

## **Operationalising the SARD-Initiative in Viet Nam**



Exjobb masters thesis in Environmental Communication submitted to Department of Urban and Rural Development, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Uppsala.

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## Executive summary

The SARD (Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development) Initiative is a partnership programme which emerged at the World Summit of Sustainable Development in 2002 to support the implementation of Agenda 21, Chapter 14. Described as a multi-stakeholder umbrella framework designed to support the transition to people-centred sustainable agriculture and rural development it is intended as a civil society led, government supported, FAO facilitated undertaking. The SEI/SLU Consortium is responsible for implementing the Upscaling component of the Initiative. This report describes the findings from a pilot study exploring the options for operationalising the Initiative in Viet Nam.

It was from the outset found that the SEI/SLU Consortium applies a specific understanding of the notions of Good Practices and Upscaling. Consequently, it is suggested to use the notion of Good Processes to avoid confusion with FAO Good Practices, also used in Sustanet, which are clearly more technical. This will reflect more rightly that the Consortium's contribution is aimed specifically at the stakeholder process of the Initiative.

A limited response has been observed from civil society actors to the Initiative, especially from grassroots level. The current interpretation of the Initiative may play a significant role in determining this situation as it uncritically perpetuates a highly politicised discourse of civil society in a contested context of multistakeholder dialogue. This depends on 'civil society' being a core concept in a political programme that aims at building good governance based on democratic principles, and four contingencies have been identified that can disqualify the Initiative to certain actors and render it vulnerable to appropriation. The Initiative is therefore re-interpreted from a process perspective to represent a manifestation of tension between hierarchical and self-organisation modes of system adaptation. To enable the focal selves to organise according to own intentions two prerequisites are used: Self-reference (R) and Interpretation (I). In this light, Good Processes are seen as dependent on the creation of a harmonious R/I-relation.

Based on 3 months field work in Viet Nam current civil society-like negotiation processes are identified, and indigenous selves with low- and high-R/I relations are explored. Space for engaging in relevant dialogues is present in Viet Nam for the implementation of the Initiative, and a causal feedback loop between sustainability of upland agriculture and self-organising capacity of indigenous selves provides a clear motivation for further planning. The village and the community are characterised as high-R/I selves. They have relatively high internal referencing but low interpretive ability and are experiencing a severe re-configuring imposition from hierarchical closure. This imposition derives mainly from reinvigoration of Oneness in the Viet Nameese State. Recent closure changes, such as decentralisation, land reform, and grassroots democracy seem yet to exert little counter-balancing influence. Low-R/I selves consist of for example more recently formed interest groups and community-based organisations as well as the Mass Organisations. They are proximately predominantly shaped by a creative form of closure deriving from the growing world of especially Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Viet Nam. Despite advances in the level of organisation of both international and local NGOs, this has not led to self-organisation in the sense of the concept applied in this study. The existence of a perception of 'lacking response' from ethnic minorities should be seen as representing a huge discrepancy between closure and interpretable environment for indigenous selves. To enable a search for Good Processes that can contribute to a more constructive interplay between local self-organisation and hierarchy closure, the notion of Civil Indigeneity is put forward. It is defined as the ability of indigenous selves to strike a helpful balance between self-reference and interpretation of closure which enables them to self-organise and adapt. On a preliminary basis three starting points for assisting in developing this ability are presented: Spread of interpretation by practice, the importance of allowing self-reference, and the current lacking appreciation of a local level negotiation process for resource management. Some ideas are provided for further project design in Viet Nam.

## **Preface**

This report is submitted to Department of Urban and Rural Development, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Uppsala, as Exjobb masters thesis in Environmental Communication. It has been tailored for the SEI/SLU Consortium with the hope of contributing to the planning towards implementation of the SARD-Initiative in Viet Nam. When not otherwise specified the views expressed in this report represent the author's interpretation. Being one piece of a dialogue comments would be much appreciated.

## **Acknowledgements**

The RDViet Office at Hue University (Nong Lam Dai Hoc Hue) assisted as local partner during the field work and I wish to thank Dr. Le Duc Ngoan, Mrs. Huynh Thi Anh Phuong and Mr. Ho Thanh Ha for their very kind help with all sorts of practicalities and for patiently answering my many and surely sometimes naive questions. Mr. Ha obligingly introduced me to some of his many friends and helped me around town. Mr. Tran Nam Tu was completing his MSc. thesis in the RDViet programme but was never too busy to turn off the computer and help me. Dr. Le Van An from the International Affairs Office was extremely helpful in providing advice and helping with preparation of official letters and permits for field work. The master students in the RDViet Program helped me meet people involved in rural development and agriculture, with translation of letters, and many other practical affairs. Many thanks to Mrs. Marja Ojanen Jarlind, Mr. Nguyen Viet Hung and the people in the Chia Se project for making the field trip to Yen Bai possible. Thanks to ICRAF-Vietnam for creating the contact and for general advice. This report should be seen as a joint result of many people's ideas and time, although the responsibility for the viewpoints presented naturally is mine alone. Thank you to all who contributed to the work. I also wish to thank Sida for their financial support to the pilot project, and Dr. Neil Powell at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences for his will to make this project happen and sending me to Viet Nam. Finally, thank you Jom for coming to me in Viet Nam and for your understanding whenever work took the better of me.

Cover photo: A Dao household in Van Chan District, Yen Bai Province.

## **Chapter I: Introduction – the SARD-Initiative**

### **The SARD-Initiative**

The SARD (Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development) Initiative (from now simply 'Initiative') is a partnership programme which emerged at the World Summit of Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002 to support the implementation of Agenda 21, Chapter 14.

The main objective of the Initiative is:

*'To support the transition to people centered sustainable agriculture (including fisheries and forestry) and rural development oriented to conserving, restoring and improving environmental, economic and social well-being while meeting the world's food needs'* (FAO, undated a, p. 3).

The Initiative is described as *'a multi-stakeholder umbrella framework designed to support the transition to people-centred sustainable agriculture and rural development and to strengthen participation in programme and policy development'*<sup>1</sup> and is intended as a *'civil society led, government supported, FAO facilitated undertaking'* (see also FAO, undated a). Being a flexible structure, participants from governments, inter-governmental organisations, and civil society can enter the Initiative with own sub-initiatives and leave as they wish. Its suggested process of implementation sets the Initiative apart from other, and prior, attempts to realise SARD, as well as sustainable development at large. The civil society leadership is provided by a Major Group Mechanism, embedded in the Agenda 21 framework from the Rio Earth Summit (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, UNCED) in 1992. The implementation of the Initiative is envisioned to follow a process of multistakeholder dialogue on various levels of policy and practice.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) is Task Manager for SARD and global facilitator for the SARD Initiative. In response to specific requests from rural communities and stakeholder groups, FAO aims to (objectives shortened)<sup>2</sup>:

- 1) Supply training, methods, tools etc. for specific problems
- 2) Promote information sharing
- 3) Build capacity to implement, monitor, and evