needs of the women and, at the same time, collect women's views and concerns so as to channel their voices from the grassroots to the upper levels of the society.

Experience, however, soon challenged the NGO's view of the roles and functions of the WU at the commune level where it was planned it would be the direct working partner of the NGO. The first project officer, Mr. Phuc, who worked part-time for Defi in addition to his main work as a Senior Project Officer of a coalition of Nordic NGOs,⁹⁹ supported Defi director's idea to partner with the

⁹⁹ The coalition consisted of Norwegian, Swedish and Danish NGOs. At the time when Defi started its Vietnam project, the coalition's head office was located in Hanoi, which enabled the Defi director to negotiate an agreement that allowed the NGO to share the coalition's office and to use other services offered by it. The contract included work input by the coalition's Senior Project Officer,

WU, but argued that there was a gap between the official status of the Union as representing Vietnamese women and the reality that positioned the WU within a hierarchical state structure, the latter implying that the Union's working agenda was very much defined by state interests.

While in the field, the Defi director was able to observe Mr. Phuc's gender sensitivity. His mother – a former editor of the Journal of the Vietnam Women's Union – had helped him to understand women's issues as well as the work of the WU. And through his mother's experiences, he had also been exposed to politics within the Union which had resulted in his mother's discharge from the editorial staff of the journal. Consequently, he was able to assess both the strengths and the weaknesses of the WU, while stressing to the Defi director that good people can be found in all organizations (fax 31.7.1997). The task, therefore, was to identify the right people with whom to work. He further pointed out that a lack of a historical perspective on the work of the WU, led foreigners to jump to conclusions as they failed to see the positive changes that had also taken place over a fairly brief period of time. Mr. Phuc thus argued against an essentialist view of the WU. Seen in Bakhtinian terms, I would propose that he was able to recognize heteroglossia in places that seemed more unified to the Defi director, as he had experiences that had made him aware of differing voices within the WU.

The role of context, and thus contextual knowledge, becomes perhaps most visible in Defi's understanding of single women. Not surprisingly, considering the language used in aid discourses as well as the vocabulary used by development donors such as the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, the Defi director referred to 'marginalized' single women while the project officer, instead, saw 'strong' single mothers when he had an opportunity to meet them (PO1, interview 24.5.2010). These two different visions of single women suggested two quite different strategies for their empowerment as well as derivation from different discourses.

The Defi director, as we have seen, saw the WU as a powerful and well-established organization that should be mobilized to help single women through the loan programme that the NGO was about to establish in the commune. Thus, as women held a central position in Defi's development thinking, the single women were given the role of objects of a pre-chosen intervention, despite the fact that

Mr. Phuc, plus a driver and an accountant. This settlement was beneficial for both parties. It was not just cost effective, but it also offered a fast track for Defi to start their project as the agreement included an article in which the Defi project was treated as belonging under the coalition's development activities in Vietnam. This being the case, Defi was able to start their project without waiting for a Permit for Operation from PACCOM (People's Aid Coordination Committee) that normally took several months to procure.

they were also expected to actively participate in the project by joining the loan groups. It is useful to remember that Western feminists as well as development donors have often been accused of presenting 'Third World women' as powerless and vulnerable, thus establishing them as a single category (see e.g. Parpart 1993: 444; Mohanty 1991). Production of 'vulnerability language' in which 'marginalized women' are accommodated can be seen as a natural outcome of aid practice in a situation where a need for help on the part of a Third World 'other' is constitutive of aid machinery justification. Moreover, as Parpart (1993: 451) has noted, the language of 'vulnerable groups' reinforces WID discourse and, as I argue, manifests itself in proposed development solutions. However, the project officer suggested an alternative reading of the single women based on his analysis of the situation in the commune. He claimed that even though the women-headed households had particular problems in terms of household economy and social status, the WU had taken no measures to respond to the special needs of the single mothers. Moreover, when talking to different parties – the single women, the WU and the Party representatives – he concluded that 'the single women were strong, as they had to be in order to survive in Vietnamese society!' (PO1, interview 24.5.2010). Here, he made a particular reference to unmarried mothers representing one third of women-headed households in Minh Son commune.

I shall return to Mr. Phuc's categorization of the commune's single mothers as 'strong' in Chapter Seven. At this point, however, it suffices to say that this new perception of single women as strong instead of 'marginalized' pushed for a substantial change in Defi's development thinking as well as alteration in the project management structure.¹⁰⁰ Significantly, the new frame offered single women the opportunity of managing their own project, thus turning them into subjects of their own development rather than objects of intervention – a topic to which I shall return in the following chapter.

The utterances by Defi director and the project officer, in fact, may be understood through the notion of intertextuality as part of dialogue. The Defi director's view of single women as marginalized reflects development discourses that seek to solve named problems. This interventionist logic (see Hobart 1993: 1) has become so deeply enmeshed in aid talk that it easily deprives its objects of agency; by marginalizing the single women through her language, the Defi director had

100 An interesting point of view to contextualize these two approaches to single women by Defi is offered by Cornwall et. al (2007) who have noted that 'Women often appear in narratives of gender and development policy as both heroines and victims: heroic in their capacities for struggle, in the steadfastness with which they carry the burdens of gender disadvantage and in their exercise of autonomy; victims as those with curtailed choices, a triple work burden and on the receiving end of male oppression and violence.'

located herself within the exact development discourses of which she was most critical. The project officer, however, contextualizes the single women primarily in the local socio-political context and thus, local discourses on gender and culture and, when seen against such a background, the single women appear strong and competent. This was an important insight as it acknowledged the agency and decision-making power over their lives on the part of the single women involved, and not just their position as isolated and poor. Here we see how a Bakhtinian reading may help us to understand how contexts of utterances also include intertextual contexts as part of the dialogical word, the word between I and the other.

The insight of single women as ‘strong’ provided by the project officer led him to suggest changes in the project management structure in the Minh Son commune which became a critical event because it raised to the project agenda, for the first time, the notion of space as a solution to a re-identified development problem. The problem in Minh Son commune was no longer defined in terms of women’s lower position in relation to men, but in terms of single women’s voices within the community and vis-à-vis the WU. As I show in the following chapters, the concept of space transformed Defi’s development orientation, despite the fact that it was seldom articulated in Defi’s dialogues with its local partners. Even in the NGO’s internal discourses the notions of participation and self-reliance often replaced discourses on space, despite the fact that all three are tightly interlinked in Defi’s utterances. Filling the positions of the Board of Management (BoM) with the single women also brought new elements of gender theorizing to the NGO’s development thinking. The suggested changes in the single women’s project management model granted the women a voice of their own – in accordance with the project officer’s views – instead of being regarded as a derivative voice of the WU. In other words, the local context was no longer defined on the lines of male-female differences but in terms of differences amongst women, thereby emphasizing diversity and acknowledged polyphony within the category of ‘women’ based on different life experiences and connected social status. Defi started to question whether the WU was an adequate spokesperson for the single women. Therefore, the project was now understood as a tool to give women the opportunity to speak with their own voices and thus enter into a direct dialogue with Defi and the WU. It is clear from this how the idea of ‘intersectionality’ (Crenshaw 1991; Yuval-Davis 2006)¹⁰¹ started to occupy more space in Defi’s theorizing of gender and how it resulted in concrete modifications in the project.

101 Crenshaw claims that defining identity purely through gender or the category of womanhood is not a sufficient precondition for understanding or promoting social justice, as identity politics ‘frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences’ (Crenshaw 1991: 1242). She suggests that, instead, it is necessary to look at e.g. gender and race dimensions or other factors that play a role

In light of Bakhtin's theory of meaning construction, it can be seen that different actors had different understandings of single women, primarily because they read the context differently. This may be understood to reflect their physical distance from the project site and, consequently, the differing contextual knowledge of the Defi director and the project officer. In addition, we have seen how their utterances being part of a number of different discourses contributed to the meanings they attributed to the category of single women.

'The people' vs. 'local authorities'

Another shift in the NGO's development thinking came along with a new conceptualizing of power. The early WID approach by the NGO had been based on the assumption of men holding power over women, leading to the decision to link women with the WU because it was believed that the WU, which drew its power from the (male) state, would have an instrumental role in the empowerment of single women. However, the new GAD approach, in addition to acknowledging differences amongst women, drew a power line between the official and unofficial: between the state and the people. That is, the main juxtaposition in Defi's development thinking – women vs. men – was gradually being replaced by that of the people vs. local authorities. This new interpretation proposed that the main struggle hindering development could be understood as taking place between ordinary households and the households of the local authorities: between those with official power within state structures and everyone else. With this idea in mind, Defi introduced the Village Self-reliance and Development Intervention model in which the NGO no longer limited its operations to women, but addressed men as well. Though there were different views in the NGO concerning appropriate means for women's empowerment within the new intervention model, it was evident that the approach conceptualized gender along similar lines to GAD.

The Village Self-reliance and Development model raised the issue of gender again, but not as its top priority. For Defi, adopting the new model meant that for the first time men and women in the category of ordinary villagers were positioned on the same side, claiming the same rights: the right to participate, the right to have their voices heard and the right to decide on local development activities. This had significant implications for the notion of participation, as I shall shortly

in social hierarchies in any given society. Crenshaw thus locates herself in the postmodern turn of feminist theorizing by emphasizing the diversity of women rather than their similar inferiority in a patriarchal world (a position typical of earlier Western feminists).

illustrate. At this point it suffices to say that the development of the dialogue can be read as having political implications.

The project officers' suggestions to move towards a community development approach were received with great interest in Finland. Though the new community development agenda was far from the NGO's 'micro-loans for women' agenda, it was easy for the Defi director to accept as it resonated with a world view developed while a student as well as during the years that she had worked for the UNDP in developing countries. In particular, the idea of self-reliance became central to construction of the new model. Here we see, in a Bakhtinian sense, how the Defi director's earlier experiences became relevant in the process of re-evaluation of Defi's development approach.

Self-reliance as a solution and meanings given to the term

In 2003 the Defi director published a fierce address against neo-liberalism, the global free trade system, financial market practices and monetary institutions. The book highlighted transnational corporations and privatization policies as key factors threatening people's well-being around the world.¹⁰² Several years earlier, her critical approach to neo-liberalism was already being communicated in her correspondence with project officers:

Promotion of a self-reliant community is an important goal in this era of increased dependency on world economy ruled by the transnational corporations, a game detrimental to all human beings, especially the poor (fax by DD 21.9.1997).

According to the Defi director, a global economic system constructed on the basis of neo-liberal ideology was harmful, as it left people vulnerable to changes in global market prices (for similar arguments see e.g. Fuentes & Shields 1989). Transnational corporations were misusing their power over the people and even over national governments, she argued. Therefore, she proposed, in order to diminish the harm caused by the system, people should become more self-reliant and lean more on their community. The Defi director emphasized that a self-reliant community did not mean isolation from society or from trade in general. Rather, in her utterance the concept refers to a situation in which local people organize themselves in order to find their unrealized strength and a common voice. Operating with a common voice is understood to increase security in people's lives compared to the (in)security offered by the neo-liberal world order.

¹⁰² The reference is omitted to preserve the Defi director's anonymity.

Here context is interesting from the perspective of meaning construction as a contextualized, historical process in which personal experiences count. Coming from the person whose first career choice was to become a leader in a big international business company, her critique of neo-liberalism may seem unexpected. As a new student at the Helsinki School of Economics and Business Administration in the early 1980s, the Defi director as we now know her had a clear vision and ambition to work as an executive director in global business after her graduation. As evident from her interview (DD, 11.11.2009), her interest in the world outside Finland had already emerged during her childhood. Her grandmother, formerly a teacher in a small seaport town on the west coast of Finland, was an active supporter of Lutheran Church-based missionary work in Ovamboland and she maintained contacts with several of her ex-pupils now earning their living as sailors around the world. Postcards and small gifts from exotic-sounding places sent to her grandmother made the future Defi director see the world as an adventure. Reaching her teenage years, she expanded her world view with the Interrail trips to Europe that were highly popular at the time among young Finns. Later on, her studies led her to a six months internship in Brazil with a big Finnish company. That experience was followed by her involvement in a research project, in which she conducted interviews and surveys in South-America for different institutions and companies. This half-year assignment took her to several Latin-American countries. The experience, she reported, was a powerful awakening and became a significant turning point in her life (original in Finnish):

[...] sillon mä jotenkin... Sillä matkalla me tavattiin paljon niinkun [...] yritysten ihmisiä siis kansainvälisten yritysten ja sit suomalaisten, joilla oli jotain tuotantoa tai konttori tai jotain siellä. Ja sillon mä ... jotenkin [mieltii].. en tiedä miten mä sen sanoisin, mutta jotenkin se matka avas mun silmät niinku tietynlaiselle sellaselle [...] ... Niinku ehkä vois sanoa, että semmosille voitontavoittelun tuomille ongelmille sellasessa tilanteessa, jossa niinki on hyvin epätasaset lähtökohdat, esimerkiksi kauheen suuret tuloerot ja paljon köyhyyttä. [...]... jotenki havahduin vasta sillon katselemaan millasia [...] hyväksikäytön ja jopa riiston mekanismeja saattaa sisältyä tällaisiin kansainvälisiin bisneksiin [...]. (DD Interview 11.11.2009).

[...] and then I somehow... During that trip we met plenty of [...] people from companies, that is, from international businesses and Finnish companies that had some production or an office or something there. And then I... somehow [...]... I don't know how to put it, but somehow that trip opened my eyes to certain, a kind of [...]... Maybe you could say to the kind of problems caused by profit seeking in situations

where people have very different starting points, for example, extremely big income differences and plenty of poverty. [...] somehow it was only then that I awoke to see what kind of mechanisms of abuse and even exploitation can be incorporated in such international businesses [...]. (DD, Interview 11.11.2009).

On returning to Finland, she ditched her earlier career plans in international business. It appears that her experiences in South America had induced a personal crisis regarding her future career as well as her choice of study field. Suspending her business studies, she began to study art and, in addition, took courses in Women's Studies and Development Studies at the University of Helsinki. As an outcome of the process she found herself redirected into a future in international development aid. She then returned to her home university to complete her Master's thesis to enable her to apply for a job in the field. After finalizing her studies, she applied for a Finnish-funded post as a Junior Project Officer (JPO) at the UNDP, and was selected and sent to Papua New Guinea. Before finishing her JPO period, she was recommended by her boss for a full-time, permanent position at the UNDP and was sent to the UNDP headquarters in New York for six months training, after which she was sent to Southeast Africa where she eventually filled the post of deputy country director.

The Defi director's first duty station at the UNDP, Papua New Guinea, had the reputation of being a particularly challenging working environment. However, according to a psychologist who tested her in Finland, a challenging environment best fit her character, as, according to the test, she had a personality that would not easily slot into a bureaucratic environment (DD, interview, 11.11.2009). The psychologist concluded that a duty station that offered plenty of challenges beyond the constraints of bureaucracy would keep her motivated.

When the Defi director recalls her time in Papua New Guinea she claims that there can hardly be a more interesting place to be when working in the field of development. She admits that donor policies, especially in the field of agricultural development, simply did not fit the context of some five million people speaking several hundreds of languages, and that the geographical challenges in terms of rough, mountainous terrain effectively compromised the plans outlined in donors' policy documents. According to her experience the local people had a self-assertive attitude to outside experts and development aid projects: 'self-assertive in a good sense': that is, the local people often disagreed with the development policies of the UNDP and other donors, forcing them into a series of negotiations in the pursuit of their development agendas (DD, interview 11.11.2009). The Defi

director concluded that they made her realize that development policies designed by 'experts' can actually be challenged.

The international aid system that had earlier appeared to be the means for making a better and more equal world seemed very different from the inside. To use her own expression, she enjoyed an 'irrationally big salary' while working in one of the poorest countries in the world, which she considered morally questionable. In her duty station in Africa, she was responsible for the UNDP's agriculture and forestry programme, even though she knew 'hardly anything about agriculture' (DD, interview 11.11.2009), and, therefore, she spent a lot of time talking to farmers so as to understand their perspectives and realities. However, she felt discomfort about being part of a donor community that was dictating structural changes that were detrimental for the small farmers. Even though the UNDP attempted to leave space for alternative agricultural development, the organization was too weak to achieve much in the face of the policies of the World Bank. 'It was there that I learned to hate the Structural Adjustment Programmes,' she says. (DD, interview 11.11.2009). And it was there that she started, for the second time, to doubt her choice of career, as the international aid system of which she was now a part raised questions that she found difficult to face. This phase can be seen to represent her second disillusionment.

Moreover, being a young, academic, Western and white foreign expert with hardly any knowledge of tropical agriculture for which she was responsible, she could no longer find justification for her position vis-à-vis the local experts whose salary and other benefits were much below her own. Even though a 'localizing turn' in UNDP's office started during her time there, which enabled her to terminate the contracts of several male experts twice her age, it did not do away with her personal anxiety on moral grounds for her own continuing involvement in the aid machinery. It is worth pointing out that postmodern development critiques by Escobar (e.g. 1984-85; 1997) and others challenged the usefulness of Western development knowledge for the Third World (Parpart 1993: 453) at around the same time. Moreover, now a mother of two daughters, the Defi director started to find the possibility of returning to Finland increasingly appealing as the alternative would be to ask the entire family to change country periodically based on the requirements of the UNDP.

The Defi director finally decided to take a few months leave from the UNDP in 1994 to go home and to reassess her choice of career once again, as a result of which she resigned from her job in the UNPD. Back in Finland she met, by chance, one of the founding members of Defi in an 'African shop'. The two women soon noticed that they shared similar views on development and, soon after,

the Defi director, as I systematically call her in this study, joined the NGO and started to plan the NGO's interventions in Vietnam. She had returned home with two main beliefs: first, mainstream development policies by the big donor agencies can and should be challenged if they do not fit the local people's needs and realities; second, she was convinced that there must be an alternative way to do development in a manner that placed ordinary people, the rural poor, at the centre of operations. Her personal experiences and encounters during her years at the UNDP thus left strong traces in her later development thinking, manifested in her utterances on Defi's Vietnam interventions. Disillusioned by the business logics of the big donors that strongly impacted on agricultural policies, she became convinced that people were better off when relying on themselves rather than being too dependent on the market or outside help.

Examination of the Defi director's account of her personal experiences shows her world view changing along with those experiences and later culminating in her critique of the neo-liberal world order which suggested that people should fight the power of international business by developing self-reliant communities. In addition to her personal experiences, she names Ivan Illich as the single most important thinker who has affected her understanding of development.¹⁰³ A critical reading of Illich's work has pointed to his 'uncompromising hatred of industrial economies' and upholding of 'the cult of a subsistence-oriented mode of living' (Trinh 1989: 113). A similar valorization of the local as opposed to the global can be found in the Defi director's thinking. To return to the theoretical foundations of this study, it is important to note that dialogue in which meanings are re-evaluated can also take place within a reading act. Thus, personal experiences can be understood to take place in textual encounters, especially when they significantly impact the reader's understanding of the subject matter; that is, when reading results in re-evaluation of meanings.

The Defi director's analysis of the development problem here is dichotomous, rooted in the notion of the 'global', while the solution is to be found in 'local' self-reliance. The latter notion became central to Defi's utterances as early as 1997, along with the new Village Self-reliance and Development Intervention. A Bakhtinian framework easily now permits us to move on to further examination of the dialogue.

Unlike the Defi director, whose understanding of self-reliance derived from negative outcomes of the 'global', Defi's project officers discussed self-reliance with no such reference. Instead, the focus of their analysis is on the local and the

103 An important reference to Illich's work can be found in the Development Dictionary, a project in which he played a central role (Sachs 1992).

national. In their constructs, the origin of development problems is attributed to political rather than economic realities. In their utterances, self-reliance is discussed within a narrative of ‘passive people’ in which ‘being passive’ is understood to be an outcome of the political context:

Usually in Vietnam’s system everything has to be followed based on the government’s request. Everybody! [...] If [people] do differently they are against the government or they do not follow! (PO3, personal communication, 6.3.2013).

Here, people’s behaviour as passive is seen to derive from the active behaviour of the state which is understood to restrict people’s activities to the role of ‘following’. An interpretation of ‘following’ emphasizes a juxtaposition with ‘taking an initiative’, which then becomes both an object and a solution of development. Therefore, while ‘following’ remains a prevailing practice in Vietnam against which development practitioners constantly struggle, making people active becomes a central development objective in accounts of grassroots activities:

Self-reliance means that [people] take their own initiative and mobilize their own resources, [...] to settle [development] problems and solve their difficulties (PO2, 2004).

The boldness of these statements can be fully understood only if read in the context of ‘if [people] do differently they are against the government’. Despite the possible danger of ‘not following’, Defi’s project officers share a view that this is exactly what needs to be done.

The passivity and lack of initiative of the people is also discussed in concrete terms through anecdotes. The project officer told me how he once visited a rural community in central Vietnam to seek products that could be sold in Craft Link,¹⁰⁴ a handicraft shop he had set up with his friends in Hanoi to open up new opportunities for the people in rural and ethnic areas. On one occasion he found suitable products to be sold in Hanoi and he told the people that he would come back after a month to buy them if they would make them for him. ‘The people immediately asked me for money so that they could buy materials,’ he recalled. He, however, refused to give them money as he was convinced that they were capable of finding the means to buy materials if they really wanted to sell their products.¹⁰⁵ A month

104 For more information on Craft Link, visit: <http://www.craftlink.com.vn/>

105 Here, his line of thinking is strikingly similar with that of the Defi director, who held the view that the impoverished are very creative ‘as they need to be in order to survive’ (DD, personal communication).

later, he returned to the area and the people came to him to sell their handicraft. This experience became significant to him, as it supported his belief that people are able to mobilize the resources around them if they actively try, something which can be seen as a pre-condition for self-reliance.

It is possible to argue that the level of analysis may be selected that would bridge the gap between these meanings given to self-reliance within Defi. That is, one could argue that the local and national transform the problem of the (global) economic system into a problem of the (national) political system. Despite their differences, both interpretations continued to coexist within Defi's development thinking. This was possible as the Village Self-reliance and Development Intervention that was designed by the project officers, did not apparently contradict the Defi director's conceptualization of self-reliance in terms of concrete activities. Regardless of the different hypotheses on the role of self-reliance, the two understandings co-existed and supported similar concrete activities.

From technical to political meanings of 'participation'

The notion of participation has played a central role in Defi's development thinking from the very beginning so it is important to explore the meanings attributed to it by the NGO. Initially, Defi's Savings and Credit Intervention model included forms of participation easily found in any micro-credit project, that is, the use of Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRAs)¹⁰⁶ and beneficiaries' participation in the loan group activities. In Minh Son commune participation was, however, taken one step further than in other communes with similar projects and extended to the allocation of project management tasks to the project beneficiaries – the single women.

We may see how participation was initially conceptualized in relatively technical terms. It took concrete forms in the use of PRA tools. In addition, the notion of participation was used to communicate Defi's commitment to a critique by the NGO community of development projects that saw people as objects of outside help rather than resourceful and knowledgeable individuals. Defi's views reflect what has been described as 'the common ground of [participatory research]' where 'codifying local knowledge is a necessary first step towards beneficial social change' and that rejects an assumption that 'experts' know best (Mohan & Stokke 2000). The Defi director disagreed with the way development talk occasionally positioned the people.

¹⁰⁶ PRAs have been criticized e.g. for treating 'the local' as a harmonious community thus downplaying intra-community tension (Mohan & Stokke 2000).

Our target group?... I dislike the term target group and targeting enormously. I think it goes contra to what we are trying to do [...]. I don't like that word at all. So we were not targeting. It's like shooting a target. (DD, interview, 28.1.2004)

Despite her dislike of the term 'target group' she later catches herself using it and starts to laugh, realising how difficult it is to totally avoid – so strongly is it a part of donor talk as the particular speech genre to which she also belongs. In terms of this inquiry, it is, however, more relevant to analyze the ways in which Defi consciously tried to replace 'target group' by 'participants' in its development dialogue. The two words appear significantly different conceptually in the way people are presented: 'target group' positions people as objects of development activities, while 'participants' are given a more active role in interventions. An analysis of Defi's utterances shows how the term 'participation' acquired new meanings and deeper forms as the NGO's interaction with the context intensified.

In the Village Self-reliance and Development model, participation was further extended to cover both women and men and all forms of activities to be conducted within the project. Here the idea of participation that began with the PRA became central in accounts of project planning, including the selection of project activities, and implementation as well as monitoring practices. This was in tune with views that emphasized the role of grassroots planning as a means to a more efficient and democratic development; that is, the local people were seen to have 'a better perception of their needs and better information about local resources' (Gandhi & Raj 1994: 51). Besides engaging with the direct project beneficiaries, Defi announced a policy of engaging with local authorities by developing a practice of inviting them on field trips, training sessions and internal assessments. In Defi's development thinking, enhancing the participation of local authorities in project activities was seen as a way to influence them, to make them understand the development model better; getting the necessary support from the authorities was seen as a prerequisite for the sustainability of the work by the Village Development Boards (VDBs) (personal communication with the DD and the project officers). Reports of activities show how this actually took place. For example, in addition to the WU, Defi invited local authorities (e.g. the Commune People's Committee and Party Units) to conduct participatory needs assessments in project communes (Defi, Bi-monthly Report, dated 25, 7.1997). Moreover, local authorities were always invited to participate in study tours / visits organized by the NGO.¹⁰⁷

One significant change in Defi's utterances on the Village Self-reliance and Development model was that the NGO soon ceased referring to it as a community

¹⁰⁷ This may be seen as also reflecting a view that strengthening local institutions was necessary to enhance democratic development in the grassroots (see e.g. Palanithurai 2009).

development project. Instead, words like ‘village democracy’, ‘local democracy’ as well as ‘grassroots democracy’ started to appear in their language. An explanation for the change of vocabulary was identified. The government of Vietnam issued a Grassroots Democracy Decree (GDD) in 1998 which offered Defi as well as other development NGOs a normative framework wherein to discuss people’s participation (as discussed in Chapter Two). The decree was seen by Defi project officers as authorizing the people to have more say in issues of local development. Here, it is important to note that the Defi director shared the project officers’ view that the decree was important for their work in Vietnam. However, as she readily admitted, she had a ‘very sketchy knowledge’ of it. In fact, she discussed the GDD in terms of the people being allowed to form their own associations, thus confusing the decree with an association law (DD, interview 28.1.2004), another legal frame actively followed by the donor community, particularly INGOs.

The GDD was useful for Defi as it incorporated an idea of people’s participation and therefore made it easier for the NGO’s project officers to find a common language with the authorities when persuading them to support the Village Self-reliance and Development intervention model. In fact, Defi repeatedly claimed that the VDB model is about implementing the GDD, thus rhetorically lining up with the state despite the *de facto* differences between the GDD and the VDB development model.

The changes in the NGO’s understanding of participation reflected changes in its understanding of a key development problem which was defined in terms of ‘lack of democracy’ in villages. On the other hand, the Village Self-reliance and Development model was assumed to create open and transparent decision-making structures in which the people played a central role. The model was accredited with two main functions: to create a space in which the people could implement activities according their own priorities (see also Williams 2002 for repolitization of participation), and to set an example for the state on how local development can be conducted in a participatory way (interviews of PO1, PO2 and PO3).

Along with the emergence of a democracy agenda in Defi’s development thinking, participation by the Defi director was increasingly conceptualized in terms of individual rights:

One strand of thinking when considering participation is how I am able to take part in decisions that affect my life (DD, interview 28.1. 2004).

Participation now is discussed in terms of ‘how I am able to’ and ‘decisions that affect my life’. We may see that those two aspects became central to Defi’s recon-

ceptualization of participation: first, people were now understood as rights holders and not, for example, as victims of state bureaucracy; and second, ‘how I am able to’ participate steered Defi’s focus more towards local power relations (but perhaps not quite enough as will be discussed in Chapter Eight). The Vietnamese state, that was partly now seen as a development problem because of maintaining its top-down decision-making structures, was, at the same time, also still seen as a necessary ally in creating an enabling environment for the people to make decisions on issues that affected their lives. This double role was not considered incompatible, as people’s participation was also understood to benefit the state. ‘Should the state follow this approach, a lot of money would be saved!’ (PO3, 6.3.2013), benefiting both the people and the state: benefits to the people delivered through participatory decision-making practices when solving local development problems; benefits for the state in the form of more effective development activities as people do things in a more cost-efficient way when compared to similar activities by the state.

Participation in local decision-making practices thus became the new focus in Defi’s development thinking, and the lack of democratic decision-making practices the main obstacle to be tackled. The Defi director described the link between participation and democracy in the following terms: ‘When I talk about democracy, I talk about people’s participation – to put it simply’ (DD, interview 28.1.2004). However, the NGO was much more restrained in its choice of words in the actual project sites as it was believed that the local political context restricted the messages Defi could openly deliver. However, in the NGO’s internal discourses the VDB model is referred to as the ‘village democracy project’. The main focus was now on reconceptualizing participation in development in more political terms than can be found in the Savings and Credit Intervention model. That is, the lack of local democracy was increasingly seen as a more burning issue of development to be tackled than unequal gender relations.

6.2 Problems of aid modalities and sustainability as a solution

As noted at the beginning of the chapter, Defi’s development thinking may be read as a reply to the problem of aid modalities. The concept of sustainability most clearly addresses this problem. Defi’s understanding of sustainability is rooted in the contradiction between aid practice (development as a project) and the NGO’s understanding of development as a process. ‘The end’ of the project, however, forces project implementers to address the question of how to sustain activities

after the project period and Defi was no exception to this rule: several internal discussions between the Defi director and the project officers focused on the issue of sustainability of development interventions which primarily addressed the question of how to maintain the approach, and thus the possible positive outcomes of the interventions, after the project period – the formal end of the NGO's involvement in an intervention.

Analysis shows that in the Defi director's utterances, two types of solutions are drafted: (1) the idea of institutionalization; and (2) a stress on financial sustainability.

Institutionalization as a solution for continuity and expansion

The notion of institutionalization is a frequent topic in Defi's correspondence and one of the key concepts in the NGO's early development thinking. At the beginning, institutionalization was discussed as part of Defi's partnership objectives with the WU. During the Defi director's visit to Vietnam in 1996, she promoted an agenda to secure the contribution of the WU to the project's activities and to convince the WU to adopt Defi's development approach as part of the WU's own activities (TOR, DD's 1st expert visit to Vietnam, 1996). This objective was consistent with Defi's original idea of working with and through the WU in the implementation of its savings and credit activities. According to Defi's understanding at the time, WU represented the best possible partner when aiming at women's empowerment. Moreover, in the district of Hanoi, where Defi set up its project for single women, the WU was experienced in running similar micro-credit projects (PO1, interview 24.5.2010). Defi's positive view of the 'promise' of the WU was supported by the fact that the Union had national coverage from central to village levels that was interpreted as indicating the Union's potential to make changes: that is, Defi believed that should the WU apply Defi's development approach in its own activities, it could have an impact on women's realities on a larger scale. Defi was well aware that a small foreign NGO could only set an example of how development could be conducted in a participatory manner, but the impact of its activities would remain limited and local (fax by the DD, 10.8.1997; see also Rigg 2003); partnering with a well-established national organization was seen as a solution to the problem. The assumption made was that the WU was both capable and willing to replicate Defi's model at the national level if it proved effective.

As soon as Defi's project officers started to work directly with the local WUs and the female beneficiaries, however, they began to report that the relationship between the WU and the potential beneficiaries was more complicated than as-

sumed. In faxes sent to the Defi director, the project officers warned that the WU was not as responsive to the needs of the women in the communes as had been expected. This challenged Defi's original idea of institutionalization. The Defi director responded to the news in two ways. First, she admitted that she shared the concerns of the project officers on the possible role of the WU in the project:

As said before, I do agree to a certain extent with your reasoning about Vietnam; it is a fact that there are no real people's organizations at the moment (fax by DD, 28.9.1997).

This reply, on the one hand, communicates agreement with the project officers' argument that 'there are no real people's organizations at the moment' which presented a view that organizations like the WU did not qualify as 'real people's organizations' due to the lack of responsiveness to the grassroots needs.¹⁰⁸ On the other hand, the message also communicates the only partial agreement by the Defi director with the project officers' reasoning about Vietnam, leaving the door open for further arguments concerning the contextual analysis. Meanwhile, the Defi director called for the project officers to work further with the WU:

Under these circumstances it is necessary to try to influence the WU by exposing them to the initiatives and solutions of the participants (Fax by DD, 28.9.1997).

The sentence indicates how the Defi director accounted for the apparent gap between the project participants and the WU that was part of the development dialogue, and allocated the project officers a new role as mediators between the two. Hereafter, making the WU 'more responsive' to the needs of the local women became one of the key objectives of the project. The NGO's correspondence clearly illustrates how the changing image of the WU moved the focus of discussion from institutionalizing to 'responsiveness'. Defi now sought to turn its main partner, the WU, into an organization that would better respond to the needs of the women at the grassroots level.

Yet Defi's project officers had already pointed out that making WU more responsive was too broad an objective and reminded their dialogue partners in Finland of a need for concrete guidelines to inform the practical work:

¹⁰⁸ A similar assessment of the Farmers' Association has been expressed by FAO that stated that 'Government-sponsored organizations such as Vietnam's Farmers' Association do not represent farmers' interests' (Quoted in Fforde 2008: 2)

The DEFI program goal can be narrowed down to ‘assisting the WU’s efforts to be more responsive’ – taking as a starting point that the WUs **are** [willingly] changing and putting their efforts in this direction but their capacity is low; they have limitations related to their organizational settings and the present level of women’s [...] perception / acceptance / use of the WUs’ services or as their forum, and participation in the WUs. [...] The identification of DEFI and its staff role here is very important: should DEFI be operational or just a funding agency, what will we be doing [...] and what not? (fax from PO1 and PO2 to DD 31.7.1997)

The extract shows the concern of the project officers to get operational guidelines from the Defi director. Furthermore, they note that the WU is not necessarily the forum that the local women want to use as a platform for their activities. There is a subtle remark, again, about grassroots realities that did not correspond with the NGO’s original theorizing about the WU. As the discussion continues, the project officers point out that Defi needs to be realistic about what an NGO of its size can and cannot do.

The project officers promoted the idea that Defi should work more directly with the people as the WU had failed to meet expectations. In response, the Defi director warned that such an approach would inevitably prove unsustainable, creating dependency between the people and the NGO, and concluded that ‘only in exceptional cases working directly with the people could be justified’ (fax by DD 10.8.1997). As the correspondence evolves, we can see a compromise between the views of the Defi director and the project officers being reached. Defi would work directly with the women’s and people’s groups (not individuals), while, at the same time, making efforts to make the WU more responsive to the needs of the women.

The correspondence suggests that despite the NGO’s disappointment regarding the WU, the Defi director was still keen on finding a way to influence, and thereby transform, the WU into a more responsive organization. After Mr. Phuc left the project to work for a UN agency, the Defi director urged his successor to examine the possibilities of moving Defi’s office to the WU’s headquarters. In her view, sharing an office with the WU in Hanoi would increase the NGO’s chances of influencing the way of working and thinking within the entire Union. The new project officer, however, firmly rejected the suggestion, arguing that, on the contrary, sharing office space with the Union would significantly restrict the NGO’s opportunities of pursuing its development thinking and thus would compromise its work. The subject was soon dropped from the agenda; Defi continued to share an office with the coalition of Nordic NGOs (personal communication with the DD

and PO2); and institutionalization fades away from Defi's key agenda. The NGO now articulated an understanding that the WU, being dependent on state funding, was so deeply a part of state structures that a small NGO like Defi could do very little to change it (personal communication, Defi POs). Defi would continue to try, but the future of its engagement was no longer dependent on its partnership with the WU. This change also meant that the notion of 'people's groups' became central to Defi's utterances, although the NGO now lacked a vision of how the people's groups could be institutionalized independently from the state, and the question of what constituted a group of villagers as 'a people's group' was never thoroughly discussed – which had important implications for the NGO's democracy agenda, as is discussed in Chapter Eight.

The issue of institutionalization returned to Defi's working agenda in 2012¹⁰⁹ when the project's main funder, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, required the NGO to submit a plan of how to institutionalize project activities before the end of the project funding period. The Ministry's request, made fifteen years after the NGO actors themselves had seriously discussed the issue, was received with slight annoyance. In the Defi director's view, the Ministry failed to understand the contextual problems involved and feared that hasty institutionalization might compromise the NGO's entire development approach. The Ministry's requirement was discussed several times in March 2013 during the Defi director's visit to Vietnam to which I was invited to participate as an observer. The topic was also discussed over a lunch meeting in the presence of the Defi director, Mr. Phuc, the current project officer and myself. Mr. Phuc suggested that one solution would be to attribute an alternative meaning to the notion of institutionalization:

109 I need to remind the reader here that I am continuing to use 'Defi' to refer to the donor NGO, even though Defi officially withdrew from Vietnam in 2004, after which it continued to offer some minor support to the Minh Son single women's group. In 2006 a new project to support local democracy was established by another Finnish NGO. As already noted, the reason for discussing both projects as Defi projects is due to the fact that despite the change of NGO, all key actors have remained the same. That is, the Defi director now leads the project under the new NGO and the Defi's last project officer also continued her work in the new project. Moreover, Defi as well as 'my' NGO continued their partnership in the new project. In addition, even though the new project is bigger in geographical terms than the original project, some of the project locations at the district level are the same: cooperation with the Minh Son single women still continues, and in addition, another commune with single women has been added. Moreover, the district where the Village Self-reliance and Development model was first implemented since 1997 is still one of the project locations. Furthermore, old participants have been used as trainers in some of the new communes. For example, two BoM members of the Minh Son single women's group trained women in the new commune in project management skills, and a chair of a VDB from a pilot district has been used to train new VDB members in the new project communes. For these reasons, what we see today is a direct continuation of the Defi project, even though the new NGO has brought some new elements to the project activities such as solar-cooker testing taking place in one of the project communes.

Institutionalization could also mean that the government [local, central] applies the [participatory] approach in their own programmes / projects (PO1 24.3.2013).

He further elaborated that this could mean, in practice, ‘[the government] making adjustments to their rules and procedures so that the grassroots people can receive and manage funds transferred from the government budget under the government [projects]’ (PO1 24.3.2013).

The new formulation of possible institutionalization attempts to reconcile the NGO’s emphasis on VDBs as independent development actors representing the people in the villages, on the one hand, and the need to secure continuation as well as the space for the work of the VDBs after the NGO’s withdrawal, on the other. Currently, the concept of institutionalization is no longer used to refer to a particular institutional space but, instead, the focus of discourse has moved to possible ways to institutionalize the participatory approach within existing socio-political structures without compromising the space for the people’s independent development activities.

Reconceptualizing sustainability as promotion of people’s groups incorporates the idea that an NGO’s development approach can only sustain itself after the project period if the local people (rather than an organization) have learned appropriate working and organizing mechanisms tested during the project. Moreover, this interpretation assumes that should the project outcomes be valued positively by the people, they will be motivated to sustain the working method even after the withdrawal of an outside supporter. It also acknowledges the important role of the state in creating an enabling environment for people’s activities.

Financial sustainability – the politics of minimizing donor support

Defi’s theorizing on financial sustainability is highly interesting as it implicitly challenges often heard arguments for bigger aid budgets, reflecting, but not limited to, the critical voices within development discourses (see e.g. Sachs 1992). The Defi director strongly criticized aid practice for developing money-intensive aid structures that, according to her view, are harmful in many ways. The idea of financial sustainability is discussed with reference to NGO practices, experiences from other countries and the necessity to conduct development work in a way that can be feasible in the long run. One line of her criticism targets development NGOs that implement projects in developing countries themselves:

It is far too expensive (and unsustainable) for a foreign NGO to implement activities itself; only in exceptional cases this can be justified (fax by DD 10.8.1997).

Instead, according to the Defi director, a foreign NGO should minimize its direct involvement in project implementation and work through its local partners. This allows the NGO to cut down the number of its local staff (in Defi's case this has meant only one full-time staff member except at the very beginning when Mr. Phuc's contract overlapped with the first full-time project officer). In Defi's case, the original idea to implement all of its Savings and Credit activities through its main partner, the local WU chapters, is consistent with this view. In this construct, the role of Defi's project officers was seen as a support for the partner as well as a monitor for activities in order to report to the NGO's headquarters in Finland. Similarly, the Defi director consciously aimed at minimizing her own involvement in the project when its activities were ongoing in the field. Indeed, the rich and frequent correspondence that took place in 1996-97 slowly diminishes and the issues dealt with are increasingly about project milestones such as reporting or, for example, decisions on budget matters, while references to changing ideas on development in a broader sense become fewer and fewer. Meanwhile, in addition to connecting the idea of financial sustainability to reducing project costs, the Defi director also advocated the use of local trainers and local knowledge. This, for her, resonates with her experiences with the UNDP where local experts, in her view, were often the best fitted to solve local development problems.

Another angle of financial sustainability in Defi's development thinking is the idea that development intervention can be financially sustainable only if local resources cover an essential part of the activity costs. This reflects an understanding that 'local economic development requires investment at a local level' (Mukherjee 1999: 233) and that 'external resources need to be provided in partnership with internal resources to have maximum impact' (Doyle 1999: 33). Thus, following an idea of 'aided self-help' (Doyle 1999: 38), Defi concluded that the money coming from a foreign donor should be minimized: 'seed money' is a common expression in the NGO's utterances. Defi normally covered only some 30-50 per cent of the activity costs¹¹⁰, the only exception being the necessary training costs that were usually fully covered by the NGO (Mid-term Evaluation Report, 2013). As the people involved are required to contribute half of the cost in terms of money and labour, it was believed that they would not have an incentive to over-budget

110 This principle became one of the guiding tenets of the Village Self-reliance and Development model.

activities.¹¹¹ Defi was alert to a situation in which the amount of money poured into a commune by an outside donor were much beyond the normal money flows in the area, noting:

There are programmes which cost US 1000 and more per beneficiary per year! An amount much larger than many people's annual income and thus inproportionate [sic] (fax by DD 28.9.1997).

The Defi director warned that 'the world is full of examples of benevolent NGOs working at the grassroots causing destruction through e.g. influx of funds manifold to what used to be available' (fax by DD 28.9.1997). In her view, the negative outcomes of disproportionate aid flows included an increased temptation to misuse project funds, plus it killed creativity and compromised people's ownership of, and commitment to, the project. Pouring money into the communes arguably increases corruption, while minimizing the budget was used as a tool to reduce the perceived risks involved in aid. The Defi director concluded that 'those whose motivation for partnership and participation derives from money are not interested in working with us, which is a very good thing' (DD, interview 11.11.2009). Keeping the money flows small thus represented a strategic choice that was believed to help the NGO avoid gold diggers clustering around the project. Moreover, project structures and ways of organizing the work, she argued, would become impossible to sustain after the project period should they depend on substantial donor support. Explaining her perspective on the importance of limited outside support to the project officers, the Defi director introduced the views of Nepalese and Indian NGOs that either completely refused to accept any foreign funding or accepted only a limited amount¹¹² as otherwise they would feel their accountability shift from their own constituency to that of a foreign donor (fax by DD 28.9.1997). The question of financial sustainability is thus discussed in connection with the issue of accountability as well as aid dependency.¹¹³

The focus of work therefore advocated the intervention model to the potential project partners and participants. Moreover, Defi's understanding of financial sustainability was also based on the idea of poor people being resourceful and creative if given the right incentive (e.g. PO1, interview 24.5.2010). Making peo-

111 According to the Mid-term Evaluation Report (2013), the problem was, in fact, the opposite: several activities coordinated by the VDBs had been postponed as they had been under-budgeted or because it proved impossible to mobilize the needed financial contribution from the villagers.

112 The Lokayan and Savrodaya movement were mentioned by name.

113 The Mid-Term Evaluation Report (Nguyen Thi Oanh & Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai 2013) partly compromises this view by urging more attention to be paid to monitoring activities by the people.

ple active, an important item on the agenda in Defi's development thinking, is therefore also linked to the NGO's conceptualization of sustainability. Only if the people can be motivated to mobilize their own resources, even if these are very limited, can a project become sustainable. At the same time, such a policy is perceived as increasing people's ownership of project activities, as people who have contributed to the activities themselves are more likely to monitor that the work is done properly and cost-effectively.

6.3 Chapter conclusions

In this chapter, I queried the main development problems identified by Defi and the key concepts that constituted the NGO's development thinking. I used my Bakhtinian reading – more specifically, the notions of meaning construction and re-evaluation of meanings – to analyze understandings of the key concepts in the NGO's development thinking, which I contextualized as a web of concepts that helps to constitute the meaning of each individual element. For example, the meaning of participation can be better understood when examined together with the meanings of gender, self-reliance and sustainability, helping to answer the questions of who is supposed to participate, who can participate, and why participation is important.

The notion of time in Bakhtin's theory of meaning construction directed my attention to development discourse in the 1990s as a likely textual context that may have impacted on such of Defi's development thinking which is analyzed here. The analysis showed how the NGO's understanding of gender and participation, in particular, reflected the views expressed by other donors as well as researchers at the time. That is, they were seen as intertextual references that participated in the construction of the meanings in Defi's development thinking.

Moreover, my analysis showed how space in the meaning-construction process was different for different actors. For example, in the case of the Defi director, her understanding was impacted both by her encounters with texts as discourse spaces (and as the consciousness of other people), as well as her personal experiences in developing countries. Thus, space in this sense can also be historical (past time). Analysis also demonstrated how the space for project officers was more an immediate physical place (project communes) where they entered to set up the NGO's interventions. This was natural as they were the ones who worked in Vietnam while the Defi director (based in Finland) just paid occasional visits to the project sites. Not surprisingly, the meaning-construction processes of the project officers were influenced more by the national context while for the Defi director the

notion of global was prominent, especially in her understanding of self-reliance. While the project officers understood self-reliance as space for independent (from the state) decision making and action by the people, the Defi director saw it as a means to fight the neo-liberal world order.

My analysis showed how the meanings of the NGO's key concepts – participation, gender, sustainability and self-reliance – were constantly tested by the NGO's encounters with local realities and how they were used as a solution to development problems. For example, sustainability as a term was seen as contributing to the solution of the problem of aid modalities – that is, seeing development as a project – while, according to the NGO, development was a process by its very nature. But sustainability was more than that: one core meaning was the economic aspect, which was considered essential in order to fight dependency and corruption and to enhance people's ownership. We saw how the project context, the concrete space in which the interventions were to be implemented, challenged the NGO's initial theorizing of development problems and also the meanings given to the key development concepts. For example, I pointed out how gender was first understood in terms of WID, in which women's interests were seen as somewhat separate from those of men. In this framework, gender inequality was identified as a key development problem in Vietnamese society and men as an obstacle to women's economic activities. However, men were part of the problem but not the solution, as I showed in my discussion. I also demonstrated how encountering the single women and the WU staff in Minh Son commune transformed the project officers' understanding of the context and thus, of the 'gender problem'. This shifted the NGO's understanding of gender towards the Gender and Development approach. That is, the NGO started to see more clearly the differences amongst the group of women themselves, as well as seeing gender as a relationship between the sexes.

Moreover, I showed how the NGO's experiences in the field changed its understanding of the key development problem it wanted to address. No longer was gender inequality seen as the main problem; attention was now also directed to the relationship between the people and the state, more specifically the local authorities. This introduced the notion of democracy to the NGO's intervention. Here, time was again relevant in the NGO's meaning-construction process. The NGO's talk of community development shifted as it started to see its participatory approach in terms of grassroots democracy promotion, aided by the Vietnamese government's Grassroots Democracy Decree that offered INGOs a new framework in which to 'word' their participatory projects. Thus, as is evident from my analysis, the meaning of participation changed in tune with changes in local de-

velopment talk and with experiences gained from the field: initially participation was understood in rather technical terms (the conducting of PRAs and participation in loan groups) but experiences from Minh Son commune challenged this view and started a process in which participation took deeper forms (e.g. project management by the beneficiaries) and came to be seen as the right of every individual, thereby politicizing the meaning of participation.

In the next chapter, I re-examine my data, using my Bakhtinian framework to analyze how entering the field changed not just Defi's understanding of its main concepts but also its development practice: in other words, how new meanings and attributes given to concepts such as 'a single woman' were transformed into changes in the micro-credit intervention in Minh Son commune.

7 RECONCEPTUALIZING SINGLE WOMEN AS ‘STRONG’: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

In this chapter, the focus of analysis turns to interactions between meanings and practice. It begins with analysis of the meaning-construction process in which Defi’s understanding of single women as ‘marginalized’ was changed to single women as ‘strong’ – as agents in their own right. My main interest is geared towards analyzing how this reconceptualization changed the NGO’s intervention. Analysis then extends to cover negotiations between Defi and its main partner, the WU, in order to understand how the NGO managed to put its changed understanding of single women into practice. I then explore a ‘success’ narrative emerging from the single women’s micro-credit project, asking how success is constructed in these assessments and, more importantly, how the claimed success of the project is related to single women’s access to economic resources, the social life of the commune and their participation in society beyond the project activities – as reported by the interviewees.

My inquiry is facilitated by Bakhtin’s theorizing of meaning construction in which time, space and experience play a central role. Defi’s micro-credit project for single women in Minh Son commune is here understood as a space that provides the NGO, single women and other people in the commune, alternative experiences of single womanhood. It is important to note that as time – from the development practitioner’s point of view – is given, that is, it is something that cannot be changed by an intervention, space (in a limited sense) and experiences become the objects of attention. Here, I distinguish between space created by and within an intervention and space in the broader sense of the word. Intervention thus understood becomes a dialogic space (at best, but not necessarily) in which different understandings meet and, together with new experiences, produce new understandings, allowing monoglossic accounts of gender to encounter societal heteroglossia.

The key data used for the analysis consists of interviews with Defi staff – in particular, interviews with the Defi director and the NGO’s first project officer, but also interviews with the single women involved (a detailed description of the latter interviews was provided in Chapter Five), staff members of district (1) and commune WUs (1).

7.1 Dialogic impact: Understanding single women as agents and reformulation of the project management model

I argued in Chapter Six that the Defi director's conceptualization of gender contained traces of Western feminist theorizing which often places women in a position that is opposed and subordinate to men. I also pointed out how feminist theorizing impacted on development discourses, manifested, for example, in the WID approach. As argued by Mohanty (1991), this produced particular cultural discourses about the so-called 'Third World' that included a certain kind of 'knowledge' of women. In particular, Mohanty (ibid.) accused Western feminism of encouraging perceptions of the homogeneity, and the systemization of oppression, of women in the Third World, often regarding them merely as poor and marginalized. This facilitated an understanding of poor women as weak and in need of outside support (by Western donors). During the planning phase of Defi's project, a similar view of impoverished women as marginalized was communicated in the NGO's utterances. However, Mr. Phuc recalls his first encounter with the single women in Minh Son commune, a meeting that altered his perception of them:

When talking with the [single] women [...] I realized that these women are so strong that they can survive in a traditional Vietnamese village alone with their children – especially those who decided to have children without marriage (PO1, interview 24.5.2010).

The statement is important from two perspectives: first, the project officer's words 'when talking with [...] I realized' communicate a turning point in his view of the single women which was facilitated by his face-to-face encounter with them: it offered him a personal experience that acted as a catalyst for re-evaluation of his understanding of the proposed aid recipients. Seeing women as active agents, argues King (2008: 201), is significant as it turns potential disadvantage into opportunity.¹¹⁴ Second, Mr Phuc's utterance reveals the tension between a 'traditional Vietnamese village' and being a single mother, suggesting that in the

114 Mohanty & Alexander (1997: xxviii) have argued that 'in formulations of feminist democracy (...). Women do not image themselves as *victims* or *dependent* of governing structures but as agents of their own lives' (Italics in original). In this theorizing, however, 'agency is anchored in the practice of thinking of oneself as a part of feminist collectivities and organizations'. While this is an interesting approach also in terms of my study, the requirement of feminist consciousness by the women themselves is, if you like, a perhaps too demanding precondition to be applied to the Minh Son single women.

traditional Vietnamese village there was no space for such women-headed families, but, as they had ‘survived’ the locale, Mr. Phuc concluded that they had to be strong. This realization led him to revisit Defi’s conceptualization of participation which he now found unsatisfactory, feeling that forms of participation should be tailored to the context. As he told me: ‘Many projects use participation but not many try to understand participation in a particular socio-political context’ (PO1, interview 24.5.2010).

Reconceptualizing single women as strong raised the question of how participation could be most effective in the particular case of the Minh Son single women in terms of the women’s empowerment. Mr. Phuc felt that – put into the context of development aid practice – the form of participation selected had to enhance active participation and the women’s self-confidence. ‘But at [that] time, it was mainly a feeling’ (PO1, interview 24.5.2010). He figured that even though he had an understanding of the Vietnamese socio-political context in general, he lacked the specific knowledge of the local context that would be relevant for Defi’s empowerment agenda. However, he shared the Defi director’s view that the impoverished are creative in finding solutions to their problems – they have to be, in order to survive. With this assumption as his starting point, he concluded that the single mothers needed more space in their community and that creating it should be Defi’s primary task.

Given the local structures and systems – I did not know exactly, but these women were strong – maybe they need some space. Maybe they find out the best way to coexist with the current local structures... which we may not be able to find. (PO1, interview 24.5.2010)

The new understanding of the mental and emotional strength of the single women now combined with the view that ‘[local people] know their society better [than aid workers]’. This impelled Defi to re-evaluate the planned project implementation model. If it was believed that the proposed recipients were strong rather than marginalized, and if they were perceived to be the best experts in relation to their problems, what kind of role would that leave to Defi? And if changes to the existing plans were made, what did this mean to Defi’s relationship with the WU? Furthermore, it needed to be defined what this new thinking meant in terms of the forms of participation by the single women. What should their role be in the project?

OK, we recognize the role of the WU, but what could we give to the women? Like it or not, everybody is part of society, contributing to the people's behaviour. (PO1, interview 24.5.2010)

The project officer's utterance raises three important issues that were to have an impact on Defi's new approach. First, the WU's role in the community and in the women's development assistance should be recognized, even though, according to the observations by the NGO, the '[single women's] voice was not being heard' in the commune (PO1, interview 23.4.2004); second, Defi should be able to give something more to the single women than was defined in the tentative project plan; and third, when entering the commune, Defi became part of local society, thereby contributing to the people's behaviour. That is, Defi's every word and action sent a message to the local people, including its partners, and how it positioned the single women within its development intervention became a central tool in the NGO's objective to empower them. In other words, Mr. Phuc's utterance – 'Like it or not, everybody is [...] contributing to the people's behaviour' – expresses Defi's realization that its own actions inevitably communicated to the rest of the community the NGO's view of single women as well as impacting on the single women's view of themselves. Bakhtin (1996: 68) expressed the same issue when he observed: "'I" understand myself simultaneously from inside and *from the perspective of the other*' (italics added). Therefore, even though Defi was closely aligned with the Vietnamese state through its partnership with the WU, it started to exploit its position as a community outsider and build its intervention on acceptance of heteroglossia, thus, in effect, attacking monoglossic accounts of gender.

Defi's new understanding of single women was based on a contextual analysis that acknowledged single women's hardships in life without assigning to them the role of victim. Instead of seeing single mothers simply as objects of social prejudice and discrimination, conceptualizing them as strong and agentive turned the NGO's attention to the fact that they had fought for their children, both emotionally and financially. Single mothers were no longer seen as a homogeneous group, as victims of gendered social norms, but, more importantly, as persons using their power over decisions concerning their own bodies, fully aware that their decisions would lead to many hardships in life. As Diep's narrative in Chapter Five demonstrated, she refused to abort her baby despite repeated warnings by her family of the severe social and economic consequences of an out-of-wedlock child (Interview 7). It was this kind of determination and inner strength that Mr. Phuc detected when meeting the women even though, at the same time, he recognized

that they had been pushed to the margins of their community and not adequately attended to by the WU.

The new conceptualization of women as strong individuals challenged the project implementation plan in which single women were objects of the pre-chosen micro-credit intervention, despite the NGO's pronounced emphasis on participation in development. The original project plan limited women's participation to the roles of loan group members and group leaders, while reserving project management responsibilities for the pre-selected local partners, that is, the district and the commune WUs. Moreover, discussions with the chair of the district WU, herself a widow, encouraged Defi to consider its support in terms broader than loan capital. The NGO realized that 'what [the single women] also need is a sort of official recognition even from Defi' (PO1, interview 24.5.2010). Defi's close alignment with the Vietnamese state, and the opportunities this offered is rather clear.

How to better recognize the single women became a key question to be resolved by the project officer. It became clear to him that project implementation had to be empowering, and that Defi should have a vision of an implementation model that would better work in this direction. In consequence, he suggested that the project management model be reconsidered to switch the key role in the project management from the WU, as had been stated in the preliminary contract between the two parties, to a model in which the project's BoM members would be selected from among the single women.

As simple as it may sound, the suggestion was radical as it challenged some key assumptions in mainstream aid practice. Aid practice has a tendency to identify certain tasks in project implementation as calling for technical expertise, also referred to as expert knowledge. At the local level this may be attributed to a certain institutional context (e.g. the WU or Department of Agricultural Extension) and is verified by past experience in a particular sector of work (Wilson 2006; see also Chambers 1997; Ferguson 1994 for general critiques of development expertise and knowledge production in aid practice). Tasks belonging to the sphere of expert knowledge usually include accounting, reporting and supervising project implementation. This reveals how project management maintains a distinction between developers and those to be developed by considering project management tasks beyond the capacity of the project beneficiaries, consequently undermining the learning potential of aid practice. Therefore, project management is normally identified as a key task of local partners who are expected to have the required managerial skills or who are believed to be able to learn the necessary skills with limited training support by the donor. The suggested change in Defi's project man-

agement structure also signified a transformation in the NGO's understanding of how better to empower the single women in the commune¹¹⁵ – answering the question of how Defi could offer them recognition.

The revised project management structure also meant that women's position as subordinate to men was no longer seen as the key development problem. Rather, the gender monologism that directed work by the WU was now seen as part of the development problem faced by the single women. As the state discourse aimed to promote happy families it also framed the way the WU was conceptualizing women through its primary attention to wifhood which meant that women lacking a husband were not among the key target groups of the Union; according to my interviewees, women usually join the WU after they have married. This reveals how 'women' in this context refers to married women rather than women who have passed a certain age, though it is true that single mothers may join the WU (even though they may not necessarily feel welcomed by married women). The lack of specific support for women-headed households raised doubts in Defi about whether the WU would be truly motivated to use its voice on their behalf. Thus, a new project management model served not just to recognize the single women but was also seen as a means to address the issue of voice; selecting the BoM members from among the single women allowed it to represent their voices in the commune.

The change in project management model manifested Defi's new and more nuanced understanding of 'women' as both the same and different. That is, despite biological sameness, differences among the group were also acknowledged. The WU was no longer expected to equally represent all women, but was now seen in a framework that considered the socio-political context in which the needs of the majority (married women) and the political system (Party / state) framed its work. In no longer assuming that the WU spoke for the single women as it had in the early phase of the project planning period, Defi now sought to develop the project so as to create space for the single women to speak with their own voices. Mr. Phuc recalls that in the process of creating space for the single women, it was sometimes necessary to use 'strategic means' to provide it in concrete terms. For example, he realised that the single women were afraid to express their views in the presence of local (male) leaders so he would invite the men for a cigarette out-

115 Kabeer (1994: 236-237) has noted that innovative NGOs have sought to position women as agents and participants in the development effort by 'an emphasis on building a sense of ownership and responsibility among poor women in relations to the organization's activities, rather than on limiting their participation to the more instrumental and limited version of participation as the take-up of services [...].' Here we may see Defi moving in the same direction as an innovative NGO in the sense discussed by Kabeer.

side the meeting room and leave the women to converse without their presence. Reducing the hierarchies within the meeting space helped the women to speak more freely.

We may see how the notion of ‘space’ in the single women’s project included dimensions of political space (single women raising their voice vis-à-vis the WU and within the commune) as well as space for participation (Cornwall 2002). Moreover, filling the BoM with single women also meant that the project became a space for women’s learning at a level that extended their normative beneficiary roles, offering the means to highlight the heteroglossia among women in the commune. However, as we shall see in the following, despite the shortcomings of the WU, Defi realized that it needed its support to be able to implement the project according to the new management model. Moreover, as emphasized by the Defi director in her correspondence with the project officers, transforming the WU into a more responsive organization should be among Defi’s project objectives (as noted in Chapter Six).

7.2 Finding an ally in the Women’s Union and creating a win-win situation

The Defi director authorized Mr. Phuc to start the necessary negotiations with the WU to get its support for the planned changes in the project management model, given that he believed that in order to pilot the model, Defi also needed to secure the support from upper structural levels. Therefore, in addition to the commune and district WUs, he approached the WU headquarters in Hanoi. He admits that personal connections with the Hanoi WU helped him in the mission:

At that time my mother worked in a WU newspaper. I could use that connection to get the Hanoi Women’s Union to let go. (PO1, interview 24.5.2010)

Thanks to the personal connection with the WU in Hanoi, negotiations with the top level of the Union ‘was easy’. It is useful to note that the NGO was not requesting concrete support from the Hanoi WU. The expression used by the project officer – ‘to get the Hanoi WU to let go’ – should be read as Defi seeking a promise of non-interference from the branch. Like Defi, the Hanoi WU showed, to some degree, an acceptance of heteroglossia and a readiness to test the limits of ‘what can be done’.

In addition to convincing the Hanoi WU of the benefits of the new project model, Defi sought to find a way to work with the district and commune WUs. As

the local WUs already envisaged themselves as having key roles in managing the single women's micro-credit project, Defi needed to control those expectations without compromising its long term objective of women's empowerment. Therefore, the project officer commenced negotiations aimed at creating an enabling environment in which the single women would have 'space of their own' – now seen as an essential means for their empowerment – a process that took several months. Defi understood that not only did it need to win the support of the district WU, but that the local authorities also had to be convinced. A much needed ally was found in the chair of the district WU who had some twenty years of experience as a single parent because her husband had died just months after her son was born (as mentioned in Chapter Five); having firsthand experience of raising a child alone contributed to her willingness to support Defi's initiative 'as she understood!' (PO1, interview 24.5.2010).

When I interviewed Madame Van, the by now retired chair of the district WU, she emphasized that she felt deep sympathy for the single mothers. Confirming her personal commitment to help them, she stressed that at the time of setting up the Defi project, Minh Son was one of the poorest communes in the district, pointing out that not just the women headed-households in the commune faced difficulties, but that life in general had been deeply scarred by the past wars.

Ở xã này rất nghèo, diện tích đất rộng nên rất nghèo và hơn nữa là vì ngày xưa ở đây có những người bị ảnh hưởng, thời xa xưa trong cuộc kháng chiến chống Pháp những xã này bị rất nặng nề.

Life in the commune was very poor, there was plenty of land but people were very poor and furthermore, a lot of people were impacted by the resistance war against the French that heavily affected the commune (Int. 6, transcript, p. 8).

As a result, prior to Defi's arrival, little attention had been given to the problems of women-headed households even though there were many of them in the area.

Lúc bấy giờ, phụ nữ đơn thân có rất nhiều hoàn cảnh, có người vợ chồng lấy nhau rồi chia tay, có người phụ nữ cao tuổi người yêu của họ đi chiến đấu rồi không về, có người nhiều tuổi - ở Việt Nam con gái ngoài 30 tuổi thì rất khó khăn bởi vì họ là những người ở nông thôn, không phải những người ở thành phố.. Những người ở nông thôn thường làm ruộng, lấy chồng rồi sinh con, phải chăm sóc gia đình, những người cao tuổi bên nhà chồng, vì vậy họ phải xây dựng gia đình sớm. Có những hoàn cảnh không lấy được chồng thì họ sống một mình. Có những người không lấy được chồng

thì họ kiếm một đứa con. Họ sống với con để nhờ cậy lúc cao tuổi. Hầu hết những người phụ nữ như thế thì họ rất khó khăn trong vấn đề kinh tế và tình cảm. Sự quan tâm của xã hội đến những người phụ nữ không chồng mà có con rất ít.

At that time, single women had many different circumstances. There were women who had separated from their husbands, women of older age whose lovers had gone to the battlefield and had not returned, there were old women; in rural villages in Vietnam a woman over 30 years of age [has difficulties in marrying], it is different from the cities.. People in rural villages do farming, women marry and have children, and they need to take care of the family and old people from their husbands' family who live in the household, so they need to build a family early. In some cases women were unable to marry and had to live alone. There were women who couldn't marry and thus 'searched for a child'.¹¹⁶ They [want to] live with a child when getting old. Almost all such women faced a lot of economic and emotional difficulties. Society paid very little attention to the single mothers. (Int. 6, transcript, p. x).

In the quotation above, the district WU chair explains that there were a great number of women-headed households in the commune as a result of post-war circumstances and it should be noted that she avoids overt negative moral judgment of single mothers. Rather, she admires them. She stresses that even though the WU does not encourage women to have children out of wedlock, all women are given the right to become a mother by Vietnamese legislation (Law on Marriage, promulgated on 29 December, 1986, see also Phinney 2005) and having a child can ease the sadness of women unable to marry.

According to the project officer, the district WU chair decided to support Defi when she learned of his suggestion that single women comprise the BoM and promised to work with him to convince relevant actors of the new model. She points out that to convince her own staff she evoked common interests:

Ngay cả trong nội bộ chị em, người ta cũng ngại khó thế nhưng chúng tôi xác định được mục tiêu là mang lại quyền lợi cho những người phụ nữ khác, cho rất nhiều người thì bản thân tôi cũng phải cố gắng là thuyết phục mọi người để cùng làm việc và cùng hỗ trợ để cho mọi người có được cuộc sống tốt hơn.

Even our own [WU] staff was afraid of difficulties [of the suggested project model] but we had decided that the goal was in the interests of all women – of many people

116 The expression 'search for a child' is used to refer to unmarried women who want to give birth to a baby despite the fact that they lack a husband. Phinney (2005) refers to the same phenomenon with the expression 'ask for a child'.

– so I myself also had to make an effort to persuade everyone to work together and to help so that all could have a better life (Int. 6, transcript, p. 22).

The negotiations revealed that it was not just the revised project model suggested by the project officer that met with resistance, but that the whole idea of offering loans to women-headed households was also questioned. Doubts about the ability of single women to pay back their loans were expressed. According to the district WU chair it was commonly believed that should a single woman be given a loan, it would be nowhere to be found at the time of repayment: ‘*có khi họ ăn hết!*’ (Int. 6, transcript, p. 22; ‘the money would have been eaten and lost forever’). This view corresponds with findings of an earlier study reporting that the majority of poor households could not access Vietnam Bank for Agriculture credit due to ‘poor loan repayment prospects’ (UNDP et al. 1995: 46) as well as resonating with the experiences of single women themselves (Interview 7). Moreover, it was not believed that the single women would be able to change their conditions even if supported by the project.

Họ không tin những người phụ nữ đó sẽ vươn lên để làm chủ cuộc đời của mình.

They didn’t believe that these women would rise up and master their lives. (Int. 6, transcript, p. 22).

Given these general assumptions of single women as unable to pay back their loans and raise their living standards, Mr. Phuc admits that without support from the district WU chair, it would have been impossible for the NGO to carry out the project the way it wanted. As a foreign organization and an outsider to the commune, Defi needed the support of its local partner. Only then could it seek approval for its project management model from the local authorities. We may see how at this phase of the dialogue Defi needed the persuasive power of the district WU to challenge the monoglossic accounts of single women widely held in the commune and by the district authorities.

Negotiations with the local leaders proved demanding: The project officer met them ‘always with Madame Van’ (PO1, interview 24.5.2010) but still the leaders were not easily convinced. Madame Van, who played a central role in the negotiations, went so far as to accuse the local leaders of neglecting their own people:

Tôi còn nhớ là tôi phải thuyết phục các nhà lãnh đạo rằng tại sao người ta ở rất xa xôi, ở tận bên nước ngoài người ta mang đến đây, quan tâm đến người dân của mình, tại sao mình không giúp đỡ cho họ được thay đổi ‘cuộc sống’.

I still remember that I had to persuade the leaders of why people from very far away, from a foreign country, had brought the project to pay attention to our people; asking ‘Why don’t you offer them help to change ‘lives’?’ (Int. 6, transcript, p. 30).

The quotation reveals a hierarchical relationship between the WU and the local leaders: representatives of the People’s Committee and the Party. In her utterance the chair of the district WU hints that the WU lacked the authority to start the project with a foreign partner without the acceptance of local leaders who exercised power over the WU. Interestingly, the chair of the district WU blames the local leaders and not the WU for neglecting the needs of the single women.

Bản thân tôi cũng luôn cố gắng, sau đó chúng tôi phải thuyết phục các nhà lãnh đạo để họ tạo điều kiện cho mình làm việc.

I had first myself to sort out, and then we had to convince the leaders so that they would create the conditions for me to work. (Int. 6, transcript, p. 22).

The project officer recalls that during the course of several months of negotiations, he could see some sympathy shown to the single women by the local authorities. He suspects that some of these senior men ‘might have had some sort of personal relationship with these women’ (PO1, interview 24.5.2010). Not touching upon the possibility such relations between the single women and local leaders, Madame Van simply points out that most of the local leaders were men thereby suggesting a gender bias in their thinking. Even though the negotiation process with the local authorities ‘was more difficult’ than with the WU, taking several months to get the needed approval, Mr. Phuc stresses that when working in development ‘time is always relative’ and that, after all, the process was ‘not so difficult thanks to Madame [Van’s] support’ (PO1, interview 24.5.2010).

The data suggests that in addition to Madame Van’s own experiences of being the sole supporter of her son, thus linking her experiences with those of the other single women, two further factors helped Defi get her support. First, as the district WU had prior experiences of cooperation with foreign NGOs, Madame Van had participated in training sessions organized by INGOs and had been exposed to al-

ternative ways of thinking about development, a factor that helped her to be open to new ideas. She explains the impact as follows:

Vì vậy tôi cũng có một chút khác biệt so với những cán bộ ở hội phụ nữ.

Therefore, I was already slightly different from other WU officers (Int. 6, transcript, p. 23).

Second, in the process of negotiations over the new project management model, Defi offered the district WU a loan of ‘USD 10,000’¹¹⁷ that was not included in the original project plan. Considering the fact that in the project plan, signed by the vice-chair of the Vietnam Women’s Union in Hanoi and sent to the chair of a Defi board in May 1994, the total project expenditure for the years 1994-95 was estimated to be USD 10,500, an additional 10,000 dollars was a significant change in the budget. Even though the proposal from 1994 only covered Minh Son commune and not two communes as was the case in 1996 when the project actually started, the negotiated loan amount of USD 10,000 is high as compared to the actual expenditure during the first year of project implementation. The auditors’ report for 1996 lists the credit capital for Minh Son as USD 4,502 and USD 6,003 for the other project commune in the district. The auditors’ report further shows that the loan made to the district WU took roughly one third of the total budget of the year.

When asked about the ‘ten thousand’ lent to the district WU, Mr. Phuc first answers that he does not recall it, but later replies that maybe Defi offered the funding because it saw that the district WU was capable of running micro-credit projects independently. He further points out that at the very beginning Defi was prepared to support the capacity-building of the district WU, but when entering the field it became clear that the district WU was already experienced and skilful in running micro-credit projects, though, as it lacked resources, it could not fully utilise its capacity. Therefore an agreement was reached between Defi and the district WU whereby the district WU would use a one year loan¹¹⁸ of USD 10,000 to run its own micro-credit projects in communes of its own choice. In other words, in addition to the joint micro-credit projects funded by Defi and implemented by

117 The amount of loan capital given to the district WU was USD 10,005 according to the Income and Expenditure Statement of 1996 prepared by Ernst & Young auditors, dated 7 March 1997, while in Defi’s communication the exact amount given is cited as USD 10,200. However, in oral communication, the money was referred to as ‘the ten thousand’.

118 In practice, the district WU benefitted from the loan for much longer as the contract between the parties was renewed at the end of the loan period.

the WU in an additional commune besides Minh Son, the loan fund enabled the Union to run similar projects independently without such heavy reporting responsibilities as normally attached to aid projects.

The case of the ‘ten thousand’ is interesting as it adds to the picture. According to Madame Van, she decided to support Defi’s approach to work with the single women in Minh Son commune as she ‘felt sympathy’ for them. A similar narrative is provided by Defi’s first project officer, confirming that Madame Van played a crucial role in the process of negotiating space for the single women ‘as she understood [the single women’s situation]’. However, the Defi director offers an alternative perspective on what happened in the negotiation process and how the loan to the district WU entered the negotiation agenda. It is worth emphasizing that her narrative does not do away with the central role of the district WU in supporting Defi in the negotiations with the local leaders. According to the Defi director, all relevant parties, including the district WU, first rejected Defi’s proposal on the new management model in Minh Son commune.

[F]or many days we did negotiate about this single women’s programme. They said no! It cannot be done [...]. In the beginning we [negotiated] at the headquarters level. And, no, it was not possible. [...] But then we were negotiating at the same time [...] on the implementing level, which was the district Women’s Union. And they had suggested something. They had suggested that they would like to try on their own to manage a certain amount of money to be used for their micro-credit programme. They wanted that very much! So [...] we said, ‘OK we can try that. It’s a bit difficult for... towards our funding agency, but we could go for it and try to organize the funding for it,’ if they would agree also to have an experiment where we could work directly with the single women. (DD, interview 28.1.2004, transcript, p. 18)

The quotation discloses that the loan of USD 10,000 was the ‘price’ paid by Defi to encourage the needed support from the district WU indicating that the negotiation was a trade-off situation to which both Defi and the district WU had to contribute. Defi wanted to have a free hand to work directly with the single women, and the district WU wanted capital to strengthen its own micro-credit programme. It is important to note that from the perspective of the district WU, the new project management model may be understood as weakening its position as compared to the original plan on which the two parties already had a written pre-agreement. Giving up its management role came with a price. The chair of the district WU realised that Defi urgently needed her support for the revised project model and seized the opportunity. Similarly, Defi understood that the district WU

‘very much’ wanted to get access to loan capital that would come under its own authority. Thus, both parties benefitting from the arrangement, Defi agreed to offer the loan and, in addition, signed a one year agreement with the district WU on consultancy and training services to be provided to the single women’s BoM in bookkeeping, fund management and other tasks that would be part of the BoM’s responsibilities. Therefore, despite the fact that the WU lost its nominal position in the project management in Minh Son commune, the contract ensured the Union a certain authority over the BoM as its members had to be trained from the very basics.

According to Madame Van, the BoM was totally dependent on the support provided by the WU during the first year of the project implementation.

Mới đầu khi mà tất cả những vấn đề để đưa dự án này về với [huyện] là phải thông qua Hội phụ nữ Huyện (...), sau đó thì quá trình dự án này đưa vào và chúng tôi đã giúp cho những người phụ nữ để họ tự vươn lên, để họ tự quản lý được dự án của họ, vậy là chuyển giao cái đó và chúng tôi thấy rất là tốt bởi vì khi mà người phụ nữ người ta tự vươn lên, người ta tự làm chủ được thì nên để dự án cho họ quản lý và chúng tôi rất đồng tình với việc làm đó.

Initially the project was implemented by the (...) district Women’s Union, then in the process [of implementation of] the project we helped the women to increase [their capacity] so that they could manage their project themselves. So when the project management was handed over to them, we thought it was very good because then they had stretched themselves, could own the project, and manage it. We were very happy to reach that point. (Int. 6, transcript, p. 14)

The project documentation confirms the commitment of the district WU to supporting the BoM, even to a level that started to raise concerns among the POs. In a fax sent to the Defi director, the project officers announced that they had cancelled the consultancy contract between Defi and the province/district WUs starting from the beginning of the year:

[A]ccording to [...] our own experience the WU’s did not provide a good consultancy in [the other project commune] and the Minh Son [WU] did too much (Fax by PO1 and PO2, 25.8.1997).

The Defi POs therefore asked the BoM to draft a new contract that would not be between Defi and the WU but between the BoM and the district WU. Moreo-

ver, Defi encouraged the BoM to look beyond the WU for help and to ‘sign the contract directly with the service providers such as Agriculture, Health, etc. Department and / or WUs, for every training course / service provided by them’. The project officers emphasized that the revision of the support model was suggested in order to ‘empower the women / BoMs’. They conclude:

As they [BoM] are direct receivers of these services, they should have the right to spend the money the way they feel appropriate and at the right prices for the right quality of the received services as well (Fax by PO1 and PO2, 25.8.1997).

We see that the concern was not only about too much help from the WU, but in addition, the POs felt the time was appropriate to push the BoM towards more independent decision-making concerning the support they needed. They also strongly believed that working directly with the service providers would be cheaper. In reality this also meant that Defi had created a need for the BoM members to start engaging with training organizations and negotiating with them about the content and the prices of training services. Defi’s emphasis on empowering women through the independent space created within the micro-credit project was, according to the Defi director, partly based on the expressed will of the single women themselves:

[The single women] didn’t trust themselves at all [...]. The only thing they said very clearly was that they don’t trust the Women’s Union and they don’t trust [...] the other officials either. So we had to work from that point somehow. (DD, interview 28.1.2004).

Interestingly, an observed lack of trust between the single women and the WU convinced Defi that the single women should be provided a space in which they could both access small loans and manage their loan programme themselves. However, the Defi director emphasizes that regardless of the obvious lack of trust between the single women and the WU the single women did not ask for any changes to the basic project model:

Definitely [the single women] didn’t say that we can manage the money and do the reporting and run the programme. It’s just an attitude. It’s also a kind of possibility. (DD, interview 28.1.2004).

Even if the single women did not initially voice any requirements concerning the project management model, they soon indicated their wish for greater independence from the WU and during my first visit to the commune in June 1997, the chair of the BoM said that in the future they wanted to run the project without WU help (Field notes 3.7.1997). In 2010, when I conducted interviews with the single women, five of whom had participated in the project since the very beginning, none of them reported any knowledge of the changes made to the project management model by Defi in order to respond to their ‘attitude’ towards the WU and to create space for them outside WU structures. In fact, as the Defi project was the first in which the single women ever participated, they were ignorant of the challenges faced by Defi to pull the model through; they had assumed that as project beneficiaries it was normal to manage their own project under the guidance and supervision of the WU. I would argue that considering their lack of self-confidence at the time, it was beneficial that they were not fully aware that the tasks allocated to BoM members were generally considered to be jobs for experts.

7.3 The project as a ‘success’ and changes in single women’s agency

In this section, I analyze accounts of the project as a ‘success’, not in order to verify or refute narratives of the project as succeeding but, rather, because I am interested in meanings given to ‘success’ by my interviewees. Moreover, I explore how ‘success’ is related to the single women’s changed experiences and to skills acquired through the project that can be seen as relevant to the part played by single women in the commune.¹¹⁹ Again, I draw from Bakhtin’s theory of meaning construction in which time, space and experiences play a central role. Thus, I approach ‘success’ as a situated account coded by locally understood signs.

My first meeting (as a stakeholder carrying out informal monitoring) with BoM members of the single women’s savings and credit programme took place in early June 1997. It was a depressing encounter. Despite my attempts, I failed to engage in a discussion with the five single women present at our meeting. I hardly managed to get the women to reply to my simple questions concerning the money they had borrowed. Most of the time, there was an awkward silence around the table. It seemed to me that the women were afraid of speaking or even looking at me. Keeping their eyes fastened on their coarse, tanned hands did not help us

¹¹⁹ Meyers (2002) talks about ‘agentic skills’ including e.g. communication, interpersonal, analytical and self-nurturing skills as central to women’s self-determination and agency in a society. The notion of agentic skills partly overlaps my interests, but does not, in my view, sufficiently address the positive or negative role of ‘others’ in the development of such skills.

to connect. Confused by their worn appearance, I kept rephrasing my question on the use of loans as it occurred to me that they might not understand the word investment. My frustration with their silence crystallised in the words ‘phlegmatic women’ that I scribbled in my notebook while impatiently waiting for their replies (field notes 3.7.1997). Finally one of the single women timidly looked at one of three representative of the WU accompanying us in the meeting as if asking for permission to speak. As the WU officer nodded in agreement, I heard a quiet voice telling me that she had bought chicks. The reply did not do away with my confusion. The women’s behaviour remained a mystery to me as, at the time, I was not aware that the single women were not accustomed to speak in front of their ‘superiors’, not to mention to a stranger.

Despite the years that have passed since my first visit to the commune, my feelings at the time are still vividly in my mind: ‘Hopeless. If these are the BoM members, this project can never succeed!’ Yet seven years later, when I participated in a ceremony that marked the official handing over of Defi’s loan capital, the very same BoM members looked quite different. Now the single women were smiling and talking. In short, I saw women who were confident in themselves, despite the fact that the participants in the ceremony included WU cadres, local leaders and representatives of other project communes. However, even though I could observe the change, I did not quite understand the reasons behind it.

Similar accounts of the changes in the single women that I observed have been reported elsewhere (Phinney 2004). The description she offers of women’s behaviour in 1996 is strikingly similar to my first encounter a year later:

Even though all of the women had agreed to meet me prior to my interviewing them, they remained wary of my questions. I had been told that they feared I would pity them – pity their unmarried status and their poor living conditions. Though all pulled on a blouse over their work shirt in order to look more presentable for the foreigner, the dress shirts were well worn. Few of the women relaxed during the interview and only a couple looked me directly in the eye as they spoke; most looked down. [...] Most remained shy, quiet and reserved. (Phinney 2004).

Phinney returned to the commune in 2004 to talk to the same women she had met back in 1996. She was curious to investigate the possible effects on their lives of the women’s participation in the micro-credit program for single female-headed households. She reported several changes, including those in the women’s behaviour:

In contrast to my previous encounters, the women greeted me with enthusiasm and smiles. Not only were they happy to see me, they wanted to take me around the commune by themselves without the assistance of a Women's Union cadre. (Phinney 2004)

The report contrasts descriptions of women who had earlier 'looked down' and been shy and reserved with the enthusiastic and smiling women who actively engaged with the visiting researcher: a description of psychological change.

In addition to a change in the women's behaviour, there are references to their changed material condition. Phinney (2004) contrasts the women's 'worn shirts' with new blouses and the 'sparkling gold necklace' of one of them. Moreover, the description of women's material and social conditions in 1996 draws a picture of women and their children on the margins of society who 'lived under extremely difficult economic conditions':

They [...] seemed to live rather circumscribed lives, not having the means or confidence to venture far beyond their villages. They did not have regular access to mass media; newspapers were very difficult to come by; none of the women had a television to watch movies, the news, catch glimpses of foreign lands, let alone view the rapid changes taking place in their own country. (Phinney 2004)

The description from 2004, however, is no longer about lacking, but about having:

[The two women] were anxious to show me their new houses and for me to see the changes [one of them] had made to her house. When I went to [her] new house, she proudly pulled out a recent photo of her and her daughter taken at a professional photo shop (...). In the photo [she] looks incredibly content and her daughter's smile is wide. (Phinney 2004)

When describing the single women in 1996, Phinney paints a picture of poverty by listing what the women were lacking: no television, no access to mass media, and furthermore, no means nor confidence to 'venture far beyond their villages'. The lives of the single women were pictured as shaped by scarcity, deficiency and need, and marked by economic as well as social limits. However, the encounter in 2004 details signs of new wealth in the women's lives: a point is made of a new house, a photo, and a new mentality ('incredibly content'). Moreover, it was observed that the women were 'chattering non-stop', 'spoke [...] with confidence,

trust, and what appeared to be sincere pleasure' and 'most notably they seemed happy'.

The described change in the single women confirms observations made by myself, the Defi staff, the WU staff and the single women themselves. As one could easily challenge reported observations of those involved in the project, an outsider's perspective is of particular relevance. The single women had indeed changed to an extent that one could not help but notice it. In the following, I shall look into the changes reported by those involved with the project.

The narrative of economic success and rising recognition of the single women

'Money is power!', concluded a district WU staff member when pointing out that in order to empower women, their financial status first needed to be raised (field notes 2.7.1997). Thus, it is not a surprise that all but one interviewee said that the primary reason for their joining the micro-credit project was economic: access to loans that required only some pre-saving rather than collateral was named as the key inducement. Women reported that during the years of participating in the project they have taken annual loans of between VND 400,000 to 5 million. Moreover, when asked about the impact of the loans on their economic status, all the women claim that they significantly contributed to their household economies. However, only two of the women interviewed individually estimate that they now have an average (*bình thường*) income, while the rest say that they are still poor. Most women thus report that they have moved from the category of 'very poor' (*rất nghèo*) to 'poor' (*nghèo*), while some say that they have been able to climb from the poor or very poor categories to average. These estimations are subjective as no specific criteria were used for each group. Instead, I asked the women to choose between the groups they themselves thought they belonged to at the time they first joined the project, and the present. The claims of considerable economic impact made by interviewees are therefore intriguing. How significant is the rise from very poor to poor if we consider the general changes in people's incomes in Vietnam during the same time period? Perhaps, like the majority of Vietnamese people in a similar time period, the single women have merely been able to improve their living standards.

However, there are consistent views that the single women's economic success may be put down to the project. Even though I am wary of this success narrative, given my own involvement with the project as the representative of a donor, similar views have also been expressed by those not directly involved with the project.

Thus, when I asked about the single best outcome of the Defi's micro-credit project, the chair of the commune WU told me:

Kết quả thì thứ nhất là phát triển kinh tế gia đình, vay vốn để phát triển kinh tế.

The most important result is the development of household economy: the loans to develop this economy (Int. 9, transcript, p. 23).

The data suggests that it is reasonable to argue that part of the improvement in the women's economic situation can be directly linked to project funds. Often this was described in terms of causal relations. For example, the narrative line goes as follows: 'after getting the project loan, I bought piglets, raised and sold them with some profit, and, finally, used the money to upgrade my house'. Such a causal narrative is typical of development-speak when constructing project success, but is problematic as it may ignore impact of factors other than the project. For example, even in the case described above a woman may have used resources such as a bigger loan from the WU for the same purpose: upgrading her house. However, the outcome, the upgraded house, is still recognized as 'proof' of the project's economic success.¹²⁰

My analysis suggests that the widely shared narrative of the 'economic success' of the single women's micro-credit project does not so much build on *de facto* change in the economic situation of individual women as include references to the single women's group as a whole. Moreover, my data demonstrates that observers such as the WU pay special attention to contextually relevant signs of success that are meaningful in a particular socio-political environment. In fact, the chair of the commune WU does not merely state that the single women have been running their project successfully, but, in addition, she includes information on specific factors that are interpreted as signs of success in the local context. Her following utterance includes one of those signs:

Bản thân tôi vẫn thường trêu chị em là đến bản thân tôi cũng chẳng biết đồng Euro là như thế nào nhưng chị em lại có. Kể cả lãnh đạo xã cũng như các chị trong hội phụ

120 Here it is important to note that my (dual) role, if you like – as a representative of the project donor (in the eyes of some of the interviewees) and not just any researcher - may have encouraged interviewees to credit the improvement in their household economy to the project even if, in actual terms, the project loan played only a marginal role in e.g. upgrading the person's house. This may be understood both as a way to thank the donor for resources introduced by the project as well as an indirect suggestion for further support by demonstrating that the money distributed earlier had delivered concrete, positive outcomes.

nữ cũng chưa ai biết đến đồng euro là như thế nào nhưng chị em đã có một tài khoản euro [...].

I often tease [the single women] that even I don't know what a euro looks like. And, like members of the Women's Union, nor do commune leaders, but *you* have a euro bank account [...]. (Int. 9, transcript, p. 25).

The reference to the single women's euro account is here understood as a sign of the single women's success and in itself includes a chain of success signs. The fact that the single women's group has been able to open a euro account, which is out of the reach of most Vietnamese, constitutes their success and is based on the women's current status as 'business women'. That is, in 2008, the single women's group registered as a cooperative to secure their ownership of the loan funds of their micro-credit programme by becoming a legal entity.

In the fall of 2006, one of the BoM members of the group visited Finland with the Defi project officer. During the visit a discussion took place that was central to the group's future activities. I was also invited to the meeting and remember how the content took me by surprise. The BoM member informed the Defi director that the single women had come to the conclusion that they could no longer rely on agriculture as their main source of income. They had concluded that even if they now had land, in the future they might well lose it as more and more agricultural property was being taken away from farmers by the state to be allocated to industrial activities. She was referring to the economic development that was reaching their commune, and noting that the women who were part of the project wanted to prepare themselves for the changes. 'We have a group of women who would like to attend a sewing class,' she continued. She then turned to the Defi director to ask if the NGO could offer some support so that the BoM could organize a sewing course. During the meeting it was then agreed that the BoM would find a suitable instructor and a place in which the course could be organized. If the price of the training was reasonable, Defi would pay for it.

During the discussion ideas started to fly from the Defi director concerning commodities that could be manufactured for the Finnish market, one of which was silk sleeping bags which later became the principal product of the single women's cooperative. The entire discussion illustrated the new skills acquired by the single women's group: analytical skills (in identifying changes in their living environment that threatened their traditional livelihood of agriculture); problem solving skills (in the suggestion of sewing as an alternative income-generation activity); and communication skills in the sense suggested by Meyers (2002: 20),

that is, skills that enabled the single women to reap the benefit of the knowledge, advice and support of others. Meanwhile, material signs of success on the part of the original aid recipients include: establishing a cooperative, which made them business owners; producing silk sleeping bags for the Finnish market, which made them professional business women engaged in a foreign trade; and opening a euro bank account which, as we have seen, positively differentiated the single women from the rest of the people in the community.

Despite the fact that only 15 women out of around 180 women in the single women's micro-credit scheme participated in the first three-month sewing class and the number of women trained still remains relatively low, the cooperative's engagement with foreign export significantly contributed to views of the single women's capacity and success. The question, therefore, is not so much whether their business is profitable but rather, and how, the women's engagement with business activities, including the creation of new jobs (even if short term and temporary by nature), became important.

The chair of the commune WU recalls that thanks to the single women's business activities some BoM members had visited Da Nang and Hoi An in search of appropriate silk suppliers – both favourite destinations for domestic and foreign tourists in central Vietnam, and therefore subject to special attention by the community. She also reminds me that one BoM member had even visited Finland, saying:

Tôi thấy nó quan trọng vì từ trước đến giờ đến bản thân chúng tôi công tác cũng chưa được chuyến thăm như thế, chị em phụ nữ được như thế thì rất vinh dự, vinh hạnh cho các chị nói riêng và hội phụ nữ chúng tôi cũng rất tự hào có những người như thế.

I think these [trips] are important because even we who have been working a long time in the Women's Union haven't been able to visit such places. The [single] women have visited them and are thus very honoured and we in the Women's Union are also very proud to have people like that. (Int. 9, transcript, p. 24-25).

Travelling is interpreted as a sign of success as it is, like a euro account, beyond the reach of most people in the community, including the speaker. It should be noted that something not evident to those reading a transcript – rather than being present during the interview – is the conflict between what was said (the actual words) and her voice while saying it. In this case, despite positive phrases such as 'I often tease them' and 'we are proud of them', her voice did not simply com-

municate a shared happiness. Rather, I sensed a hint of envy, as she had not been invited to share those experiences.

In addition to markers directly related to the activities of the single women's cooperative that are interpreted as signs of their success, some single women run successful businesses of their own. Indeed, two women who are often cited have been able to establish a rather comfortable life thanks to the business activities they have developed. One of them has a big house attached to her ground-floor shop in which she sells anything from rice to hardware and pipes. When I visited her, she recalled how she first started a small business selling kittens saying that it was a relatively good business as there was no competition and she is good with animals. It becomes clear that she has business instinct that has helped her to rise from poverty. However, after also visiting the house of the other 'success story', it became evident that there are further important factors explaining their success besides their business skills or the project loans. Most importantly, both women have adult sons who support their mothers' business activities. Having an adult son also means that he will continue to live with his mother and contribute financially to the household economy and, when he marries, the daughter-in-law will also add to income-generation activities. For example, the daughter-in-law of one successful woman is known for her excellent sewing skills and for several years has earned extra income by making products ordered by the cooperative. Thus, having an adult son can potentially add two more pairs of hands to the household. On the other hand, having an adult daughter normally means that she is either expected to marry (creating expense for the single mother) or, if already married, living with her husband's family and contributing to their economic status rather than her mother's: in the long run, having a son or a daughter seems to be a central factor in the economic well-being of a single woman.

The importance of the child's sex is also recognized and talked about by the single women themselves. Women who only have a daughter have to face a life alone when getting old (e.g. Int. 5), while those with a son enjoy a growing family with a daughter-in-law and grandchildren. A mother of one daughter admitted to me that she is concerned about her future:

[...] mọi người cũng bảo là em nghĩ xa quá, bây giờ thì lo cho con ăn học đến lúc con ăn học xong thì lại lo cho con trưởng thành rồi mình lo cho thân già của mình thì cũng không biết thế nào. Bây giờ vẫn trẻ có sức khỏe thì đi gánh gạch, về sau con trưởng thành rồi mình già thì mình đi làm ô sin, làm người ở để lấy tiền nuôi cho cái thân già của mình sau này.

All [women] tell me that I think too far ahead; now I should only worry about the child's needs, then when she has grown up, I'll worry about an old me. Now I am still young and healthy so I carry bricks, later when my child has grown up and I am old, I'll work as a domestic worker who lives with a family to get money to feed me when I am old. (Int.1, transcript, p. 55)

During the past twenty years, an increasing number of rural women have moved to 'làm ô sin,' that is, to perform domestic work in better-off families (Nguyen Thi Nguyet Minh 2012; Nguyen 2015); one interviewee expects to find domestic work either in the district or in the city. As has become clear, the economic status of a single women's household is closely linked to the age and the sex of her child(ren). Women with adult sons are more likely to be able to benefit from loans as they have more working hands available to put capital to good use.¹²¹ Moreover, as stated by Le Thi (1994: 9) a 'lack of strong labour force' – that is, an adult male member in the family – contributes to household poverty. In other words, the presence of a son can be understood to compensate for the lack of a husband in a household. Furthermore, a daughter-in-law is also a significant contributor to the household economy and can provide substantial input to a home headed by a single woman by sharing her work, or through engagement with the cooperative's sewing and other income-generating activities.¹²²

Despite the differences in actual possibilities to improve their financial situations, often depending on the age and sex of their children, single women share the view that the economic success of the project is central to improving their status in the commune:

Từ hồi có dự án chị em làm kinh tế giỏi, phát triển được kinh tế thì tiếng nói của chị em sẽ quan trọng bấy nhiêu và được nhiều người biết đến.

121 In general, female-headed households (FHH) without a spouse present have a lower living standard than male-headed households, which can partly be explained by differences in cultivated area and access to loan capital (UNDP 2002). However, the study does not differentiate between FHHs based on the age and sex of their children which, as suggested by my study, is an important factor in explaining differences amongst the group of FHHs without a spouse present.

122 During one of my visits to the commune, a woman over 40 told me that she had tried to participate in a sewing class but due to her weakening eye sight she could not get the thread through the eye of the needle and so she gave it up. She said that sewing is better for younger women, such as daughters-in-law. A single mother with small children admitted that she would very much like to participate in the sewing course, but could not do so as there would be nobody to take care of her children during classes and, furthermore, she needs her full salary to feed them.

Since we have had the project, we have done well in economic terms; we have been able to develop our economies. Therefore, our voice will become important and reach many people. (Int. 5, transcript, p. 42).

To do well in economic terms is thus perceived as part of the solution in the women's empowerment agenda, as economic success adds to the weight of one's voice. It is important to note that the interviewee does not herself claim to have such voice within the community. The grammatical function of *sẽ* in the quotation above is to form a future tense of the verb that follows. Thus, the meaning of the utterance rather expresses the speaker's belief that economic success is a precondition for being heard in the social context in which she lives. It should be stressed that while the economic success attributed to the single women's group does not suggest that they have become wealthy, and even though several women are still poor compared with other households in the commune, they all report changed attitudes towards them. For example, the single women emphasise that prior to Defi's micro-credit project, they had difficulties in accessing loans as people did not trust their ability to pay them back. Thus, one of the project's economic successes has to do with showing other villagers as well as the local authorities that the single women are trustworthy in economic matters. One of the interviewees mentioned that now that her neighbours and relatives have seen she is capable of paying back her loans, she can also borrow from them if needed (Int. 5).¹²³

Paying back their project loans in time has not always been an easy task for the single women. My data suggests that sometimes women lend money to each other in order to help those facing difficulties in paying their monthly instalments:¹²⁴ a woman may take a loan of VND 5 million, use 3 million herself and lend the remaining 2 million to other women. However, one interviewee said that she would not take a loan bigger than she needed as forward-lending to someone else would be risky. Even if the onward borrower cannot repay her loan, the original borrower would still need to pay the entire amount at the due time, and my interviews demonstrate the single women's firm commitment to pay back their loans promptly.

One woman proudly pointed out that she often submits her money to the group

123 Interestingly, as found by Quoc Hoang Dinh et. al (2012: 354) strong ties to persons of higher social standing significantly reduce the amount of credit constraints. Therefore, we may assume that women's easier access to credits as reported by the interviewees is partly connected to their connection to the WU staff, a new relationship established by the project. Moreover, as shown by earlier studies, access to one source of capital is likely to increase access to another type of capital (ibid.).

124 Often micro-credit models are based on mutual liability and an assumption of solidarity among women. However, as a case study from South Africa illustrates, women's willingness to take risks for others is limited to long-term friendships meaning that the micro-credit group loan model can also promote tension among the women (Hietalahti 2013: 72).

leader one or two days before the deadline. This commitment to abide by the loan terms does not always come without a cost. One woman admitted to using the loans to cover her daughter's school fees instead of making investments as required by the loan regulations, and recalls the difficulties she faced in paying back the money after joining the project:

Bấy giờ kinh tế khó khăn, em đi làm nhưng không dám mua thức ăn hàng ngày, tiền phải để dành để trả tiền lãi, không có gì ăn [...].

My economic situation was very difficult, I went to work but still did not dare buy food every day, I needed to save the money to pay back the loan, didn't have anything to eat [...] (Int. 2, transcript, p. 14).

The single women's resilience in difficult situations and their determination to pay back what is owed should also be understood in terms of economic success. The demonstrated ability on the part of the women to repay their loans goes against people's expectations and is therefore understood as a sign of the project's economic success. Considering the low expectations of the people and commune authorities with regards the capacity of single women to manage their household economies, the simple fact that the loan project did not fail has also become a sign of success. The engagement of the single women's cooperative in foreign trade adds further to their social status, and individual members of the cooperative benefit from their membership as a result, even if they do not personally take part in the sewing activities. Furthermore, the success of individual women who play central roles in the project has favourably contributed to the image of the economic capacity of single women in general. Therefore, my data suggests that the single women's economic success is created through language in which meaning of 'success' is constructed through signs (e.g. the euro bank account) that are culturally meaningful 'proofs' of success in a particular socio-political context.

Reports on increased happiness and self-confidence

Some interviewees reported that in addition to getting access to the project loans, they joined the project to have a chance to meet other single women. As discussed in Chapter Five, many single women had experienced social isolation, or at least a scarcity of social contacts, prior to their participation in the project, due to moral judgments by other people or a lack of time, or both. For example, when asked about her relationship with other single women before the project, Trinh replied

that she knew some women in her village, but only had a closer relationship with one single mother with whom she shared land allocated to them by the commune authorities. Nowadays, with her daughter already married, Trinh lives alone in her small, simple house but enjoys friendships with other single women acquired through the project. As a long-term BoM member and a group leader, she now knows many single women in the commune. Women's friendships can be observed in their body language whenever they meet. Friends sit close together, and lean towards each other engaging in lively discussions. Despite the fact that Trinh is still poor, she says that her life has significantly improved thanks to the project. She has no debts and is now part of a group in which women share their joys as well as their worries, and encourage each other.

Compared with life prior to the project the changes are very clear from the perspective of women's social relationships. The following two descriptions, the first by a woman who has left her husband and the second by a single mother, finely crystallize the life of the single women prior to the project:

[...] *tôi chỉ đi làm ruộng rồi về nhà ngủ, chăm sóc con, không có quan hệ gì với ai.*

I only went out to do farming, returned home to sleep and to take care of my child. I didn't have any relations with anyone. (Int. 7, transcript, p. 7).

Lúc trước thì cứ nghĩ mình là người đàn bà như thế này ai người ta chơi bời, cũng bị xa lánh nhiều [...].

Before, people thought I was 'that sort of woman'; so I was ostracised (Int. 8, transcript, p. 6).

Lacking or even avoiding social relations with other villagers was a characteristic experience shared by the single women. Thus, the project that was organised around loan groups was also seen as an opportunity to meet other women, as noted by one interviewee:

Sau đó được đi giao lưu với các chỗ, cũng thấy hết mặc cảm mình là đơn thân đi.

Then [in the project] I got to meet people and I got rid of my complex of being a single woman (Int.8, transcript, p. 6).

The inferiority complex apparently felt by many of the women was also mentioned by a WU representative. The single women themselves recounted their experiences of being either looked down upon by other villagers or pitied by the people – a response they did not like. In addition, the lack of social relations was connected to the women’s concrete life situation. Being the only breadwinner in their households and having nobody to help them, women were confined to the combination of work and children, especially when the children were too small to be left alone.

When women talk about the possibility of socializing and being with other women, a Vietnamese word *vui* – literally ‘merry’ or ‘joyful’ – frequently appears in their utterances. In our conversations women have pointed out that the project is also *vui* because it has provided a context in which they can help each other when needed: when a woman is sick, for example. The group has, in some cases, taken up the role normally considered to belong to the family, and the *vui* of belonging in a peer group has significantly contributed to the women’s experienced well-being. One of the women describes the change brought to her life as follows:

Kinh tế khá hơn, tham gia vào dự án thì được tham gia, [...], đi họp và cũng vui hơn. Sống hơn trước nhiều.

Finances are better after joining the project [...]; I get to participate in meetings and also have more fun. I am much happier than before. (Int. 3, transcript, p. 18).

The extract underlines how access to the project loans has made her life ‘more tolerable / better’ in economic terms, but also ‘more fun’. She further explains that after the women have submitted the monthly instalments of their loans to the group leader, they ‘sit and chat with each other’ (Int. 3, transcript, p. 19). Women point out that they now have more friends – making their lives better than before. This new ‘joyfulness’ is evident to all those who met the same women at the beginning of their involvement with the project, including myself. The former chair of the district WU also emphasized that in addition to other benefits the project has brought to the single women, they are now happier. Even a single mother who does not have time to participate in the monthly meetings recognized the importance of a peer group, pointing out that merely knowing about other women in a similar life situation has been empowering:

Tại vì em thấy người ta bảo tham gia vào dự án là không phải một mình mình có hoàn cảnh như vậy mà là nhiều người người ta cũng như mình nên từ đó em không rụt rè như trước nữa.

Because I was asked to participate in the project I am not alone in my circumstances – there are a lot of people like me, so I am not as timid as I used to be (Int. 2, transcript, p. 27).

Thus, one of the central elements understood as part of the project's success has to do with the emotional well-being of the single women who are part of it: their sense of belonging and being members of a group rather than socially isolated, and their perceptions of their lives as now being 'happier' and 'a lot better' which is due to the changes in their social relations as much as to the improvements in their economic status.

Another key change reported by the interviewees is an increased self-confidence:

Tôi thấy điểm nổi bật nhất là tôi cảm thấy tự tin hơn.

I think that the most important thing of all is that I feel more confident about myself (Int. 7, transcript, p. 33).

There are a range of factors that have contributed to the women's self-confidence, but according to my interpretation of the data, the single most important one has been the project management model. Unlike in most micro-credit interventions, where project management is undertaken by a local, professional organization, in Minh Son commune the project management tasks were put in the hands of the recipients. This particular feature in the project management model, which derived from the NGO's changed understanding of the single women as agentive in their own right, may seem minor at the first sight but is, I argue, a key factor behind their increased self-confidence.

Project management tasks, including accounting, reporting, overall project supervision and response to, for example, the training needs of the project participants, were completely new areas of responsibilities for the selected BoM members, and required skills that they did not initially possess. As noted earlier, Defi contracted with the district WU to train and support BoM members in order to build the BoM's capacity and, according to one BoM member, it took them around three years before they felt confident with their responsibilities. However, the very fact that they persisted in learning tasks that are normally considered to require

expert knowledge significantly contributed to their self-confidence. Their teachers, obviously, did not give up either. The former chair of the district WU stresses the importance of the project management model when pointing out that ‘because the women manage their project themselves, they respect their achievements’ (Int. 6, transcript, p. 37). She also emphasizes that the project has further empowered its recipients because the results are their own doing, not those of the WU (Int. 6, transcript, p. 37).

Learning experiences (funded by Defi as a ‘project activity’) have reportedly increased women’s self-confidence and can also be seen as empowering. According to a BoM member her new self-confidence helps her to attend to her personal matters more effectively. For example, she has recently submitted her red book (a land use certificate) application that she ‘expects to get soon’, observing that earlier she did not know where to go to deal with the matter or how to get the needed information. Moreover, she admits that even asking for information felt too intimidating as she did not know if someone would be willing to help her or not. Now she has access to information and emphasizes that if she does not know something, she knows who to ask and she no longer feels anxiety when talking to people such as those in authority – no longer worrying whether her responses are right or wrong (Int. 5, transcript, p. 13-14).

It is important to note that learning is not limited to concrete skills such as accounting or reporting nor is it limited to the BoM members. My data indicates that other project participants have also benefitted from increased access to a variety of information that did not reach them prior to instigation of the project, something which is mentioned by several interviewees. For example, women have participated in training courses organized by the project that include animal raising techniques, health care, nutrition, gender equality and food safety. According to the working principles of the project, training has been organized in cooperation with relevant local institutions: courses on agriculture and animal husbandry, for example, were run in cooperation with the Farmers Association (*Hội nông dân*). Even though similar courses are regularly organized by the Association, single women did not necessarily have access to them in the past:

Bây giờ đi tập huấn thì không thể cho toàn thôn đi tập huấn mà phải lựa chọn, nếu như mình không tham gia vào dự án thì mình chưa chắc đã được lựa chọn để đi tập huấn.

Now I go to the [agricultural extension] training sessions, but as it is impossible for all the villagers to attend, the participants were selected. If I had not participated in the project, I would not necessarily have been selected to take part. (Int. 7, transcript, p. 5)

The quotation reveals a local practice that was unfavourable for the single women as the selection process for the training offered by the Farmers Association downgraded their needs; in general, according to my informants, it is more often men than women who are invited to participate in government-funded training courses. New technologies or agricultural knowledge is expected to reach women through their husbands, which leaves single women uninformed.

Besides access to training courses which have increased the women's knowledge in various fields, the BoM members mention the development of their communication skills as one important benefit of the project, with one explaining that regular meetings with WU staff and the project officers have helped in this direction. Furthermore, BoM members have played a key role in channelling information to the loan groups through the loan group leaders, which has also taught communication skills that women felt they had previously lacked. In the local socio-political landscape, however, support from the WU has remained central in promoting the ideas of the BoM to the local leaders, as the WU has an established position within the political and administrative landscape in the commune and the district. Thus, when the single women asked the local leaders for a meeting room of their own, the BoM was backed up by the WU. In other instances of assistance, the chair of the commune WU has introduced the single women's cooperative to possible business partners as she has both wide connections and formal status in a well-known institution. This has enabled the cooperative to procure contracts to make school uniforms, for example, indicating that the help of the commune WU has greatly assisted the single women's cooperative to develop by opening doors that might otherwise have remained closed. On the other hand, the BoM has often had to balance its desire for independence with its dependency on the support of the WU (personal communication, name withheld, Hanoi, March 2013). The cooperation between the BoM and the WU has also encouraged the single mothers to take part in WU activities which is significant as it offers them access to information that they might otherwise lack, such as updates on government policies – though it should be noted that the most popular WU activities mentioned by the women were games of badminton usually played early in the morning or late in the evening next to the village cultural houses.

Some of the changes that may be seen in the degree of participation in events outside the project are caused by transformations in the women's life situations, rather than the project *per se*. In particular, my data suggests that single women with small children do not have the time or opportunity to participate in activities outside their homes as they are preoccupied with their infants and suffer from 'time poverty' (Lister 2003: 132). It is therefore women with older children who

tend to be more active in social events in general. However, interviewees emphasized that they would have been unlikely to take part in social events in their villages without the increased self-confidence that they see as an outcome of the project.

Increased self-confidence, like the knowledge from the training courses commented on above, is also reported to have reached women outside the BoM. In addition, the BoM order newspapers for the loan groups to read together in order to facilitate knowledge dissemination to the project participants. Women have also developed their communication skills during the monthly group meetings while sitting and talking with other group members. It is also important to note that project participants tend to identify themselves with the BoM members who have become role models for them; the fact that the BoM members have learnt how to run the loan project efficiently signals to the other single women that they also have the capacity to learn new things and further improve their lives. Many of them share in the pride of the achievements of the loan project and the cooperative managed by their peers. Just as the economic success of some of the single mothers has positively contributed to the image of single women in general, success in the management of the loan fund and the cooperative by the BoM is positively mirrored in the self-image of participants outside the BoM, while the members of the BoM recognize their position as role models and take their tasks seriously. However, as they become grandmothers, some of the BoM members have started to talk about handing their positions over to younger women in order to have more time for their grandchildren.

Recognition, space and single women's agency

As noted in Chapter Six, the revised project management model was based on Defi's understanding of single women as strong, independent agents in need of public recognition. Confronting the belief that the women selected for positions of responsibility lacked the necessary skills for the roles, Defi asserted trust in the women's capacity to learn and promised the district WU it would take full responsibility for the project's possible failure. The fact that the single women, who had had previously had low visibility in the commune's life despite their relatively high numbers, were now being paid special attention by a foreign NGO (itself in many ways seen as aligned with the Vietnamese state due to its alliance with the WU) sent an important message to the women as well as to the rest of the community. According to a representative of the WU, doing things differently was easier for a foreign organization than a local one as foreigners were not expected to con-

form exactly to local practices such as observing the hierarchies between different government offices that restricted, for example, what the WU could do, but that did not directly concern foreign organizations. In addition to having more space to experiment as a foreign NGO, Defi chose to work in a 'grey area'. That is, instead of following what was explicitly known as 'can be done', Defi followed a principle in which 'everything that is not explicitly forbidden can be done', thereby consciously tested the limits which, in the Minh Son commune, meant that it used its 'INGO space' to recognize single mothers. These new ways of seeing and treating them, which had arisen dialogically, disrupted local practices that saw them as confined to the margins of the community. The resulting heteroglossic account of single women and their acts constructed by Defi should be seen as part of a series of struggles within the project that are productive of new meanings given to the category of single women. However, even though Defi challenged monoglossic accounts of single women, the language of the project as a site of struggle over meanings should not be understood as inevitably moving towards unity.

The project also saw Vietnamese mass media recognize that the country has single women with special circumstances and special needs. Media attention escalated when the Vietnam Women's Museum, owned by the VWU, produced an exhibition featuring the single women in 2009, with funding from the Finnish embassy in Hanoi. The exhibition project presented photos taken by the single women themselves that depicted their everyday existence and the changes delivered by the loan programme: for the first time in their lives, they had the opportunity to select how their lives were shown to a wider audience, and to speak for themselves through the pictures they took. As the exhibition opened on International Women's day, all eighteen single women whose stories were presented in the exhibition were invited to an opening ceremony in Hanoi that had unexpectedly mobilized tens of local media representatives. When I later visited the exhibition myself, I was impressed by the openness that the women had exhibited in telling their stories. Later, on my return to the commune, we discussed their experience of the exhibition and they all seemed to agree that it had been a good one. One of the women reported that after the opening of the exhibition she had been invited onto a television programme, where she had told her story again. She further told me that now all the people in the village respected her for the choices she has made in her life and the good work she has done in raising her daughter. For her, the media attention following the exhibition was an empowering experience. When I asked some of the women if they had hesitated before participating in the exhibition project, they all convinced me that they had been happy to take part. 'Learning how to take photos was fun,' one of them commented but, more importantly, the women

claimed that they had wanted to use the opportunity to let people know about the difficulties they had faced as well as the improvements brought by the project and their participation in it.

The exhibition testifies to the single women's new self-confidence and their avowed agency. More confident in their heteroglossia, they no longer settle for a passive role in society, but are active in matters that they find important. This new agency was also manifested in the single women's actions within the loan project and cooperative. A project beneficiary who is normally a passive member of her loan group, rarely attending the monthly meetings, recounted how she changed her loan group because the group leader refused to give her as big a loan as other group members due to her poor economic situation; in the new one she was treated the same as the other women. In addition, she attended a meeting in which her old group leader was voted out of her post and a new group leader selected. When reporting these events, she appeared proud that she was able to change things instead of simply resigning herself to the situation as it was (Int. 2).

In spring 2012 a long-term chair of the BoM had to leave her position at the cooperative's annual meeting as the members had learned that she had taken a loan many times bigger than was accepted by the cooperative's loan regulations. Despite having faithfully and effectively served the BoM since 1996 and paying the loan back on time with due interest, the meeting attendees voted in another candidate as the new chair. Even though the change was somewhat dramatic, and remains a topic not readily discussed outside the group, it was a positive sign from the perspective of the project's desired outcome: an increase in women's agency. The event may clearly be used to demonstrate that the cooperative members are serious about the agreed rules and regulations, and that the women are both willing and capable of making decisions and taking action when the regulations are violated, even if the violation is committed by a person they respect. To date, however, most women still limit their active participation to the cooperative or use their newly acquired skills to attend to their own affairs. As one interviewee commented, she prefers to use her time for the cooperative as there she can truly have an impact on decisions, unlike in decision-making practices outside the cooperative, thereby indirectly suggesting that despite improvements in the position of single women, not all voices carry equal weight in local decision-making practices. Therefore, with limited time available, she finds it more useful to limit her participation to the sphere in which, according to her experiences, her voice is being heard (Int. 5).

7.4 Chapter Conclusions

In this chapter, I began by studying the meaning-construction processes concerned with the concept 'single women', and the 'success' narrative. My objective was to demonstrate how language used in development practice matters and may, in fact, initiate concrete changes in project activities. This finding adds to understandings of the complexities and contestations that occur within aid practice (Ferguson 1994; Li 2007; Mosse 2005). The analysis showed how reconceptualizing single women as strong and agentive altered Defi's understanding of the most appropriate forms of participation by the single women in the Minh Son savings and credit project. Notions of space and recognition became central to the NGO's process of re-evaluating its intervention model, with the notion of recognition being particularly understood to call for concrete action on the part of the NGO. To put it in Bakhtinian terms, Defi understood that how it acted towards the women would be relevant for their self-image as well as for how the rest of the community perceived them. Understood this way, the project became a space in which the single women could have alternative experiences of themselves through which they could come to see the potential they possessed. This goal was achieved by allocating the project management tasks – usually considered as belonging to the sphere of expert knowledge – to the recipients themselves instead of the WU as originally planned. Perceiving single women as strong (instead of 'marginalized') thus resulted in concrete changes in the NGO's intervention.

My analysis of the success narrative showed how the meanings of success are constructed in relation to the particular context in which the narratives are created. I pointed out that the narrative of financial success, for example, is not only based on actual changes in the women's economic status as a direct result of the project. Rather, I argued, the data shows how it is constructed through generalizations (the success of a few women being attributed to the group as a whole), on the one hand, and understood against the backdrop of expectations of failure, on the other. The simple fact that the activities are still ongoing and that the scheme is running smoothly and the women have proved capable of paying back their loans is already understood in terms of success due to contrary expectations prior to instigation of the project. Moreover, my data showed how success is constructed through signs that are contextual and culturally specific, such as a euro bank account that differentiates the single women's group from the rest of the community.

I have suggested in this chapter that increased self-confidence, as one outcome of the project that is reported by the interviewees, enables women to better manage their own lives by attending to issues that they formerly felt were out of their reach

(such as applying for the red book). The project's 'success' has also contributed to the women's position in their community partly because they are now better-off (not just in economic terms), but also because they are *seen* to be better-off. This has allowed women to become more active within the community though they still seem to prefer to limit their active participation to their peer cohort, that is, the group of single women. My data suggests that within these parameters, women are now involved in democratic decision-making practices such as the selection of the BoM members based on collectively agreed rules and working principles. They also work as a group to pursue and defend their interests within their community, to make strategic analyses and choices concerning their lives (e.g. by creating new income-generation activities) and thus, I conclude, their group agency has become an important way to participate in society in a manner that has been recognized by the commune leadership. Here we see how individual group members benefit from their joint identity as 'business women' even if the group of women directly engaged with the cooperative's business activities remains relatively limited in numbers. These findings have important implications for an inquiry into practicing grassroots democracy, as I shall discuss in the following chapter.

8 PARTICIPATION AND VILLAGE DEMOCRACY: COPING WITH MEANING AND HITTING HARD BOUNDARIES

This chapter explores reception and resistance to Defi's emphasis on, and utterances concerning, participation, which were disclosed by the NGO's Village Self-reliance and Development Intervention model, also referred to by Defi as the 'village democracy project'. It adds to the analysis of gender in the previous chapter and highlights the political context of the NGO's democratization agenda.

In Chapter Six I outlined the central position of the notion of participation in Defi's development thinking and how its meaning changed along with the NGO's deepening understanding of its working context. I followed the relatively technical interpretations of participation in the planning phase of the NGO's project in Vietnam as they were extended to project management tasks in Minh Son commune and, finally, with the identification of a lack of grassroots democracy, to entire households and communes. Participation was then understood in terms of the right to take part in local decision making in matters that directly impacted on people's lives, thereby linking the intervention model to the practice of democracy at a grassroots level. The meanings attributed by Defi to participation were all favourable, reflecting an enthusiasm for participation, and an understanding that it delivered positive changes to people's lives that became broadly salient in the 1990s.

Following Bakhtin's theories, in this chapter I again approach meanings as being constructed in the interplay of time, space and people's experiences, exploring those given to participation by local people as well as the views of local leaders concerning community involvement. The analysis is based on data collected in interviews with NGO staff, project partners and beneficiaries in the Xuan Dong commune in 2011 through which I study how people contextualize their earlier experiences of participating in decision making and how these experiences have impacted on their understanding of participation more generally. Furthermore, all parties are understood as being part of a development dialogue in which utterances and aid practice comprise a field of struggle over the meanings of participation and, indirectly, over the meanings of democracy at the local level. Understood through a Bakhtinian reading, development interventions geared towards stimulating village self-reliance aim at creating a space – an alternative micro-cosmos

– that facilitates participants’ re-evaluation of meanings relevant to Defi’s long term development objective: the promotion of democracy in villages. Finally, I examine how the understandings of ‘the people’ and the ‘local authorities’, central to the construction of the village democracy intervention, have been approached in project implementation and what this teaches us about democracy promotion in Vietnamese villages.

Analysis in this chapter draws from the following interviews conducted in two project villages in Hoa Binh province: the Defi director (2), NGO staff members (4), and in-depth, semi-structured stakeholder interviews (10). The interviewees represent the commune’s People’s Committee (1), the district and commune Women’s Unions (3), Village Development Boards (a group interview of three VDB members representing two VDBs: two VDB chairs and a male VDB member), and, finally, interviews with five project beneficiaries of which three were individual interviews (two men and one woman) and one that was with two women. The interviewed project beneficiaries lived in three different villages in Xuan Dong commune, Hoa Binh province. One of the interviewees lived in a village where Defi has a micro-credit project for women but where the Village Self-reliance and Development model had not been implemented. The interview took place due to a communication problem but proved useful as it showed how the interventions may be discussed along the lines of donor identification rather than intervention models.

Another of the interviewees was a male beneficiary of Defi’s savings and credit intervention in a village where the Village Self-reliance and Development model was also implemented. It was not my intention to include the views of a male beneficiary of a women’s micro-credit project in my data, as my plan at that stage was to limit interviews to those who have actively participated in the Village Self-reliance and Development Intervention. However, as the mistake was noticed only after the interview had started, I felt it better to go on with it as it would have been logistically difficult to leave the interviewee’s house as the *xe ôm*¹²⁵ drivers were scheduled to arrive two hours later. Moreover, the interviewee seemed happy to receive me and my research assistant, so I decided to see if the interview could be useful. In fact, it did prove important in two distinct ways: first, it became apparent that the interviewee was not clear about the activities undertaken by the village development board (VDB) in his village even though he actively participated at the village meetings, suggesting that VDB practices are less participatory than

125 A *xe ôm* (literally meaning a hug vehicle) is a motorcycle that is used as a local taxi. For some men, driving a *xe ôm* provides their principal income, while for others it supplements additional sources. In rural areas, a *xe ôm* is often the most convenient way to reach the villages as the roads can be too narrow for a car or in poor condition.

assumed by Defi;¹²⁶ and second, the interviewee seemed to consider it normal that he was the beneficiary of a savings and credit intervention that only offers loans to women. This reflected his idea of a family as united in a common goal, thus challenging the male-female distinction / juxtaposition typical of micro-credit projects targeting women.

The interviews were organized with the help of the district and commune WUs who contacted project beneficiaries based on the criterion that they represented different groups that have actively engaged with the Village Self-reliance and Development project: (a) Women's Union staff members; (b) the commune People's Committee, a significant actor in creating an enabling environment for the project (support in terms of non-interference being the minimum); (c) members of VDBs representing project management and coordination; and finally, (d) both male and female project beneficiaries. Members of two VDBs were interviewed at the same time, a discussion that was dominated by the male VDB chair, while the female VDB chair only spoke when specifically addressed. This reflected the multiple hierarchies involved: an age hierarchy (the male VDB chair being older than the female chair); gender hierarchies; and socio-political hierarchies (the male VDB chair representing the Party, the leading organization in Vietnamese society). The commune WU was also asked to consider and arrange the logistics of the interviews to ensure that the distances between the interviewees' houses were not too great. Given the time limitations (a total of three interview trips to province of Hoa Binh, each of 2-3 days), I finally decided to concentrate all interviews in one commune instead of two, as originally planned. Even though it might have been useful to collect data from two communes for comparison purposes, one was so far from the town of Hoa Binh where I stayed overnight that time spent travelling would have curtailed the possible number of interviews.

In addition to semi-structured interviews conducted in the project district in 2011, I returned to Vietnam early in 2013 to observe internal reviews of the intervention model in three other provinces in northern parts of Vietnam. This two week trip, accompanied by the Defi director, offered me an opportunity to follow current discussions of the intervention and to see how they varied depending on the local context. It also enabled me to further contextualize information provided in these sessions, and views presented earlier by the Defi staff. The sessions proved valuable for my understanding of the role of context in aid interventions as they manifested the diversity among villages, on the one hand, and the similari-

126 As stated in the Mid-term Evaluation of the Village Self-reliance and Development Intervention in Vietnam, 2007-2012, 'application of a participatory approach has often been cut short' (Nguyen Thi Oanh and Nguyen Thanh Mai, November 2013), which may explain why villagers are not necessarily aware of VDB activities in their villages.

ties of challenges in project implementation on the other, despite the time span of several years between them. Out of the five provinces (Hoa Binh, Bac Giang, Phu Tho, Hung Yen and Ha Tay¹²⁷) in which village democracy projects are now implemented, I attended internal reviews in the provinces of Ha Tay and Bac Giang, besides the one held in Hoa Binh province, where discussions varied in terms of content but, perhaps more importantly, in terms of discussants. Both of these factors lend support to a criticism of aid practice as drawing upon an ‘assumption of universalism’ (Fforde 2009), further highlighting the need to understand differences across contexts even in geographically limited areas. Besides the interviews and my personal observations, analysis in this chapter also draws on project documentation and the correspondence between the Defi director and NGO staff.

8.1 The meanings of participation, space and grassroots democracy in the NGO’s utterances: Colliding with local ‘realities’

As already discussed, the Village Self-reliance and Development Intervention model was designed by Defi’s two Vietnamese project officers, Mr. Phuc and Ms. Hien. The model was inspired by CIDSE’s community-based health care project, implemented in the province of Thai Nguyen (see CIDSE 1999). One of the identified strengths of the community-based development model was ‘the combination of external intervention with internal, local effort’ (Defi 2002: 3). Taking into account CIDSE’s experiences, Defi’s project officers developed an intervention model that aimed to encourage self-reliance and active participation among local people in order to promote grassroots democracy (Defi 2002: 4).

According to Mr. Phuc, ‘creating space was the key’ when developing the new intervention model with Ms. Hien.

Frankly speaking, I don’t think I did anything or even [Ms. Hien]. We went there to defend space! (PO1, interview 24.5.2010)

He further explains that creating space for people’s participation was important as often aid workers have ‘good intentions, but assumptions are not well founded’ which ‘may lead activities [in the] wrong way’ (PO1, interview 24.5.2010). He emphasizes that ‘often we make assumptions that we [are sure about], but often we don’t know’ (ibid.). Understanding the limits of knowing what the people wanted guided the work of the NGO’s project officers. In addition, Mr. Phuc stressed that

127 The province of Ha Tay was merged with the city of Hanoi in August 2008.

in an aid context, there is only a fine line between suggesting something and imposing it: 'Though we talk about participation, we may impose!' (PO1, interview 24.5.2010). In particular, he argues that 'our women normally tend to agree with us and they never say, you impose.' Thus, if the notion of participation is taken seriously, he concluded, Defi should only defend space in which people can define their own development problems and find ways to tackle them. In this conceptualization, the 'project just provides [the] mechanism' (PO1, interview 24.5.2010) for the people to act within the space created by the intervention model.

In Mr. Phuc's understanding, participation was closely linked with the notion of space, emphasizing that, without a space outside existing structures, participation will likely remain nominal. Therefore, Defi was committed to combine participation with concrete decision-making power. Ms. Hien further explained the NGO's working approach as follows:

We have to [...] let [people] decide. We only suggest. We make them understand the principle. [...] So with such a kind of dialogue, we make people understand and they themselves decide on all the regulations. [...] We also want [...] them to decide on how much they should spend and on what they should spend. We keep the right to make final approval, but only when the thing has been clear and [...] understood by people. We should not force them. Even though we still [laughing] have a [...] rod in our hand, but we have to make them convinced before we decide. (PO2, interview 14.4.2004, transcript p. 14)

We may see one of Defi's main working principles in this extract: people should be able to decide, but only when they have an understanding of what their decisions mean in practice. Therefore, the project officers spent a lot of time explaining project objectives to the people, and negotiating with regards their proposals concerning project regulations and activities as well as Defi's principles when supporting different types of activities. The NGO made a distinction between the use of its donor power to 'impose' or 'force', on the one hand, and to 'convince' and 'make people understand' the outcomes of suggested activities or project regulations, on the other. In other words, they promoted a dialogical relationship with relevant actors using language as the mode of exchange, backed up by acts. Spending time making people understand was seen as essential in order to abide by development thinking that emphasized not just participation but also sustainability. Defi thus used its donor position to make the VDBs work within the frame of its development thinking and tried to find a balance between its ideas of space for independent decision making by the people, and the sustainability of aid inter-

ventions, following a working principle in which it ‘agree[d] on the approach and [...] approve[d] the budget’ while ‘what to do [was] the decision of the beneficiaries, the local people’ (PO2, interview 14.4.2004, transcript p. 4).

As noted earlier, in Defi’s internal discussions the Village Self-reliance and Development Intervention is often referred to as the village democracy project, thus emphasizing the connection perceived by the NGO between people’s active participation and practicing democracy at the local level. In the words of the Defi director: ‘when I talk about democracy, I talk about people’s participation – to put it simply’ (DD, interview 28.1. 2004, transcript, p. 14). Thus, in her view, a key aspect of democracy is ‘how I am able to take part in decisions that affect my life’ (DD, interview 28.1. 2004, transcript, p. 15), and here participation is seen as a precondition for democracy. She further points out that her understanding of participation is based on a Western idea of an individual ‘that is not such a common approach in Vietnam’ (DD, interview 28.1. 2004, transcript, p. 14). Therefore, she has promoted a rights-based approach to participation, while noting that, according to her understanding, this was not common in the project communes.

Even though Defi’s project officers share a view that participation is an important aspect of local democracy, they tend to conceptualize people’s participation more from the community’s point of view, pointing out that the Village Self-reliance and Development model is an important tool for creating space for the people rather than assisting individual decision making, thereby treating individuals within a framework of group membership, on the assumption of shared group interests. Their utterances on grassroots democracy, therefore, are not so much constructed around the idea of every individual’s right to make decisions, but rather they are rooted in a view of the people’s right to be heard, claiming, at the same time, that the voice of the people is not, in fact, sufficiently heard by local authorities. The following comments by poor villagers of Tra Vinh province finely illustrate the challenges faced by NGOs:

I am glad I was invited to a meeting today, but do we get to talk? Usually we do not get to talk; we just come and listen to them [local authorities] talk.

They [local authorities] don’t invite me to meetings, but they invite me to public works. (quoted in Quoyeser 2000: 3)

This is exactly what Defi tried to change; it believed that by setting an example of people’s participation and by demonstrating the concrete outcomes that the approach can deliver, they could eventually change the mindset of local authorities as well as the WU. Democracy was therefore understood as something to be

practiced in everyday decisions in the villages while participation was conceptualized as a positive thing that could deliver solid benefits for the people and the community. As pointed out in Chapter Six, positive accounts of participatory development were common in the literature of the 1990s but, when entering the communes, Defi's project officers soon realized that their ideas of participation and self-reliance failed to attract the people who were 'quite reluctant about that kind of project' (PO2, interview 14.4.2004, transcript, p. 9).

According to the project officer, '[...] people often expect a lot from us. They thought that we would bring some [...] material support [...], assistance.' (PO2, interview 14.4.2004, transcript, p. 9) Despite the fact that Defi selected potential project villages from among those that did not have other foreign-funded projects it still experienced local expectations of material support. As negotiations were first held with local leadership and the WU – actors who had learned about foreign support in other communes – their understanding of aid practices may have played a role in creating those expectations.

Donors were not unaware of potential problems. During the 1980s, aid to Vietnam from Finland and Sweden (all other Western countries terminated their aid programs in the late 1970s) often took the form of single shipments of material support. For example, the NGO that I later joined had sent high quality Finnish paper for children's books, and hospital equipment. During a trip to Vietnam by 'my' NGO's representatives (of whom I was a member) in 1991 it turned out that the paper was nowhere to be found and the equipment was being used in a hospital in Hanoi serving high-ranking party officials and their family members (a fact of which the hosts were seemingly proud and about which they expected us to be similarly pleased). Understanding the problems involved in such aid, my NGO stopped sending material support to Vietnam.

8.2 Interpretations of, and resistance to, participation among the people: the role of state practices

This section to some extent goes over ground already covered, but from a different perspective. Whilst Chapter Seven reported the views that the project had strongly positive effects on the well-being of single mothers, here we look at whether the Village Self-reliance and Development project was associated with similarly favourable views of its effects on aspects of democratization, participation and governance. The accounts of this are more controversial.

People's reluctance to participate in the Village Self-reliance and Management model was not only explained in terms of aid practice.¹²⁸ My data points to state practices and people's experiences of them as a key factor in shaping people's understanding of participation in development projects. Drawing from the perspectives of the WU, local authorities and Defi, I first analyze how people's (unwelcome) behaviour was understood as deriving from their earlier experiences and, second, explore Defi's strategy for overcoming the difficulties faced in project implementation.

Defi's project officer explained people's reluctance to participate in the project by top-down state development practices that treated people as objects of state support rather than as active participants in local development: 'people have experienced a long time of being subsidized and guided and managed from the central level. So they are very inactive and dependent (PO2, interview 14.4.2004, transcript, p. 6). But a lack of active involvement, in the NGO's view, was not limited to the people. The project officer argued that it was equally an attribute of its main partner, the WU:

[The local WUs] get used to the process whereby they are given the plans by their superior levels and they just implement them without knowing why they have to do this and what it is for (PO2, interview 14.4.2004, transcript, p. 2).

It was further argued in the NGO's 'Manual on the Establishment and Implementation of Self-management and Development in the Villages Model' that external interventions had impacted on the way local people saw the entire field of development as not being their concern.

Local people and local officials considered themselves as self-evident beneficiaries [of aid / assistance] and it was 'the others' responsibility' to help them. The participants would either be quite reluctant to participate in the project activities or they would request to be paid. (Nguyen Le Hoa 2003: 3)

The support 'from outside' the commune, whether channelled by international donors or government projects, left very little voice for the local people in terms of development content:

128 It is worth pointing out that the notion of participation became a subject of serious criticism within development research in early 2000's (see e.g. Cooke & Kothari 2001).

The problem with this approach was that in some cases the intervention was not very relevant to local conditions and therefore the impact and effects were very limited (Nguyen Le Hoa 2003: 3).

People's reluctance to participate in local development activities, interpreted in terms of their passiveness, was also brought up by other interviewees. Like the Defi project officer, a representative of the WU viewed people's inactiveness as an outcome of state practice. She also pointed out that the state's top-down management system showed inadequate interest in local needs and left little space for the people's voice in development interventions. She explained that the top-down approach was evident, for example, in training courses funded by the state:

[...] mình cũng thấy rằng nó có sự áp đặt từ trên xuống bởi vì cô cũng là một cán bộ kỹ thuật, muốn tập huấn cái gì là từ ở trên chỉ xuống là tôi tự xuống tập huấn chứ không biết lòng dân muốn hay không?

[...] I also feel that upper levels impose their decisions onto lower levels because I am also a technical officer; if I want to provide training on something usually this comes down to the lower level, but if I do it myself I do not know whether this is what the people want or not. (Int. 13, transcript, p. 10).

A similar view of the state's working practices was presented by another representative of the WU who emphasized that people in the commune had no prior experiences of the NGOs' working style in which people may sit together to discuss their development priorities and decide among themselves what activities should take place. Instead, she argued, people's prior experience of participation was limited to state interventions in which it was often a formality rather than a real possibility to have impact on a development agenda:

Còn cái kia là chính quyền quyết định làm mọi thứ. Chỉ xin ý kiến của nhân dân. Nhưng cái ý kiến đấy cũng chẳng mấy khi được xem xét.

But [in state practice] the government decides [upon all activities]. [The authorities] only ask people's opinions. But the views expressed by the people may not have any relevance when decisions are made. (Int. 12, transcript, p. 9)

The WU further pointed to poor outcomes of state interventions as another factor contributing to people's passiveness in development projects:

[...] có một số hỗ trợ của chính phủ cho nhân dân nhưng mà không đem lại hiệu quả kinh tế cao.

[...] there were some government support [programmes] for the people, but they did not bring much economic result. (Int. 12, transcript, p. 2)

As state-led development projects had brought only limited benefits to the people, they did not show an interest in Defi's intervention either. This point becomes relevant when considering the fact that the NGO entered the commune accompanied by commune authorities. This, most likely, made it difficult for the people to see Defi and the state as having differing agendas, especially in a situation where they did not have prior experience of foreign NGOs. Thus, when Defi entered the commune with the WU and local authorities talking about participation in development, it did ring bells in the people's minds, but those bells did not encourage them to join the project as they 'disbelieved'.

The Defi director admits that it took her some time before she realized that participation meant something very different to the local people than it meant to her.

I've come across many times the idea that people think that participation is [...] you know... forced, almost [...] half-forced labour¹²⁹ you have to contribute for some government project or whatever. So people participate when they are told [laughing] that they [are to] use [...] some days for this and that project. (DD, interview 28.1.2004, transcript, p. 15)

Mr. Hung, the VDB chair of one of the two pilot villages in the commune, confirmed that villagers used to be passive which, in his understanding, was connected to their experiences of participating in village meetings. In particular, he referred to people's experiences of the selection of local development activities in which people's voices did not count, and therefore, many chose not to attend the meetings. According to Defi's project officer the situation was not helped by the fact that village leaders used to be nominated by commune authorities and not selected by the people.¹³⁰ Thus, village leadership was a political nomination and the tasks were allocated by the upper levels of the state apparatus. The project officer explained the role of the village leader as follows:

129 Rigg (1999: 593) has interestingly pointed out a similar interpretation of 'participation' as 'forced labour' e.g. in Thailand.

130 According to the data collected in the interviews, this practice has changed at least in some villages. E.g. in the Defi pilot village selected for this study, a new village leader was recently selected by the villagers from three (male) candidates using a secret ballot.

[Village leaders] have to explain to their villagers all the policies, regulations and guidance from their upper levels. And when there are some requirements from the upper level to implement something, [...] they have to take the lead [...]. But they are only the implementers. (PO2, interview 14.4.2004, transcript, p. 4)

Village leaders, therefore, were the link between commune leaders and the villagers, but their being dependent on maintaining the trust of commune leaders created an upward form of accountability. In reality, things could be even more complicated. For example, village leaders often felt caught in a difficult situation as they occupied positions at the interface between the local population and higher levels in the Party / state (Fforde 1989). On the one hand, they were expected to serve the state and implement orders from the upper levels of state management. On the other hand, however, village leaders sometimes prefer to prioritize village needs as they may feel most loyal to their fellow villagers. Defi and WU representatives shared the view that the state's top-down management structures lacked appropriate mechanisms for listening to the people. It is worth pointing out here that WU staff spoke of state practices critically, as if they located themselves outside the state box; at the very least they did not appear to regard their own practices as state practices even though similar top-down management structures prevail within the WU.

A representative of the commune People's Committee suggested that the people, at first, did not want to take part in Defi's project as they had no prior knowledge of it and feared that by contributing to it they would risk losing their money. Moreover, he suggested, the people could not be sure that Defi would stay in the commune long enough to bring them any benefits (Int. 11). However, his utterances revealed the difficulties commune authorities had faced in following and implementing state policies – communicating, in fact, similar behaviour by the people outside of the Defi project. He confirmed that many local state projects were delayed as it was difficult for local authorities to mobilize the needed support from the people. According to him, 1996 and 1997 were especially difficult for the commune leaders due to the reluctance of the people to contribute to the state's development activities:

[...] mà anh em lãnh đạo chúng tôi cũng cảm thấy cực kỳ vất vả ở chỗ là việc để hoàn thành nghĩa vụ đối với nhà nước, hoàn thành trách nhiệm nhà nước đã giao, tuy nhiên việc thực hiện không được như mong muốn của mình cũng do mang tính chất của thời bao cấp có nghĩa là chỉ trông chờ vào người ta cho mình chứ không nghĩ đến việc để nhà nước hỗ trợ và nhân dân cùng thực hiện là không có.

[...] we in the [commune] leadership felt it extremely difficult to work in order to finish our obligations to the state, to complete the tasks allocated by the state; we could not carry them out. [...] People only expected to get, but they didn't want to do anything; they only waited for state support and nobody thought of the state helping and the people participating in implementation, not at all. (Int. 11, transcript, p. 27).

The timing of these difficulties as described by the commune leader is important as it coincides with the period Defi first entered the commune. The interviewee from the commune PC thus revealed that people's passiveness was a widespread phenomenon in the commune at the time and not specific to their response to Defi's intervention. Interestingly, the interviewee explains people's reluctance to participate in terms of their 'insufficient knowledge' rather than as an outcome of the state's own development practices. This can be seen as a cognitive strategy in which blame for the unsuccessful implementation of state projects is easier to apportion to the people rather than reflecting one's own role in the process. Moreover, as pointed out by McHale (2004: 34), the Vietnamese elite 'has often belittled the common man and woman, sometimes thinking of them as "dull-witted" or lacking intelligence' and, therefore, references concerning the people's 'insufficient knowledge' found in utterances by the commune People's Committee simply continue this tradition.

Here we see a significant difference between the views expressed by the WU and those of the commune's PC representative. It has been pointed out elsewhere that Vietnamese villagers commonly use indirect means such as minimising their involvement to oppose particular leaders, or the requirements of local leaders, when it comes to activities deemed unfair or wrong (Kerkvliet 2005: 20-21). In my understanding, the passiveness reported by Defi, the WU and the commune PC is best understood as a form of active resistance on the part of the people towards state practices they had encountered. In Bakhtinian terms, people's non-acts were a reply within a dialogue between the state, the people and, consequently, Defi.

One of Defi's project officers also indicated that the requirement 'to follow state policies' was a factor causing people's passiveness, arguing that doing new things or expressing one's ideas were easily interpreted as 'not following' and considered politically risky. According to another project officer, due to the requirements to conform people did not feel confident in expressing their ideas and suggestions in public:

[...] if they ha[d] a very [...] advanced idea, they would not dare to share [it] if this [did] not follow some [...] existing routines. They would not dare to [...] share with people or take the initiative. (PO2, interview 14.4.2004, transcript, p. 6)

Kerkvliet (2005: 20) has also noted that in public meetings ‘only occasionally did ordinary villagers directly challenge authorities’: remaining silent rather than expressing alternative views or ideas in public meetings is arguably a way to avoid open confrontations in a politically restrictive, monoglossic environment.

Ultimately, the data suggests that the local people had experienced state practices in which development activities were designed by the upper levels of the state apparatus; they had not had any voice in decision making in local development and their roles were mostly limited to contributing labour or money. Looking at such practices from the people’s point of view, their passiveness can be understood as a form of resistance vis-à-vis state machinery. This, as I have shown, contradicted the perspective of state officials (here the commune PC) who perceived people as rather lacking knowledge and educational competence:¹³¹ the two factors used by the authorities to explain the hardships they faced in their attempts to mobilize the people – a position typical of Vietnamese elite (McHale 2004).

People’s passiveness or reluctance to contribute to state projects can also be understood as a response to widespread corruption within Vietnamese society. As pointed out in Chapter Two, one pronounced reason for the promulgation of the GDD was to fight corrupt practices in the communes. My data does not directly address the issue of corruption, but unless we choose to believe that the NGO’s project communes differ from the rest of the society – that is, that they are corruption-free zones – there is reason to assume that people’s reluctance to participate in, and contribute to, state projects was partly linked to the prevalence of corruption and not just to the content of development agendas or their claimed lack of knowledge.¹³² Corruption would also explain unfinished state projects or the poor results mentioned by the WU as well as the commune PC.

Adhering to my Bakhtinian framework, I have analyzed how the meaning of participation in Defi’s understanding was rooted in development discourses at the time while, for the people in the project commune, the meaning of participation seemed heavily influenced by their (negative) experiences of development practices by the

131 Similar phenomena wherein the state bureaucracy sees the rural poor as ‘ignorant and needing guidance’ in an authoritarian political environment has been reported by Holloway (1989, in Cleary 1997: 16).

132 Interestingly, according to a study by the World Bank (2012: 30), corruption was seen as the most serious issue for Vietnam by public officials (44% of the respondents) and it ranked third among citizens – preceded only by the problems of living costs and traffic accidents.

state, reinforcing the premise that meanings are always contextual. According to the Defi director's understanding, the main difference between her view of participation and 'the local view' was that she emphasized participation as the right of every individual while, in the local context, participation as a responsibility was emphasized. Understanding participation as an obligation is also evident in practices that were later developed in the commune to ensure implementation of the Grassroots Democracy Decree (GDD). According to one interviewee, the GDD, which stressed people's participation, has, for example, meant that households that do not attend village meetings may be fined or that such families cannot receive certification as a happy / cultural family (*Gia đình văn hoá*) from the authorities (Int. 13).

In the following section, I explore how Defi worked in the context where participation was understood as the obligation of a citizen towards the state rather than seeing participation as the right of every individual or a group of people actively to make decisions concerning issues directly affecting their lives.

The experienced gap between words and actions, and the challenge of building trust

My interview data suggests that Defi faced a lack of trust when entering the commune; it first needed, however, to convince the local authorities of its participatory approach. In this task the GDD – issued the year after the introduction of the Village Self-reliance and Development model to the district, and emphasizing the role of people's participation in local development – became an important framework in which to promote and defend Defi's participatory intervention model. In fact, the NGO went as far as claiming that the model was, in fact, a way to implement the GDD. This view, as noted in Chapter Six, was partly based on the NGO's confusion about the content of the GDD and helped by the authorities' limited understanding of how to go about implementing it.

However, the GDD did not necessarily help the NGO to convince the people of the value of participation as they still lacked trust in it; my data suggests that the meaning of participation in people's minds continued to be guided by the notion of obligation and they found it difficult to understand the kind of participation Defi was offering them. Moreover, even when the NGO's approach was thoroughly explained to them, people had difficulties believing in it. A project officer pointed out that the gap between the state rhetoric of participation and actual state practice was a major contributing factor:

[...] all Vietnamese people know about [the government slogan] ‘people know, people discuss and people decide’. But they also experienced that it didn’t work in reality and they get tired listening to that one [...] and they disbelieve. (PO2, interview 14.4.2004).

Interestingly, Defi’s project officer, who replaced Ms. Hien when she left to continue her studies abroad, described very similar experiences when entering a new project area some ten years after the NGO’s first Village Self-reliance and Development pilot programme had started. She emphasized that even after a commune and a village had made the decision to participate in the project, it did not mean that they would actually do anything.

[...] at the beginning people did not trust [the approach]. When we requested something they did not [normally do], they ignored [the project]. (PO3, 6.3.2013).

A similar view was also expressed by a representative of the WU. She pointed out that should the model be replicated, it would be relatively easy in the same commune as people would understand its benefits, but if expanded to other areas the NGO might face the same difficulties as before. This suggests the continuity of state-led development practices that leave little space for the people to have a say and / or the absence of encouraging experiences of participatory development.

In order to overcome people’s distrust Defi chose to spend more time than originally planned in explaining its development approach thoroughly to allow people time to think. Before taking any further action in project implementation, the project officer continued the dialogue with local authorities and the people so as to convince them to give the model a chance. One of Defi’s long-term project officers admits that when expanding the model to new areas in the latter part of the 2000s, she was tempted to leave the commune as she was tired of trying to encourage the people to take action when the people were ‘not happy to see me’:

I wanted to give up, but [the project director] convinced me that you should keep going back. So I did. [...] You see, for two years nothing happened. But finally people organized themselves. (PO3, 6.3.2013).

In this particular case, the commune was in the midst of significant changes in land allocation, the main resource of rural farmers, which had increased tension among the villagers. According to the project officer, things started to move forward only when the people selected a new VDB chair. This process alone sug-

gests a positive change in people's behaviour. Instead of doing nothing, action was taken to change an unsatisfactory situation in order to move forward.

When entering a new commune, Defi faced a situation in which it sought to win the people's trust through repeated visits to the commune and the villages so as to encourage them to grasp the opportunity offered by the project. This involved the need to change people's attitude towards outside support, to gain their trust as well as to facilitate processes in which participation in the development context would gain new content in the people's minds. The project officer who was most involved in the negotiation processes required to set up the model in the pilot communes emphasized that an approach where outside financial support is minimized and people's own role maximised is not particularly appealing to the people as it seems to offer very little concrete support. Moreover, the project officer argued that even when the people are persuaded to experiment, the game is not over. The next step is always to develop concrete practices in which the promise of participation as advocated by the NGO becomes real in the people's experience.

[...] it's very time consuming [...] to convince the people that it's worthwhile to try. Because people are more interested in something more practical.

The bottom-up approach is very time consuming. [...] It's costly at the beginning, but it's much more effective if we consider the whole. [...] If [people] have been used to the top down [...] approach, you cannot change them by giving them training [...]. To absorb, they have to learn step by step. [...] Changing attitudes already takes time, but from the attitude change to the practice change is also a big step. (PO2, interview 14.4.2004).

Changing people's attitudes was thus seen as the first step, to be followed by changes in practice. In other words, Defi had to develop awareness that aid practice needed to confirm the oral communication of what it represented. As Defi was, by then, aware of the contextual challenges in terms of meanings given to participation by the people and the local leaders, development aid practice became a space that aimed at facilitating the re-evaluation of the meaning of participation. In order to succeed, the intervention model had to offer alternative experiences of participation so as to change the meanings given to the word. This is consistent with the problems caused by corruption, which potentially raised and complicated the issue of trust.

8.3 Local authorities - a problem and a solution

Despite the fact that Defi saw local authorities as part of the development problem – as discussed in Chapter Six – the NGO understood that it needed the support of the local leaders to be able to work with the people in the villages. Therefore, Defi first attempted to convince the authorities of the benefits their intervention model could bring to the villages and the commune. To this end, the NGO organized a field trip to Thai Nguyen for the leaders of the district, commune and village levels to let them learn from CIDSE's experiences of a bottom-up development approach. Several concerns, however, remained in the leaders' minds even after the field visit. One of these, according to Defi, was the leaders' suspicion that the NGO aimed at constructing alternative power structures at the village level through the village development boards, thus compromising existing power structures. The NGO convinced the authorities that the purpose of the VDBs would not be to challenge existing leadership, but to coordinate activities that would benefit the whole village and, indirectly, the commune.

Despite the emphasis on local democracy in Defi's internal discourse regarding the intervention model, in their communications with local leaders the model was presented as a technical tool for enhancing local development – which was believed to be a concern of the local leadership. That is, development was mainly discussed in terms of concrete problems such as access to water or the condition of village roads, and solutions to these problems. The chosen technical approach to development can be understood as the NGO's strategy to avoid being labelled as political, which might have endangered the entire intervention model; people's participation as a right and its linkage to democratization as understood by the NGO were not openly discussed with local leaders except when the NGO had to defend its participatory approach. In those cases references were made to the GDD as it was not possible for the local leaders to argue against existing state policies. Therefore, even though Defi saw local authorities as an important part of the development problem, it knew that the same leaders were needed to create an enabling environment for implementing an intervention that aimed at enhancing grassroots democracy. As the model's approach was new – not just to the people, but also to the local authorities – there was a great deal of confusion about how to put it into practice. According to a WU interviewee, there was hesitation over taking a central role in the project as WU staff members had witnessed unsuccessful government projects in the commune and were afraid that they would not be able to use the funds effectively.

It is important to remember that even though Defi's official partner in the Village Self-reliance and Development model was the commune Poverty Reduction Committee (CPRC) consisting of local leaders, both the micro-credit interventions and the Village Self-reliance and Development model were supervised by the district WUs. In reality, the role of the WU was not limited to supervision; the responsibility of supporting the implementation of the Village Self-reliance and Development model also fell on their shoulders. A former chair of the district WU explains that this was felt to be a heavy task for the Union, saying that it seriously thought of giving up the Defi project in 1999 as it was considered too difficult to handle. She adds that despite the fact that the Village Self-reliance and Development pilots were already ongoing, people still did not fully understand the model and that the WU officials were not sure how to go about implementing them either. Meanwhile, many women did not want to repay their loans from the commune's micro-credit scheme, also managed by the WU, as they considered the money 'as a gift' (Int. 12).

Nói chung là rất khó khăn. Khó khăn từ lãnh đạo huyện cho đến lãnh đạo của địa phương ở xã cứ nghĩ rằng là mình làm như thế này không biết là nó có hiệu quả, có đúng không? Có kết quả không? Có được dân ủng hộ không?

In general, it was very difficult. Difficult on the part of the district down to the commune leaders who kept thinking that the way we worked might not bring results, might not be the right way. Would it be effective? Would the people support it? (Int. 12, transcript, p. 8).

As noted earlier, in the local power structures the WU operates under the supervision of (predominantly male) local leaders within the Party and the People's Committee. This interview extract clearly communicates the fear the district WU felt about failing in the activities supported by Defi, which was the main reason for the district WU to consider giving up the project. However, Ms. Hien, the Defi project officer at the time, managed to encourage the WU to continue its work and to persevere, despite the fact that 'no one knew exactly what to do' (Int. 12, p. 8). According to the district WU, its staff experienced 'a lot of trouble' from the CPRC, which, despite a nominal position in the project, only started to participate in it when they saw that the WU was doing well with it (ibid.). This can be interpreted as the committee's willingness to share in the good reputation that was being generated by positive project results.

At an early point in the project, Defi was very keen on working closely with the WU as it still saw the Union as a solution in its attempt to expand the village democracy programme to new communes. The NGO expected the WU take a lead in mainstreaming the approach within the structures of the Union rather than expecting the CPRCs to apply the approach in their work. The Defi director points out that from the NGO's point of view, power struggles were not limited to those between different state organizations; rather, Defi was also involved in power struggles within the WU. She recalls that Defi's wish to work with lower levels of the WU was frequently challenged by the province WU:

[...] there were [...] incidents where [...] tough negotiations ha[d] been going on. For example, [at] what level [of the WU should] responsibility [for] the implementation rest [...] because the provincial level wanted a stronger role and they wanted the money to go through them and not directly to the district level. So, that has been an ongoing, quite heated discussion. (DD, interview 28.1.2004).

From Defi's point of view, the provincial WU was too distant from the actual project participants that it wanted to support. The project director pointed out that 'as an equal partner' the NGO holds to itself the right to enter 'heated discussions' when needed:

So we do have a say also, particularly [...] we can even have a strong say if our opinion is [...] based on the participants' view, which is sometimes easier to express to us [...]. [T]hen it's easier for us to negotiate with the provincial level Women's Union [...] than for the local women to raise their voice [laughing] and be very strongly disagreeing with the provincial Women's Union [...]. (DD, interview 28.1.2004).

The Defi director, however, emphasized that even though Defi saw its role as that of a mediator, strengthening the whole WU was still high on the NGO's working agenda 'but in a way that strengthens participation' and makes the WU 'more responsive' (ibid.).

The delicate apparent consensus between Defi's village democracy approach and the interests of the local authorities culminated in the selection processes of the VDBs. At the beginning, the selection process was conducted by open voting, by a show of hands. Later, however, Defi introduced a secret ballot for selection of VDB members, though this method of voting is not necessarily followed in the project villages especially as, in some villages, there have been an equal number of candidates as are places available on the VDBs, which changes the nature of

the entire voting act (Project internal evaluation, February 2013; for discussion of problems of selecting candidates and voting in Vietnamese villages see e.g. Tran Thi Thu Trang 2004).

The Defi director recalls one particular case that raised opposition on the part of the local authorities. In one village, the village leader nominated by the commune authorities was not elected by the people to the position of the VDB chair which caused a lot of confusion among the local authorities, the first reaction being that ‘this can’t be done’; the authorities wanted to invalidate the outcome of the VDB’s selection process as it challenged power relations within the village. However, Defi’s project officer reminded them that it would be highly unwise not to acknowledge the result of the selection process. She emphasized that the VDB members had been elected by the villagers following the principles agreed upon by all parties beforehand and that the leaders should respect the people’s will. If they disqualified the election, they would compromise their reputation in front of the people (though, clearly, this was what accompanied most elections where no agency like Defi could intervene). The view that the village leader should be part of the VDB was also raised by the province and district WUs during one of my follow-up trips to the project (field notes 12.11.1998). As we shall see in the following section, controlling the selection process of the VDB members by local authorities has since been strengthened.

8.4 Village Development Boards as space for the people – but who are the people?

In this section, I inquire into the meanings of ‘local people’ in the village democracy intervention model. As shown in Chapter Six, the model was expected to address an assumed juxtaposition of people vs. local authorities in Defi’s development thinking, in the belief that the intervention should provide people space for participation in decisions concerning development in their villages as well as the actual power to make the decisions. This reflected views commonly held by promoters of community development that ‘poor communities need to develop organisations they can control and through which they can act’ (Doyle 1999: 36). It should be remembered that, as noted earlier in this chapter, Mr. Phuc stressed that such an independent space should be located outside existing structures, or otherwise participation would be likely to remain nominal (PO1, interview 24.5.2010). The concept of the people’s space culminated in the formation of VDBs that were central in planning and implementing activities prioritized by the people, as well as in coordinating between different activities. As with the BoM members in the

Minh Son commune, the VDB members in Xuan Dong were to be selected by the villagers from among the villagers. Ideally, Defi believed, local authorities would want to mainstream participatory methods in their own projects after they witnessed the benefits of letting people decide and implement their own development activities.

Mr. Hung, the chair of the VDB in the pilot village, explains that in the activities managed and coordinated by his VDB, people are mobilized through mass organizations and other institutions in the village. That is, the VDB directs subgroups including Party Committees, the village leader, mass organizations, veterans and the elderly to mobilize their members to implement activities coordinated by the VDB. He concludes that the working model has proved effective and that the VDB can successfully organize activities with only a small number of VDB members. Moreover, the VDB chair works closely with the village leader who is responsible for coordinating state-funded activities in the village. Mr. Hung further explains that the importance of the Defi project lies in the fact that it has given villagers and the VDB an opportunity to demonstrate their capacity to plan and implement activities in their village. While the villagers discuss their needs at public meetings, the VDB can also put forward suggestions for activities on the part of commune leaders. A representative of the commune PC pointed out that socio-economic development plans are discussed annually at the village level in April, with the participation of all households. In the process, the role of the VDB chair is crucial as he uses the opportunity to suggest activities based on the needs of the villagers but beyond the financial capacity of the VDB. The female beneficiaries in the village also explain that the VDB actively engages with the village leader in order to coordinate activities at the village level:

Có khi là bên ban phát triển muốn thảo luận một cuộc họp gì thì cũng phải thảo luận với trưởng xóm đấy với cả phó xóm đấy.

When the Village Development Board wants to discuss something in a meeting then it also has to discuss it with the village leader and the deputy of the village (Int. 17, transcript, p. 74).

The expression ‘has to discuss’ communicates the hierarchical structure in the villages that cannot be ignored by the VDBs. That is, the status of the village leader is higher in the local political structure than the status of the VDB, which falls outside the formal structures. This indicates that the negotiating power of the VDB is informal, based on personal relations between the VDB members and the

local authorities, and also connects to other positions held by the VDB members within the community. In such a construction, the personal relationship between the VDB chair and the village head becomes crucial in the process of promoting suggestions by the villagers made through the VDB. According to Mr. Hung, his VDB has been quite successful in getting their proposals onto the development agenda of the commune. However, as the commune also manages only a limited development budget, more substantial activity proposals are forwarded by the commune authorities to the district level for their decision where some of the proposals are accepted while others are not, depending on the available resources and the scale of proposals. The commune and district leaders thus base their decisions on the funds available as well as considering proposals from all the villages in the commune at the same time. The hierarchical relationships are also evident in the fact that the VDBs continue to submit monthly reports of their activities to the commune PC and the WU.

Two elements in the VDB's working methods deserve special attention. First, as noted already, even if the VDBs are, in essence, situated outside formal commune structures, they are not independent from them as at the village and commune level they need to coordinate their activities in close cooperation with local leaders who do possess formal power. This has both constraints and benefits. The fact that VDBs can successfully introduce suggestions to the commune's socio-economic development plan suggests positive progress in terms of people's actual access to local decision-making practices, assuming that the VDBs' own work is genuinely participatory in nature. As my data suggests, prior to the project, commune leaders used to present their development plans to the villages and even offered them the opportunity to contribute their comments, but there was no guarantee that the comments would be taken into consideration in actual decision making. Moreover, according to some interviewees, commune leaders did not necessarily even collect people's feedback but merely informed people of upcoming activities to which they were expected to contribute. Thus, there seems to be a slight change towards a more open working culture at the commune level that is partly attributable to the Defi project.

An important factor mentioned by the interviewees is that the project has helped to build trust between the villagers and the local leaders. As the leaders used to discuss the people in terms of their 'limited knowledge level', the project has enabled the people to demonstrate their capacity to implement development activities when given appropriate planning and organizing tools. Thus, trust is being built through concrete activities implemented effectively by the people on the one hand, and by support (concrete and / or verbal) for the villagers' activities shown

by the authorities on the other. According to the chair of the commune PC, despite the limitation in terms of financial support, the intervention model has contributed to overall development in the project villages; he claims that, compared to other villages in the commune, inhabitants of the project villages have higher incomes and awareness levels. It was also pointed out that social coherence in the project villages has increased, both in the earliest project villages from which Defi has already withdrawn and in new project villages. Better social coherence and understanding among different households in the village means, for example, that the poorer households, including those headed by single women, are reported to engage with other villagers to a greater degree than before; and their voices are more highly respected within 'self-management villages', according to all interviewees. It was also suggested that people now get along with each other better than before, a social cohesion that can be observed at funerals and weddings (Int. 15). Some respondents also point out that the social activities and requirements of the state are being conducted more effectively in the project villages. The female beneficiaries explain that the project has developed a 'habit of participation' among the villagers, which positively contributes to village life.

VDBs - consolidation of the existing political structure?

Bearing in mind that the Village Self-management and Development Intervention model was designed to offer people the space to discuss and decide upon their development, it is necessary to query what exactly is meant by 'the people', and the identities of VDB members selected. The assumption within the model communicates a separation of 'the people' on the one hand, and 'local leaders' on the other. Ideally, members of the VDBs are selected by the people from among the people. However, as already noted, a few years after setting up the first VDBs in the province of Hoa Binh, the actual composition of the VDBs tended to reflect the political power relations in the village: 'the VDB heads were often the existing leader of the village or the secretary of the Party unit' (Nguyen Le Hoa 2003: 9). Thus, in two of the pilot villages one VDB was chaired by the secretary of the Communist Party at the village level and the other VDB was headed by the village deputy. Even though village leaders are no longer always selected and nominated by the commune authorities (e.g. in the pilot village, a new village leader was selected by the villagers from three male candidates using a secret ballot), indicating an increase in democratic practices at the local level, the candidates put forward are approved by the commune authorities who have called upon the meetings to select their new leaders. Similarly, in another village selected for this study, that

is, the village where the VDB has a female majority, all of the three members represent the local establishment: two come from the village-level WU while the male member is the village leader. In fact, as argued in the Mid-term Evaluation Report, ‘most of the VDB members are formal head and deputy head of village and mass organization (Communist Party Secretary, WU, Farmer’s Union, Youth Union, War veteran Union, Union of Aged People, the Fatherland Front and Village Police).’ The report continues: ‘Only some villages elect farmers, and most of them hold or have held positions in the village or communes’ (Nguyen Thi Oanh and Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai 2013). Thus, the report concludes: ‘[M]anagement structure at villages basically use the existing local organization structure adding that the selection of VDBs is done by raising hands in a village meeting¹³³ where the Party secretary and village policeman often act in a supervision role’ (ibid.). In addition, the report notes that the list of candidates for the VDB heads is prepared by a committee including the commune WU. This, to me, suggests state capture of the VDBs with significant implications for ‘the people’ and thus, the democracy-promotion agenda of the NGO.

People vs. local leadership: On categorizing the villagers

Despite the set objective of creating VDBs by the people and from the people, the data suggests that their actual composition reflects political power structures within the villages. As discussed earlier, non-responsiveness by local leaders and organizations was defined as development constraints to be tackled within the Village Self-reliance and Development project. In particular, the VDB members were to represent the collective voice of the people and ensure that the activities conducted were suggested and selected by the people. My analysis suggests, however, that the juxtaposition of people and local leaders is both unsatisfactory and problematic as it is difficult to identify criteria dividing them. For example, should the leader of the WU at the village level be considered part of the people or part of local establishment if the two are treated as excluding each other? The NGO’s project officer comments as follows:

In Ha Tay [one of the new project sites], the VDB members represent mass organizations, but in the village level they do not get salary from the government, only in the commune level. Even if they get some compensation from the government, they are still farmers. (PO3, 6.3.2013).

133 According to the Defi director, the NGO’s project officer argued against this claim saying that in most cases the selection was made by secret ballot.

Thus, according to the view of the project officer, those villagers who do not enjoy a salary from the state are understood to belong to the category of the people rather than to that of local leaders despite their possible role in state-funded mass organizations at the village level. Moreover, she emphasizes that the VDB members have been selected by the people thus representing the will of the people. Here we engage with an interesting question concerning the selection process of the VDBs. The policy of the NGO is that it should be open: anybody should be able to suggest a candidate; voting should preferably be conducted through a secret ballot; and there should be more candidates than seats for the VDB.¹³⁴ However, while the selection process was discussed during the internal assessment sessions in which I participated early in 2013, it was evident that different villages followed different selection practices; some used secret ballots while others voted by show of hands, a practice that is highly problematic when power hierarchies within villages are taken into consideration. Moreover, representatives in some villages observed that it was common practice to have the same number of candidates as seats available, which compromises the whole idea of a selection process as it lacks the element of competition. As noted in the previous section, the project's mid-term evaluation report also drew a picture of the VDB selection process as non-transparent and controlled by representatives of the state apparatus at the village level.¹³⁵ These factors, taken together, offer reasons for claiming that local power positions that derive from the politico-organizational landscape are usually decisive in the processes of proposing and selecting the VDB members.

Even if we accept the claim that not enjoying a state salary is the main criterion for being one of the people, a position at the village level can also be seen as an avenue to positions at the commune and district levels. In the case of conflicting interests between the villagers and local leaders, the VDB members representing mass organizations or the Party experience contradicting expectations. Yet being part of the state apparatus does not automatically establish someone as an undesirable candidate from the people's perspective, something which would assume fundamentally conflicting interests between a person contributing his or her work to the state apparatus (here including the mass organizations) and the rest of the people: an oversimplification of heterogeneous reality. Furthermore, this view would ignore the fact that within a one-party political setting the village Party

134 These principles were stressed by the Defi director during the project's internal evaluation sessions in February 2013.

135 As a response to the findings of the Mid-term Evaluation the Defi director stressed a solid need to establish a system to ensure that at least 40% of the VDB candidates are women and that there are twice as many candidates as actual posts in the VDB. Furthermore, she reminded the project officer to make sure that the selection process leaves space for nomination of candidates in addition to 'official' ones. (E-mail by DD, 24.2.2014).

secretary is likely to be in a better position than an ordinary villager when negotiating with commune authorities concerning VDB activities: it is of significant benefit to be trusted by the state apparatus on the basis of being insider. The main questions would then be how the VDB members identify themselves: do they see themselves as (ordinary) villagers or do they feel that their main loyalty is towards the state apparatus? And how participatory has the process of selecting activities actually been?

I have briefly pointed out that the division between the people and local authorities is not only problematic at the village level but, in addition, is based on an idea of separation that does not easily fit local realities and fails to acknowledge that there is power vested in positions within the state apparatus even if they are non-paid. My data also shows that just as the division between the people and local authorities proves complicated, the division between local authorities and project beneficiaries also fails to communicate the project reality: in the Village Self-reliance and Development model local village leaders have often also received loans from the project and, deliberately or not, were among those selected by the WU for me to interview (e.g. a male beneficiary representing ‘the common people’ who was, it emerged, a retired chair of the commune PC).¹³⁶ Yet, as one such beneficiary reported, he had not been asked by the VDB to pay back his loan despite the fact that the financial status of his household, according to his own assessment, is above average.¹³⁷

One can easily find two alternative explanations for the latter phenomenon: first, it could be that the VDB wants to retain him as part of its activities by prolonging the loan repayment given that he continues to pay the interest on his loan; according to the interviewee, this offers him the possibility of continuing to contribute to VDB funds as he no longer needs the small loans it offers (Int. 18). A more pessimistic explanation would be that the project loan has been used to benefit a member of the village elite, something that can be interpreted as a corrupt practice consolidating local power hierarchies. My data does not allow me to argue for one or the other explanation but it raises the points that development practices cannot escape the impact of local power structures and that typical divisions of local people into beneficiaries and local leaders fails in aid projects targeting entire villages as their leaders are also community members: the categories are not separate but

136 This, to me, suggests an attempt to manipulate to some extent the information gathered from the interviews. If this was the objective, it nevertheless failed as the interviewees were open about their other / past affiliations, thus enabling me to reflect critically on their utterances taking into consideration their different positions.

137 The fact that local authorities are often better-off than other people in the area may be hypothesized as being caused by corruption but also as the benefits of access to knowledge that can be used for investments.

overlapping. In addition, it is not enough to look at the village level only, because villages are dependent in various ways on the decisions and working practices at commune and district levels and individuals having cross-cutting contacts can be seen as strategically important mediators between them. This perception raises important theoretical issues, to which I return in my concluding chapter.

8.5 Participation as gendered

Another important approach to the notion of ‘the people’ in an inquiry into grassroots democracy is that of gender: to what extent is participation by the people dissected by gender within a village democracy project and how do actual project practices reflect other relevant practices in the villages? It should be remembered that by introducing the Village Self-reliance and Development Intervention model Defi hoped to reach the poorest households (as compared to the micro-credit intervention), thereby diminishing inequality based on economic status. Moreover, a community-based approach allowed the NGO to address gender issues as community concerns rather than as a separate women’s interest. An analysis of my data suggests that with the introduction of the Village Self-reliance and Development Model, Defi both succeeded and failed in reaching its gender objectives.

Gender quotas and the VDBs

One of the first concrete questions addressed by the NGO concerned the gender quotas of VDB members. I personally took part in some of the relevant discussions in Finland and, along with the Defi director, was in favour of quotas.¹³⁸ However, Defi’s project officer warned us that the time was not right to push for them as people in the villages were not ready for the innovation; rather, the approach finally taken was to increase gender awareness within the project and gently promote the idea that women also should have a part in the VDBs. In practice, Defi instructed that each VDB should include ‘at least one woman’ with the result that one woman was selected to the VDB in the pilot village and was later chosen for my research interviews. According to the male chair of the VDB, selecting

138 Our position may be understood in light of positive examples of women’s participation in Finnish society and our belief that special quotas for women may sometimes be the only way to open doors for women into decision-making bodies such as the VDB, allowing them both to develop and to demonstrate their capacities. However, as pointed out by Guijt & Shah (1998: 3), assuming that presence of women at community gatherings (as well as in decision-making organs such as the VDB) would guarantee ‘women’s issues’ ending up to the agendas of such meetings ‘completely ignores the dynamics of gender relations’.

one woman out of the required eight VDB members was based on the project officer's instruction that the VDB 'should have one female member' though this was challenged by the chair of the district WU, who had insisted on attending the interview. As soon as the VDB chair (in this position since 1997), made this claim, the chair of the district WU looked dissatisfied and chimed into the interview, protesting against his interpretation of Defi's instruction. She insisted that people had misunderstood it: '[The project officer] said that they need at least one [woman], but they selected only one!' (Int. 15). A similar interpretation has also been reported in rural China: 'The wording of "at least one woman" has had the effect of producing a ceiling upon women's representation, so that the minimum of one woman has become a maximum' (Howell 2008: 63).

The challenge of having women selected into the VDBs was also raised in the Manual on the Establishment and Implementation of Self-management and Development in Villages written five years after setting up the pilot programmes in the province of Hoa Binh:

Even though gender balance in VDB is promoted, male dominance is often the case (only 20 to 30 per cent of the VDB members are women). Practical experience showed that it was very difficult to achieve gender balance in the VDB. Like in many other areas in Vietnam, especially in the rural areas, local people have gotten used to men having the dominant positions in practically every public domain. They seem to believe that social community or village work is not for women. (Nguyen Le Hoa 2003).

The extract communicates that dominant gendered ideas treat the public domain as a male sphere making it difficult to push for gender balance within the VDBs. In 2004, when Defi withdrew from the commune and officially handed over the project funds to the VDBs, the number of VDB members was reduced. For example, in the pilot village selected for this study, eight VDB members quickly became three, all of whom were men. According to the VDB chair, it proved difficult to work with so many members; even organizing a VDB meeting that fit everybody's schedules was hard. He also pointed out that due to the limited resources available for the VDB there were fewer activities, and that three people sufficed to manage them; neither he or the other interviewed male VDB member saw any particular reason to have a woman on a VDB. Rather, they mentioned that the project had helped to alter social attitudes to the poor and to women, a similar view to that expressed by the chair of the commune People's Committee who also claimed that there was no need for gender quotas in the VDBs. More precisely, in his view, there was no need even to have concrete requirements for women within

the VDBs when it could be otherwise arranged for the VDBs to include both men and women.

Despite an apparently positive attitude towards women's access to VDB membership, the chair of the commune PC did not express any concerns about VDBs lacking a female representative. Instead, he pointed out that the activities coordinated by the VDB contained other possibilities for women to participate in key positions besides actual membership, mentioning that many of the group leaders of individual activities were women. Moreover, he emphasized that as people are mobilized to VDB-led activities through mass organizations like the WU and the Youth Union, these channels also offer women the opportunity to become actively engaged (Int. 10). It could be argued that views that reject the need for female representatives in the VDBs on the one hand, and point to alternative forums in which women can play an active role, on the other, reflect and maintain ideas of a sexual division of labour (Eviota 1992; Stanley 2013) within the project's implementation. In other words, the lack of female representatives in the VDBs is justified by suggesting that women can play an active role in the lower levels of the project model, therefore allowing monoglossic accounts of gender that frame the public sphere as primarily belonging to males to remain unchallenged. Male dominance in the VDBs is also acknowledged in the Mid-term Evaluation Report where it is pointed out that most VDB heads are men, 'possibly because the list of candidates for VDBs proposed by formal authority and mass organisations for villagers to vote already comprise of mostly men [sic]' (Nguyen Thi Oanh and Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai 2013) – with the exception, of course, of the WU. That is, the report suggests that predominantly male village elites propose only male candidates for the VDBs which means that, in most cases, the VDBs have only one woman member who is a representative of the WU (*ibid.*).

The female beneficiaries in the pilot village who were interviewed reiterated that villagers prefer men to women when selecting people for public positions as 'men's voice is stronger' in public meetings (Int. 17). It would, however, be mistaken to assume that this is the case in every village. In another project village in the same commune in which I conducted my research interviews, two out of three VDB members were women, including one female chair who emphasized that in her village men and women are equal. She pointed out that women raise their voices at village meetings and are even more confident than men 'as they have received training from the project and WU activities' (Int. 15). A similar observation about women who raise their opinions in public meetings was also mentioned in the Mid-term Evaluation Report where a reference was made to the fact that 'in some villages women are the ones who stay home while their husbands and

children work away from home' (Nguyen Thi Oanh and Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai 2013). Thus, there seems to be significant differences in the actual position of women in the different villages, reflecting factors such as varying employment situations and the *de facto* composition of adult members in the households.

As noted already, gender continues to be an issue within the project. Internal evaluation sessions that took place in early 2013 clearly illustrated how VDBs as decision-making bodies reflect wider social practices in the villages. Moreover, despite project guidelines that aim to ensure open and fair selection practices of VDB members for example, data gathered at internal review sessions suggests that local practices may outweigh the rules set by the donor, in particular those linked to gender and age hierarchies. To illustrate the problem: in one of the sessions, in response to the project director's reminding the participants of the gender quotas within the project, the predominantly elderly male participants listed several reasons why women were underrepresented in the VDBs (and also in the evaluation sessions): women's lesser knowledge compared to that of men; women's lack of time to contribute to social activities¹³⁹; and their reluctance to take on increased responsibilities. However, in a similar session in another province, approximately half of the participants were women and moreover, both men and women represented different age groups ranging from young adults to elderly people. When the project director again reminded the participants about the gender requirements for the VDBs, the participants unanimously replied that gender was not an issue in their villages as half of the participants were already women, thus exceeding the formal requirements of the project.

It should be stressed that, according to my data, gender attitudes do not follow any clear lines such as province, commune or ethnic group distinction. The villages discussed represent both Kinh and Muong villages and, in both, different gender attitudes could be found. The struggle, clearly, continues.

Gendered practices and women's participation in the village democracy project

Interestingly, most interviewees claimed that women and men were equal in their communities. Female beneficiaries argued that in their village there was 'no discrimination against women' and that 'boys and girls are treated similarly' (Int. 17). When asked to define what they mean by gender equality, the women replied:

¹³⁹ Lack of time is a common reason given for women's lack of political engagement, not just in Vietnam, but elsewhere as well (see e.g. Chew 2008).

[...] bình đẳng giới là, nam nữ bình đẳng ý là không chỉ những bình đẳng trong các tổ chức xã hội mà còn bình đẳng trong tự nhiên của cái xã hội này nữa ạ.

Gender equality means that men and women are equal, meaning that they are equal not only in mass organizations but also in society in general (Int. 17, transcript, p. 66).

Women also noted that gender equality is not only a social issue, but also an issue within the family where it relates mainly to non-discrimination in the treatment of boys and girls, especially in terms of access to education.¹⁴⁰ In addition, gender equality means that there is no discrimination between the head of the household (*chủ hộ*) – understood as the husband – and the vice-head of the household (*phó chủ hộ*), that is, the wife. Yet, despite the fact that many women argued that gender equality had been achieved in their village, they also described gendered practices in their village that demonstrate – if not outright discrimination against women – practices and ideas that favour men over women in public village life. I have identified three reasons for gendered imbalance in local decision-making practices from the interviews. First, according to village regulations, all household heads are required to attend village meetings convened by the village leader. The household head is assumed to be a man (if there is one who is competent), and women are expected to participate only when their husbands are unable to attend, such as if / when they are absent due to seasonal work – usually taking place between October and the Tet festival, that is, the Lunar New Year (Int. 17). As stressed by one informant, the village meeting halls are too small for both men and women to attend meetings simultaneously so limiting the number of participants has a practical foundation. However, the village rules that identify the household head as a primary participant in the village meetings is gender biased, favouring men over women.

Village meeting practices are relevant to the village democracy project for two reasons: first, village meetings are part of the context of the cultural as well as political space in which people's understandings of participation are being developed; gendered practices within the context easily replicate themselves in development projects. More importantly, as the VDB meetings are usually combined with the village meetings, local gender practices in terms of who is expected to participate necessarily impact on project implementation. My analysis indicates

140 In the light of Millennium Development Goals for 2015, Vietnam has made considerable achievements in gender equality in primary education where the difference between boys and girls in primary school net enrolment rates was 1%. However, the statistics show significant differences between ethnic groups as pointed out by UNDP. For further information see: http://www.undp.org.vn/digitalAssets/30/30543_MDG_2.pdf (visited 2.10.2013).

that the practice of combining the VDB meetings with village meetings has both advantages and disadvantages. A clear advantage is that the institutional framework enables the VDB to reach the majority of households in the village as the household heads are required to participate in the village meetings. According to one informant, only a handful of households do not attend the meetings and the figure given to illustrate this was that in a village of 84 households, at least 80 participate. A male participant of the Defi project from the village in which women dominate the VDB explained the village regulations as follows:

Anh là chủ hộ nên phải tích cực tham gia các buổi họp và cùng bàn bạc với xóm.

I am the household head and therefore have to actively participate in the meetings and also discuss with other villagers (Int. 21, transcript, p. 13).

He estimated that in his village 95 per cent of household heads are men. Thus, one of the factors contributing to the gender inequality in local decision making has to do with village regulations identifying the household head as the primary attendee to village meetings. In villages where VDB activities are combined with village meetings, the practice therefore limits women's participation. The female interviewees from the pilot village estimate that in their village of 70 households, all participate in the VDB meetings / village meetings and that, normally, approximately two thirds of the participants are men.

Secondly, the women also point out that even though they personally have participated in some of the meetings, women are busy with their work and do not have time to attend communal events (Int. 17); referring to the gendered division of labour within households, they tend to see village meetings as an extra burden for women rather than a right or an opportunity. This relates to the third factor mentioned by the women when explaining the gender unbalance at the meetings: 'men's voice is stronger than women's' as 'women are timid in public meetings' and 'men are bolder in expressing their views' which, the women stressed, is particularly important when different views verbally clash in public space. Moreover, the women argue that most women in their village lack the verbal power needed in disputes as women are either 'shy' (*rụt rè*) or 'compliant' (*cả nể*). Here we may see the impact of monoglossic accounts of gender that contribute to the behavioural norms that idealize women who are gentle and respectful (see Chapter Four), and that are perceived as prohibiting women from expressing their (differing) views in public. It is apparent that the voices of women are diminished by their concern with maintaining the respect of their community and by aiming to ensure

harmony among discussants, leading them to conclude: ‘women are not as strong as men and therefore the household head has to participate in the meetings more’ (Int. 17, transcript, p. 51-52). Thus, understood through biological sexual characteristics rather than as culturally-learned, gendered communication preferences, men are seen better fit to attend public meetings as they can defend the views of themselves and their families boldly and straightforwardly.

The contradiction between the claimed gender equality and the interviewees’ descriptions of gendered practices in local life reflect state-led discourses on gender that focus on gender equality as manifested in national legislation (see also Chapter Four). In Vietnamese legislation men and women enjoy equal rights in both society and family life but, in practice, the division of labour is heavily gendered. Therefore, (Western) demands for gender equality become an issue that can add to the burden of Vietnamese women in the short term as illustrated in the following extract:

Equality between men and women, in some aspects, means heavier responsibilities for women. Their responsibilities towards the family are not reduced while they have to shoulder more social responsibilities. (Le Thi Quy 1994: 5)

What is important to note here is the idea that gender equality adds to women’s responsibilities and increases an already heavy burden on women in Vietnamese society, particularly as women’s familial responsibilities are not challenged but are taken as given and natural. Despite the nearly two decades of time difference between the text quoted above and the interviews conducted for my research, women still expressed the same views of being burdened by too many tasks already, hence limiting their participation at meetings to cases when they have a specific suggestion they want to put forward. For example, one of the female beneficiaries reported having suggested that the VDB changed the way it collects repayments from borrowers. She explains that the VDB chair used to go from household to household until she suggested that, instead, he could use a drum or megaphone to call all borrowers to monthly meetings at the village cultural hall to make their payments. ‘The villagers supported my suggestion,’ she said, seemingly proud of having initiated the change; she also commented that the VDB chair now saves a lot of time.

Despite almost unanimous claims by project participants that gender equality prevails in the commune, representatives of the WU have witnessed the opposite, despite advancements in the field in the commune and the district. Nonetheless, they conceded that, despite the constraints, the Village Self-management and De-

velopment Model has improved women's position in the project villages even more than the micro-credit project. According to the former chair of the district WU, 'women rarely had an opportunity to raise their voice' in public meetings prior to Defi's project (Int. 12). She emphasized that Defi's decision to give the district WU the role of project supervisor has increased its status in the district as well as that of women more broadly, thanks to the gender training supported by the NGO. Moreover, she claims that the performance of the WU in the Defi project significantly contributed to the fact that for the first time the state has decided to channel part of its loan funds through the district WU. Thus, instead of having to borrow from the banks, poor households can now turn directly to the WU, giving them easier access to loans specifically aimed at benefiting them. In her view, the Defi project has helped to raise the status of the WU in the eyes of local state officials.

Despite the limitation in gender equality discussed above, all interviewees agreed that the model has increased women's participation in communal decision making. Female participants reported that as women do not attend the meetings as much as men, they rely on the WU staff to get their voice heard, discussing issues concerning the VDB and other communal activities at the WU meetings which can then be communicated by the leader of the village WU at commune meetings. This suggests that the WU offers female villagers at least indirect access to decision making in the village and the VDB meetings as, according to the Mid-term Evaluation Report, one VDB seat is usually reserved for the head of the village WU.

Thus, all interviewees seem to share the view that the Village Self-reliance and Development model has made women's voices more audible in communal affairs compared to the situation prior to the project. During my interviews in late 2011, WU staff further emphasized that despite the shortcomings in actual gender balance within project activities, the gender training offered by Defi has been an important factor in increasing gender awareness in the project villages. Moreover, they put forward the argument that a key factor in raising gender equality has been the discussion of gender issues in a forum consisting of both women and men, thereby arguing that even though the micro-credit scheme for women also enhances gender equality, its impact is more limited as it is chiefly addressed to women when, in fact, men are often those whose understanding of gender should be changed.

8.6 Chapter conclusions

Dialogue is not necessarily the same as agreement. In this chapter I have analyzed meanings attributed to participation by grassroots Vietnamese as reported by Defi, the WU and local authorities. I pointed out how the meanings held by Defi in the village democracy project differed from those of the people. My analysis of the interviewees' utterances indicated that the meanings attributed to participation by the people were defined by their prior (negative) experiences of state development practices. It also showed how Defi used dialogue to manage the discrepancies and to win people's trust so as to encourage them to join the village democracy project. Moreover, I suggested the conceptualization of aid practice as a space where the donor (here Defi) aims at facilitating the re-evaluation of participation, a key notion in the NGO's understanding of local democracy. If this goal is successful, development projects may offer participants alternative experiences of participation that are believed to contribute to the development of a more democratic culture at the local level.

In addition, I analyzed the notion of 'the people' – a key concept in the NGOs intervention model whose access to decision-making practices Defi wanted to enhance. In my analysis I concluded that the notion of 'the people' is highly problematic when juxtaposed to 'the local authorities' in the village context. First, the state apparatus of both the Party and mass organizations are present in the villages, thus establishing some of the 'people' as closer to established state structures than others. However, as some of these positions, such as those in mass organizations, are not paid jobs as at the commune level, this lends some support to the interpretation that such office-holders should be included in the category of 'the people' and not that of 'the local authorities' though this interpretation ignores the power that attaches to such positions. Therefore, 'the people' and 'the local authorities' – like 'project beneficiaries' and 'local authorities' – are, in fact, overlapping rather than discrete categories in the context of village community development.

I also showed how VDBs that were established to create space for 'the people' can, in fact, be captured by existing Party-led institutions in the villages which can be seen both as a problematic and as a beneficial factor from the perspective of the democracy agenda. First, a close relationship between the VDBs and state-led organizations may be problematic if democracy is understood as an *independent* space wherein the people may decide on, and then conduct, development activities in the villages outside the existing structures – the NGO's objective and precondition for meaningful participation according to PO1. My data suggests that the Village Self-reliance and Development model as developed over the years has not

been able to create such independent space. However, the very fact that the VDB members are, in one way or another, part of the state establishment at the village level, has also helped the VDBs bring activities and resources that are beyond their own capacity to the development agenda of the commune PC.

Finally, I explored the notion of ‘the people’ from the perspective of gender, inquiring whether and how gender plays a role in defining who participates in what in terms of the village democracy intervention. My analysis showed how local gendered practices weaken women’s voices in village decision making by rendering public meetings primarily meetings of ‘household heads’, mostly understood as men. Given such a construction, women have sought to strengthen their collective voice through the WU; despite the claims that ‘men and women are equal in our village’, my data suggests that gender equality is understood by villagers as a legal issue rather than critically assessed in the frame of local gendered practices. This leads me to conclude that grassroots democracy at the village level cannot be satisfactorily discussed without appropriate attention being paid to power hierarchies, in particular state structures that reach down into the villages, and gendered norms that produce concrete practices in a particular development context. Such data has important theoretical implications for a democracy-promotion agenda, to which I will turn in my concluding chapter.

9 CONCLUSIONS

This study explored development as a non-technical, contested and political field of practice. Research was inspired by ethnographic studies that have explored how interventions change as an outcome of actors' interests and cultural values, as well as the overall socio-political and historical context of the intervention and its locale (Ferguson 1994; Li 2007; Mosse 2005). I share with this line of research an interest in development as a contextual, dynamic process. My perspective onto the contestation within aid practice, however, concerns language as a means as well as an object of contestation. Several researchers have noted that words that are central to development theory and practice have different meanings for different actors (Kurki 2010; 2013; White 2004; Drydyk & Penz 1997; Cornwall 2008; Cornwall & Brock 2005; Jenkins 2001; Mosse 2005). My interest in language rests on these findings, supported by my experiences as a development practitioner, but at the same time goes beyond them by exploring how different understandings of key concepts in aid practice are constructed and transformed. Indeed, understanding how different meanings affect aid interventions has become one of the core objectives of this study.

Through my research approach, which identifies language as a site of contestation in aid practice, my overall objective was to contribute to knowledge about grassroots democracy promotion through my analysis of aid projects in Vietnam. More specifically, my research focused on the villages / communes in which the selected case studies were implemented by the Finnish NGO Defi. During the process of my research, I became particularly interested in how gender affects a person's ability to take part in processes in which democracy may be practiced at the local level. Thus, the following central questions were raised to guide my research:

- (1) How do **development ideas**, manifested as words with specific meanings, transform into intervention models, and how does contestation over meanings in particular contexts contribute to changes in the project 'script'?*
- (2) How do **gendered norms** and practices manifest themselves in the selected case studies and the project contexts, and how do they relate to the issue of democracy?*
- (3) How does the **local political context** interact with the intervention models and what are the implications of the political context for the NGO's democratization agenda?*

I approached the research questions through case studies that represented two types of development interventions: the Savings and Credit Intervention for single women in Minh Son commune, greater Hanoi region; and the Village Self-reliance and Development Intervention model in Xuan Dong commune, Hoa Binh province. The long-term development objective of the Savings and Credit project was women's empowerment while the Village Self-reliance and Development model aimed at promoting democracy in villages. The selection of the cases reflects a broad approach to democracy as it concerns the equal treatment of people in society and the ability to affect both one's own life and society more broadly (see MFA 2014; Sida 2013a; Sida 2013b). The differences between the two types of interventions were expected to add to our understanding of complexities and contestation in democracy promotion.

To find answers to the research questions listed above, I explored the possibilities of a 'Bakhtinian reading' in the field of development research. My choice of the Bakhtinian analytic framework was not an obvious one and there are no other studies so far – to my knowledge – using such a framework to better understand development practice. However, through my readings of Bakhtin's work, I had come to believe that a Bakhtinian framework could help me to gain important new insights from my data. This stance enabled me to treat the thesis as, in part, a test of the value of a Bakhtinian reading. What the chosen framework actually offered for the study will be analyzed more closely at the end of this chapter.

In the following section, I outline the main findings of my study as they connect to each of the three research questions: first I discuss the role of meanings in aid practice; second, I draw together the key contributions of my study to an understanding of gender and how gender relates to my inquiry into local democracy; and lastly, I focus on the local political context and on the implications of context for the studied intervention, especially for Defi's democratization agenda.

9.1 Contestation over meanings contributing to changes in the project 'script'

My research findings confirm that aid projects change as an outcome of contestation over the meanings of terms central to the construction of an aid project. Thus, my results support earlier findings that key development terms, which guide development practice, are understood differently by different actors. This 'ambiguity' of words, as Mosse (2005) has called it – that is, the fact that words may have several meanings – has been noted, for example, by Kurki (2013), White (2004) and Drydyk & Penz (1997), who all mention the lack of a single, universal defi-

nition of democracy. Similarly, as argued by, for example, Cornwall (2008) and Cornwall & Brock (2005), and as confirmed by my study, participation can mean different things for different actors. This multiplicity of meanings has important implications for aid practice and, as I argue, for donors' democracy promotion agendas in aid recipient countries. Thus, the question arises, what are the implications of the fact that meanings central to development practice are necessarily and always subject to contestation?

The Bakhtinian reading I apply in this research emphasizes the necessity of accepting that meanings held by different actors in an intervention situation are highly contextual. Moreover, meanings manifest themselves in those utterances which comprise replies to other utterances though, importantly for development practice, a reply can take the form of words or acts (Bakhtin 1996). I have suggested in Chapter Eight that people's passiveness (their lack of interest in participating in a project) as reported by the NGO, should in fact, be understood as an active reply in terms of a non-act. Moreover, I argued that people's non-responsive behaviour may be best understood as reflecting their prior experiences of unsatisfactory state-led development projects and thus, as an indirect means to oppose local leadership, which is in line with earlier findings by Kerkvliet (2005: 20-21). Further, I argued that as meanings are contextual, interpreting the other's utterances (and, e.g., non-acts as replies) requires a high level of contextual knowledge.

One of the objectives of my research was to take a closer look at why meanings vary and what the variation does to aid projects. I approached this task through Bakhtin's theory of meaning construction in which time, space and a person's experiences play central roles. Space was understood here to refer to particular, physical places but also to space for acts. Time and space together form the context in which a person lives and experiences things. Social norms and practices are understood as part of the contexts that shape, but do not determine a person's experiences. The study showed how meanings are re-evaluated and, therefore, subject to change in the course of dialogical interaction between development actors, by which I refer to a dialogical relationship (Bakhtin 1996: 209) – as opposed to monological dialogue which I examine later – between a donor, project participants and partners. A dialogical relationship is characterized by preparedness and willingness to learn from the other whereby, as noted in the methodology chapter, encountering the other person's consciousness facilitates a re-evaluation of one's understanding of the subject matter. A dialogical relationship thus requires that power asymmetries between partners are put aside to enable the potential to learn from the other. That may sound naïve and contrary to aid realities. But this is ex-

actly what distinguishes a dialogical relationship from a monological / authoritarian dialogue.

Chapters Six and Seven showed how the NGO's understanding of single women as 'marginalized' transformed into an understanding of these women as 'strong' as an outcome of encounters between Defi's first project officer and the single women in Minh Son commune. The notion of 'strong' was used to refer to the fact that the single mothers had used their power over their bodies to keep and maintain their children despite the harsh effects which the decision had on their social relations, and their economic situations. In Chapter Seven I showed how this particular change in the NGO's understanding of the single women contributed to a change in the project management model that, as I argue, had important empowering impact for the recipients, enhancing their ability to affect their lives in ways that also positively altered how other people saw them. The finding points to the importance of dialogical relationships in aid practice, and may be understood as part of a democratic culture within aid projects. However, it is worth stressing that a dialogical relationship does not necessarily lead to changes in the parties' meanings, or imply agreement or increasing consensus. Dialogue involves contestation over meanings and the importance of dialogue lies in its open-endedness; insofar as the parties are open to alternative meanings, a dialogical relationship includes the potential for changes through the re-evaluation of meanings. Thus, dialogical changes in development thinking and aid projects derive from actors' changed understandings, rather than from, for instance, competing interests.

For aid practice, understanding the processes of re-evaluation of meanings becomes highly relevant when projects aim to change the target group's understanding, to be reflected in changed behaviour. Take, for example, the democratization agenda of the donor community. It seems likely in light of this study that the disappointment by the donor community regarding the results of their democracy-promotion activities, discussed in the Introduction, was due to its lack of understanding that people's experiences (or lack thereof) play a role in how people understand democracy in the first place. An aid intervention should, therefore, create spaces for alternative participant experience in order to facilitate their re-evaluation of the meanings of terms such as democracy or participation. It is important to bear in mind that from the donor's perspective, time – one factor central to meaning construction according to Bakhtin – is a 'given', that is, it cannot be changed by an intervention. Similarly, as noted by Li (2007: 4) and supported by my study, development contexts include, for example, political relations that are beyond the capacity of the donor to change. Therefore, the intervention itself should become a micro-space in which people may experience an alternative real-

ity, an experience which may then contribute to changes in their understanding. I pointed out in Chapter Eight how meanings given to participation by the NGO and the local people demonstrated substantial divergence and caused considerable delays in the implementation of the Village Self-reliance and Development project. My analysis showed how the different or even contradictory meanings given to participation explained the villagers' initial reluctance to take part in, and contribute to, the project. I found that the villagers' passiveness could be explained by their prior, unsatisfactory experiences of participation in state-led development activities where participation was predominantly understood by them as an obligation that was unlikely to lead to a rewarding outcome, rather than the positive interpretation of 'a right' assigned to the term by the NGO. The finding adds to other identified reasons for non-participation such as those produced by gender (Cornwall 2008: 278, 279). My research, therefore, partly replies to the question – 'What has language got to do with development?' – posed by Cornwall & Brock (2005: 1056).

This study also points to the central role of intertextuality (as a discourse context representing utterances by others) in meaning-construction processes. As shown in Chapter Six, intertextuality shapes donor understanding of both the development context and the actors who are part of it. I then proposed that the micro-credit intervention was selected as a means to overcome the problem of women's inferior position to men partly because the NGO's understanding of gender relations at the time was guided by the WID approach and the 'Confucianism thesis'. The WID approach applied by the NGO emphasized the integration of women into development (Davids et al. 2014: 398). A rise in the economic status of women, which was the expected outcome of the micro-credit intervention, was understood as imperative for an increase in the women's social status, a view that was shared by the project participants. Moreover, local gendered norms, especially the interpretation of Confucianism as the 'cultural' basis for women's inferior position in relation to that of men, affected the NGO's understanding of women. In my reading of earlier literature on gender and Vietnam in Chapter Four, I noted how it commonly stressed women's subordinate position to men; I also pointed out that a similar view of Confucianism as the doctrine that influenced gender relations in Vietnam was largely shared by the donor community in Vietnam (e.g. Unicef 1994). My case study thus underlines an important element of meaning construction: meanings are intertextual and they travel. Analysis showed, however, that the NGO started to question the relevance of its understanding of women after its encounters with them were instigated. I have argued that this change in the NGO's understanding was instrumental in the change of the project management model, a

transformation that became the most important factor contributing to the women's improved agency and social standing.

Meanings attributed to key development terms, therefore, play an important role in aid practice. This does not do away with the role played by different agendas and different actors in contributing to changes in development projects (Mosse 2005), but rather helps us to deepen our understanding of the complexities in aid practice.

I have put forward the argument that the meanings of words matter, consequently emphasizing the role of language as a site for contestation in aid practice. In Chapter Eight I showed how Defi's re-evaluation of the notion of participation significantly contributed to changes in its aid model. The Savings and Credit project was initially marked by a conventional (for NGOs at the time) interpretation of who the project participants were and in what kind of activities they should / could participate. At this early stage, the participation of the project beneficiaries was limited to loan group activities in which the single women were expected to actively take part. In addition, PRA was understood as a participation tool even when its function was to confirm the need for a pre-selected intervention model by the donor and its main partner the Women's Union. It was only when the NGO began entering into a dialogue with the single women in the actual project context that it started to see the development problems, and hence the solutions, in a new light. I showed in Chapter Seven how the NGO's commitment to the promotion of gender equality, which guided the establishment of its micro-credit interventions, now seemed to inadequately address key problems in Vietnamese society. The juxtaposition between men and women was no longer perceived as the main development issue that the NGO wanted to address. Instead, Defi's re-reading of the context and its disillusionment with the role of the mass organizations (in this case the WU) contributed to a novel analysis of development problems in which juxtaposition between 'the people' and 'local authorities', especially with regards the people's lack of voice in local decision making, was identified as the key development problem to be addressed by the NGO. This resulted in the introduction of the word 'democracy' to the NGO's development thinking and its practice; as pointed out in Chapter Six, 'participation' was increasingly understood by the NGO in terms of the right to take part in decisions that affect one's own life. Analysis showed how the meaning of 'participation', first understood in relatively technical terms, transformed as the NGO entered into dialogue with its beneficiaries and gained new insights about the context whereby the newly politicized understanding of participation directed its design of the Village Self-reliance and Development Intervention model.

Different meanings attributed to participation, according to analysis of my data, also contributed to the fact that the introductory phase of the Village Self-reliance and Development model took more time than expected. I have elaborated through my study how local people's understanding of participation as 'almost half-forced labour' (to use the Defi director's expression), significantly hindered their acceptance of the intervention model. Defi was required to enter into a dialogue with the local people to build trust and persuade them to give their model a try. It is here, I would argue, that a Bakhtinian framework can help us understand a key challenge in democracy promotion: in order for people to grasp alternative meanings for democracy (or participation), the intervention needs to encourage them to re-evaluate their existing understandings through new, positive experiences that roots democratic culture in a new context.

9.2 Gendered norms and practices affect participation

In the Introduction I noted how democracy-promotion discourses pay little attention to gender. This may reflect a historical male domination in political science (as suggested by Celis et. al 2013), but may also derive from a focus on formal rather than substantive democracy. My research process highlighted, however, the need to include gender analysis as part of an inquiry into democracy promotion, as a result of which I analyzed how gendered norms and practices in the development context manifest themselves in aid practice and how gender is related to the issue of democracy. My findings suggest that there are significant gendered differences in an individual's access to decision-making structures in Vietnamese villages. It is worth noting that gender mainstreaming attempts have been criticized for narrowing the concept of gender to its application to women (Davids et. al 2014: 400) and as I have shown in my study, this was very much the approach initially taken by Defi as well. In an effort to counteract this I have discussed women's experiences in relatively generalized terms while at the same time emphasizing intersectionality and differences in the category of women itself (Crenshaw 1991; Yuval-Davis 2006). Relevant to this understanding is that women's experiences are not only shaped by their sex, but also by their different experiences in life which are influenced by their age, ethnicity, education, financial situation and their position in society (such as being from a certain family or part of the political apparatus). Such of my findings which address 'women' should not be understood, therefore, to apply equally to all women, but rather, they tell us how the female biological sex and ideas of femininity create norms and behavioural expectations of wom-

en and not men, even if some women are able to rise beyond such expectations thanks to seniority produced by their age, education or social position.

My case studies illustrate how gender works in concrete development interventions. In my analysis of gendered norms in Chapter Four I pointed out the danger that researchers may potentially reproduce essentialist interpretations of them as norms set by ‘culture’ (see also Vuola & Vuorisalo-Tiitinen 2014: 173). It seemed to me that labelling ‘Confucianism’ as a reason for women’s inferior position to men is highly problematic if the notion of ‘Confucianism’ itself is not subjected to closer examination. The aim of my reading of early Confucian texts (claimed to be the origin of the cultural values manifested in the gendered norms) was thus to investigate whether it is fair to attribute women’s inferior position to the Confucian doctrine. My analysis showed that, in fact, early Confucian texts were concerned with setting norms for appropriate male behaviour rather than that of women, a significant factor ignored in later interpretations of ‘Confucianism’ as also pointed out by Li (2000a, 2000b). I argued that sexual norms in early Confucian texts were models for both young men and women as they did not stress gender division, but rather the lines of age / generation. In particular, the role of parents was central in decisions concerning one’s partner. Interestingly, my analysis of the single women’s narratives in Chapter Five pointed in the same direction: sexual norms are important, but norms of filial piety are even more so. My exercise was useful, I argue, as it showed how essentialist claims attributed to culture may fail to recognize difference and change within the culture itself, not to mention the hierarchies between different cultural norms. Moreover, essentialist views are problematic as they implicitly (even if unintentionally) argue for a ‘natural’ state of being and fixed meanings while, in reality, as I argue, they reflect the interests of particular groups in society. In my view, a Bakhtinian reading of gendered norms as manifestations of state monologism enables us to challenge the norms in a productive way.

As pointed out in my analytical chapters, gendered norms fail to determine women’s actual behaviour, though, due to their visibility in society (partly a result of their state sponsorship), they are used to judge female behaviour and become important factors in women’s everyday experiences. My study, however, suggests that outcomes of breaking the norms do not follow a pre-determined path. Rather, I have shown through my analysis in Chapter Five that norms are not fixed but always interpreted in relation to a concrete context in which a woman’s family plays a central role. In fact, more investigation is needed into the role played by norms of filial piety in the gendered experiences of both young women and men in Vietnam.

While my study confirms that gendered norms matter, but do not determine women's lives, my case study of the single women's micro-credit project showed how women's experiences were nevertheless gendered experiences in which ideals of sexuality, family and motherhood shaped the single women's experiences as members of the community. That is, moral judgments (when made) affected the possibilities available to a woman to participate in communal life, though single women also reported that single parenting limited their access to events such as communal meetings due to family responsibilities, particularly in the case of women with small children, presumably a temporary phenomenon. Single women also shared experiences of economic difficulties though my data suggests that gender, again, plays an important role in the degree of difficulty, in this case the gender of a woman's child(ren). Women with adult son(s) were better off than women with adult daughters due to gendered practices in which a son continues living in his natal home even after he marries, thus significantly contributing to the household workforce. This is a noteworthy finding as the economic status of a household is arguably not isolated from the voice and influence of the household in communal decision making (Drydyk 2005; Cornwall 2003).

Another key finding related to gender suggests that even though gender equality is guaranteed by Vietnamese laws and claims of gender equality were expressed by several interviewees, in everyday practices the roles of women and men are differentiated in ways that hinder women's access to communal meetings and thus, to the formal spaces of local decision making. The main reason for this, in light of my data, is the separation of public and private spheres, where the public sphere preferences males. This became evident in interviews conducted in Xuan Dong commune in Hoa Binh province where I found gender to play a role in village regulations that identify the household head, commonly understood to be a man, as having an obligation to participate in the village meetings. Consequently, women were underrepresented in village meetings and seen as substitutes for men in case of need. Moreover, women also preferred a male (if the family had one) to represent the household as they had their hands full with work; time poverty (Lister 2003: 132) was reportedly one of the main reasons for women's non-participation in public meetings. This applied to women in general, but to the single women with small children in particular. Moreover, men's voice was seen as 'stronger than women's'. Here we see how gendered norms that aim at controlling women's behaviour – in particular the notion of the ideal woman as someone who speaks gently to preserve social harmony – discourage women from expressing strong opinions at village meetings and, in their experience, limit their possibilities to influence public decisions.

My analysis shows how gender works at a village level in multiple ways, ultimately making it more difficult for women to participate in public life. As for grassroots democracy and aid practice, my results communicate a need to expand our inquiry into the local norms and practices manifested in development aid to their actual gendered outcomes. In the case of Defi's interventions, the NGO made a strategic choice to try and create conditions for the single women's group to speak and act for themselves by giving them project management tasks, turning the Board of Management into their own sphere; this demonstrated its belief in the potential of single women – thus communicating an alternative view of them to the rest of the community – and also manifested the NGO's changed understanding of the role of the WU in gender issues. I have argued that this marked a deepening awareness by the NGO of differences that cut across the category of women. My overall conclusion concerning the NGO's micro-credit intervention for single women is that, from the perspective of social equality and local democracy, the alteration in the project's management structure was the single most important factor behind the reported positive changes in the women's collective voice in the commune, and their self-confidence, quality of life and new agency. Women themselves, as well as WU representatives, confirm that the single women are now respected by the community as the project has enabled them to show their capacity to manage and improve their finances. I have pointed out that even if the women's economic success does not always apply to individual single women, the success narrative alone has collectively increased single women's status in the commune and thus their collective voice. This indicates the centrality of women's economic situation to women's empowerment and their acceptance by the rest of the community.

9.3 Democracy promotion in a one-party political context: Findings and theoretical challenges

In the Introduction, I pointed out the challenges of discussing democracy in the context of a one-party socialist state that, according to generally used criteria for democracy, is categorized as non-democratic to start with; there are obviously limits to how much democratization can be expected to take place in an authoritarian state. What we can learn of these limits through Defi's interventions is a key issue to be discussed. Moreover, state socialism as a political context also has implications for gender issues. My study concurs with Tripp (2013: 523), who argues that state socialism seems to promote gender equality in legislation, but sees the issue of women's rights only through the state's objectives of economic develop-

ment and social stability. My study further shows that in addition to the gendered outcomes, one-party rule places significant pressure on development practice.

State capture and the limits of what an intervention may change

The pressure by the political apparatus manifested itself especially in the implementation of Defi's Village Self-reliance and Development Intervention model. I argued in Chapter Eight that despite the NGO's objective of creating Village Development Boards as spaces for people who were outside of existing political structures, there is strong evidence of state capture of the intervention model. According to my research findings, the project has been unable to escape the pressure to maintain political stability in the project villages. With few exceptions, the VDBs are manned by local village elites, that is, by Communist Party secretaries, village leaders and representatives of the WU, who all have roles in the state apparatus. Moreover, my study suggests that the state capture of the VDBs is facilitated by selection practices for VDB members which are controlled by the state apparatus through the selection of candidates. This is not surprising as it can be understood as simply reflecting normative (s)election practices within the socialist state. For example, according to the Mid-term Evaluation Report (2013) on the intervention model, the state apparatus used several mechanisms to get the 'right' people into the VDBs. This included the assembly of a special committee for pre-selection of the candidates which consisted of the village elite. Moreover, during the actual selection, voting by show of hands instead of secret ballot was used, and supervised by the local police. In addition, the number of candidates suggested by the pre-selection committee often did not exceed the number of VDB members required. Here we find evidence that development practice is vulnerable to political relations it cannot change (Li 2007: 4).

Thus, my research shows how the state apparatus actively promotes practices in which the key positions of an intervention are secured to the local elite who are trusted by the political establishment, demonstrating how development becomes political in a concrete context (Li 2007; see also Ferguson 1994), but perhaps not in ways supportive to the donor's democratizing objectives. My study suggests that the state capture of the VDBs compromises Defi's original objective of creating an independent space for people in which to discuss and make decisions concerning village development activities away from the pressure of the state apparatus. We may of course question the likelihood that communal development would ever be seen as non-political by local leaders, especially when an intervention is

rooted, as in the case of the Village Self-reliance and Development Intervention model, in political ideas of participation. I argued in Chapter Eight that due to the NGO's confusion over the categories of the people and local authorities the systematic nature of the state capture went unnoticed by the donor; political analysis of actual project implementation was not properly conducted as 'the people' were understood to include all villagers: commoners and village elite alike. Therefore, despite the fact that state penetration of the VDBs had already been mentioned in a manual on the intervention model (Nguyen Le Hoa 2003) ordered by the NGO in the early 2000s, it received inadequate attention in the annual project reports, allowing retention by the NGO of the idea of the VDBs as the people's spaces. The case study exemplifies how an intervention aiming to promote democracy at the village level, based on an initial juxtaposition of the people and local authorities as the development problem to be addressed, may fail to deal with the complexity of the village life in a one-party setting – and how this was embedded in the NGO's utterances about the model. Once again, this finding confirms that language matters in aid practice in significant ways as it is through language that the NGO defines who is expected to participate in what, and for what ends.

Linkages with political society as mutual inter-penetration: Support for the democratization agenda?

My findings concerning the Village Self-reliance and Development Intervention demonstrate that the political context limits what is possible in aid practice. My case study illustrated that the NGO's attempt to promote the voice of the people in the villages through their intervention's creating a 'space outside existing structures' did not materialize. The finding that the VDBs reflect and replicate the structures of the state apparatus lends support to Ferguson's (1994) earlier claim that development projects may unintentionally reproduce relations of (political) inequality between actors (see also Gardner and Lewis 1996: 72-73). How the state penetrates the intervention may also be seen in ways in which the work directed and coordinated by the VDBs was regulated via mass organizations.

The findings reported above do not, however, automatically mean that the model is without democratizing value. Consider, for example, an argument by Alagappa (2004: 48) that 'the impact of groups advocating democracy can be substantial if they connect with political society'. Moreover, as noted in the Introduction, it has been argued that a mutual inter-penetration of the state and social groups may have a transformative effect on the state, thereby contributing to its gradual change (Gallagher 2004: 442-443). Both claims urge us to look more

closely at my findings that the close relationship between the VDB chair and the commune chair of the People's Committee as an official representative of the state apparatus at the local level produces positive development outcomes. That is, the close relationship arguably helps a village successfully add suggestions for development activities to the commune's development agenda, indicating an increase in the villagers' influence over local development. This, of course, happens on condition that development agendas promoted by the VDBs are put together in a participatory manner. However, the extent to which the planning organized by VDBs is actually based on open debate and deliberation is a question that cannot be reliably answered by my existing data, though if we can assume that the project created participatory processes that guide the work of the VDBs, we could at least be more hopeful that the intervention has good prospects of democratizing the local regime (see Kaldor and Kostovicova 2008: 111). Moreover, as noted in Chapter Eight, the project has contributed to changes in the overall village culture which is now, arguably, more inclusive (of the poor and women) than before, a change that is widely attributed to the project. It has, therefore, contributed to trust-building between different groups of people / households in the villages as well as between the ordinary villagers and the village elite. Yet my findings indicate that, despite the reported benefits of the intervention model, it has nevertheless not been mainstreamed by commune and district authorities or the WU as the NGO had once hoped might happen. This supports earlier findings of NGO projects having geographically limited impact (Rigg 2003). Meanwhile, and important to the inquiry, my study indicates that in a few cases when other villages have 'replicated' the project model, they visited the project villages in order to learn how implementation of development activities is organized. Thus, the model is primarily approached by local actors as providing an organizing tool for technical interventions, which means that its developmental impact extends beyond the project villages, but not necessarily its democratizing influence as hoped for by the NGO.

Economic activities as civil society spaces enhancing democracy?

Civil society is often seen as central to democratization by development donors. However, as pointed out in the Introduction, the meaning of civil society is as similarly subject to multiple interpretations as democracy. I propose that, in the Vietnamese context, the notion of civil society cannot be limited to typologies created in Western, liberal societies. Thus, the single women's group that estab-

lished itself as a cooperative may be understood as a civil society entity because its way of working and its mutual support objectives (Nguyen-Marshall 2012) reflect values generally assigned to civil society. Moreover, as pointed out by Hannah (2007), civil society-like groups often register as companies due to restricting legal frameworks. Therefore, understanding the single women's groups as civil society organizations opens up new prospects for assessing their democratization potential. Earlier I pointed out that the Savings and Credit project has had democratizing impacts when seen through the lens of single women's more equitable treatment by the community, and their increased ability to affect their lives. However, my study also indicates that it has not been subject to similar political control as the Village Self-reliance and Development Intervention model. This has, in part, enabled the creation of more independent space for the single women's activities and the development of the group's civil society-like activities which include the open and democratic selection of the cooperative's Board of Management members. It is apparent that an intervention focusing on women's empowerment and economic development of their households has, at the same time, promoted democratic practices in ways that have not been seen as a potential threat to the political establishment.

9.4 Reflections on my Bakhtinian framework

Treating 'development' as something that is not 'objective' also appears to help manage 'subjectivity'. The selection of an analytical framework was the main tool that helped me step outside of the project: to change my role, conceptually, from participant to researcher. This, I believe, is important in any research endeavour, but a particularly challenging task for someone like me who has been part of the project I then went on to study. Moreover, I feel that research, at its best, is a creative process into which a researcher throws herself – another aspect of 'subjectivity management'. Understanding research in this way has perhaps two important consequences. First, the role of the researcher is to make something new from the ingredients – the research data; and second, the researcher cannot remain an objective writer of the thesis, but instead, must actively engage with the data using the chosen tools. Thus, it is not about writing a report on what has been learnt, but authoring a new narrative that, if successful, can make the reader better understand the world through the thesis.

It is also important, I believe, to be aware that while the selection of analytical framework and conceptual tools facilitates analysis, it simultaneously places limits on what can be achieved. This applies to my Bakhtinian framework as well. My

acceptance in this thesis of Bakhtin's theory of meaning turned my focus towards specific utterances by different actors involved in Defi's project. This has, on the one hand, offered me interesting perspectives onto the aid world and my data and, on the other, and as the thesis shows, limited my analysis in some important respects as I now discuss.

Strengths of my Bakhtinian framework

In my thesis, I used my Bakhtinian framework throughout the chapters to analyze my data. I started by exploring Defi's development thinking where analysis rested upon Bakhtin's theorization of meaning construction and re-evaluation of meanings. Here, differentiating words from meanings laid the foundations for my inquiry and pointed out the need to look beyond the words. I enquired into Defi's development thinking from the following perspectives: first, I identified, aided by my textual analysis of project documents and Defi's interviews, the key words in the NGO's development thinking in connection to the Vietnam interventions; second, I traced utterances that revealed the meanings given to those words (for example, participation) by different actors; then, based on viewing Bakhtin's theory of meaning construction as a process in which time, space and experiences play a central role, I expanded my inquiry to cover the project director's life history. Here, I inquired how her past experiences impacted on her development thinking. For example, as noted in Chapter Six, the stress on 'self-reliance' in the NGO's development thinking is better understood against her earlier employment history, which had significantly shaped her world view.

My focus on meaning construction as an interplay of time, space and experiences, highlighted the following important issues: first, as time, space / place and experiences change, so do meanings. Development practice, therefore, is marked by contestation over meanings, as demonstrated by my study. This enabled me to approach Defi's development thinking, not as fixed or static, but as subject to transformations as outcomes of changes in time, space, and dialogical encounters, often as narratives of experiences. My Bakhtinian framework, therefore, allowed me not just to identify Defi's development thinking (which can also be achieved by close reading of project documents), but, in addition, to understand why specific words (and not other, readily available development buzzwords) occupy a central position in this NGO's development thinking.

Another important issue, evident from discussion in Chapter Six, is that my Bakhtinian reading facilitated my inquiry into Defi's development thinking but also helped me understand how it conceptually approached the development

problems that it aimed to solve by its interventions. The Bakhtinian framework, therefore, can deepen our understanding of a noted ‘problem’ within development practice, namely the changes that take place within projects when compared with the original, approved project plans.

I have shown in my study how, through my Bakhtinian analysis, gender may be analyzed in a productive way. A Bakhtinian reading may be used to analyze gendered norms and practices, but also how women’s experiences reflect the norms in ways that promote perceptions of how power works in the production of gender, and how heteroglossic accounts of gender constantly, if unsystematically, challenge monoglossic accounts. I also showed, as already discussed in 9.1., how Bakhtin’s theory of meaning construction helped me identify transformations in the meanings of key words and the relationship between the transformed meanings and changes in interventions, which, I argue, derived from dialogical encounters between key actors; as Defi learned more about its actual development context, the need to re-evaluate its development thinking and thus the solutions became evident. Therefore, my Bakhtinian framework offers an alternative way to look at changes within development projects.

Consider, in comparison, Mosse (2005), for example, who suggested that changes in development projects derive from the different interests and agendas of different actors. He further noted that in his case study project reports tracked changes in actual project practice, and development consultants then had to find a way to explain these changes in an acceptable manner to the donors. I do not argue against those findings. However, I find it useful to underline that utterances such as ‘having to explain’ communicate the unspoken belief that changes in development projects are considered problematic as they go against assumptions about expert knowledge and knowability (Fforde 2009) – both factors that aim to legitimize development aid through implicit claims that aid interventions are both logical and manageable. My approach to the question of changes within projects in this thesis is rather different. I call for more understanding of development contexts and argue that a Bakhtinian framework can help us in this task. Moreover, accepting that meanings are always contested and subject to change can also help us to understand that changes can be for good reasons and thus, for the better. This involves the acknowledgment that my understanding is limited due to my particular position and may lead me to misinterpretations of the context and thus, unsatisfactory solutions to the development problems to be tackled.

However, my application of a Bakhtinian framework also draws attention to the fact that encounters within development practice are not necessarily or solely what he called dialogical relationships; communication frequently has purposes

other than (possible) mutual learning. Bakhtin named such ‘dialogues’ monological or authoritarian, stressing the fact that monological utterances aim at influencing the other without the expectation that the other will reply, and pointing out that state utterances are often monological. In my research, I used Bakhtin’s notion of monologism as a conceptual tool to approach gendered norms in Vietnam. Taking earlier studies on gender in Vietnam as the starting point of my inquiry, I concluded that they share a view that Confucianism has significantly contributed to women’s subordinate position (to men) in Vietnamese society. My research experience suggests that a Bakhtinian reading helps us to approach ‘culture’ (whether it be Confucianism or gender) in a more nuanced way, making us aware of the heteroglossia within monoglossic accounts and helping to avoid the dangers of essentializing culture. For example, in Chapter Four of this study, I challenged monologic accounts of Confucianism by revisiting Confucian classics (the works of Kongzi [Confucius] and Mengzi [Mencius]). The historical analysis showed that early Confucianism indeed communicates gendered norms but, contrary to what many interpretations of late Confucian texts would have us believe, early Confucianism stresses the notion of a ‘noble man’ and consequently, focuses on norms that should shape men’s (rather than women’s) proper behaviour.

It should be noted that the Bakhtinian approach to gender is consistent with feminist scholarship that seeks to offer conceptual tools for altering gender relations. I conclude here that in addition to facilitating an inquiry into meanings in general, a Bakhtinian framework fruitfully contributes to gender and feminist studies, helping us analyze norms (as ideas) as subject to contestation, change and interpretation. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that Bakhtin has already inspired a number of feminist scholars (e.g. Bauer and McKinstry 1991, Hohne and Wussow 1994, Henderson 1992).

I turn now to discussing the limitations of this approach as illustrated by this study.

Limitations of my Bakhtinian framework

Weaknesses in the framework (as well as strengths) relate to using language as a central source of information. In my research, issues that could reasonably be assumed to exist within the context in some form or another, such as corruption (generally considered to be widespread in Vietnam) mostly remained unaddressed and consequently not part of my data. Therefore, one of the limitations is connected to my research methodology (textual analysis) as well as the Bakhtinian framework itself; as I adopted Bakhtin’s theory of meaning as one of the key tools

for my analysis, it simultaneously defined concrete utterances as the object of analysis as this is how Bakhtin claimed that meanings can be approached. However, issues such as corruption are sensitive in local contexts and seldom discussed openly and, in any case, I did not specifically ask questions about corruption as my focus was elsewhere. Only a few utterances that, for example, mention that only a little money remains at the local level can be fairly safely interpreted as referring to corrupt practices at different levels of the state apparatus. Yet it is fair to argue that any discussion of grassroots democracy should at least consider the outcomes of possible corrupt practices from the perspective of democratic culture.

The limitation of what is unsaid can, to some extent, be tackled by a researcher's contextualizing the data. For example, the Grassroots Democracy Decree by the Vietnamese state makes a direct reference to corruption, thus communicating that it was a widely acknowledged phenomenon and a problem within society at the time the decree was introduced. Nevertheless, my research methods as well as my analytical framework may easily fail to address corruption adequately, and any other important factor that is not spoken about. It is fair to assume that sometimes an interviewee may have, for example, a career ambition that strongly motivates his or her actions, but such an ambition may not be verbally articulated despite having an impact on what a person says or leaves unsaid during an interview. Such factors, again, may be difficult to capture with my Bakhtinian framework. Therefore, a researcher has always to settle for an incomplete picture of the context due to the limitations of the chosen analytical framework, or expand the range of research tools so as to tackle the limitations: long-term ethnographic fieldwork (Davies 2008; Cerwonka and Malkki 2007), for example, might better yield information about corruption, though it is also possible that such practices would be carefully concealed from an outsider to the commune, in this case, the researcher.

Abandoning essentialism – the core of a Bakhtinian approach

As should be evident from my study, my Bakhtinian approach abandons essentialism when it comes to ideas. Here it is important to stress that Bakhtin differentiated between ideas and things and his theory of meaning was more interested in ideas so even if it were possible to approach 'a tree' through a Bakhtinian analytical framework (in which case we could probably conclude that different people picture a different tree and even give different meanings for a tree based on their cultural contexts), I am more interested in how a Bakhtinian framework can aid us to identify meanings behind words that represent ideas rather than things. Hence, a Bakhtinian framework can facilitate our inquiry into participation, democracy

or marriage as ideas and it is here, in particular, that Bakhtin abandons essentialism and ontological stability. Instead, he argues for heteroglossia and different yet equal consciousnesses. Moreover, he points out that whilst monoglossic accounts of ideas are made possible by unequal power relations, they cannot do away with heteroglossia within a society.

I have further argued that aid practice is not free from monologism. The unequal power positions within aid practice offer tempting possibilities for essentialist, monologic claims. That may be one, but by no means the only, reason for the problems faced in democracy promotion. If we take it for granted that we know, for example, what democracy is or what it should be, then it is only a short way to establishing an authoritarian, monologic dialogue with our partners. If these ideas are rejected or not understood by our partners, it may be easier to find reasons for our failure in the context ('authoritarian past', 'culture') than to test our own thinking; my understanding is that development practice is vulnerable to authoritarian dialogue as aid is structured in ways that enable it. Further, my thesis suggests that inclusion of a Bakhtinian framework (or something similar) within the knowledge deployed as part of development practice reduces this tendency.

9.5 Final remarks and suggestions for further research

It has become evident during the process of my research that development knowledge cannot be or, if you like, should not be separated from contextual knowledge, which should include an inquiry into meanings as contextual. This, I believe, is evident in light of my own study as well as noted by earlier research.

In my study I have proposed various ways in which language matters, thereby contributing to our understanding of aid practice as a contested field of activity by showing how its language and meanings contribute to contestation. However, more empirical research would be needed to show how language actually matters and what implications it may have for development practice, including, perhaps, some not investigated in this study. Here, I have suggested that we pay attention to words but that we do not stop there. More importantly, we need to understand the meanings behind the words and how (different) meanings given to the words manifest themselves in aid practice. Language in this sense can add to our understanding of an actor's behaviour, thus complementing valuable perspectives in earlier research and by other disciplines, especially by ethnographers.

Moreover, a focus on language, and what is said, can help us excavate differences between gender policies and gender outcomes. More critical research is

needed on gendered norms, on the one hand, and how these norms are negotiated in real life experiences, on the other, to add to our knowledge of the grounds on which essentialist accounts of gender may be challenged in a particular cultural context in order to increase gender equality in democratization.

Finally, my research process indicates that there is lack of knowledge of how to enhance democratic practices in non-democratic / authoritarian political contexts. It is important to remember that according to Kaldor and Kostovica (2008) democracy in Asia may be best promoted by stimulation of debate and deliberation and by liberating space for the growth of civil society. More empirical research, however, is needed to discover what these 'civil society spaces' might comprise in authoritarian political contexts because civil society-like activities may exist in spaces other than those we expect and therefore seek out. Furthermore, democracy in many parts of Asia is perhaps, and perhaps inevitably, best promoted in cooperation with the state, which demands, however, a critical mass within the Party in the context of a one-party state for it to have an impact beyond the local level. The question thus arises whether it is realistic to assume that aid practice, especially small-scale interventions by foreign NGOs, could ever do more than merely set an example. More longitudinal studies of development interventions in the context of one-party states are therefore needed to see to what extent aid projects can, in fact, contribute to creating democratic practices beyond the project frame.

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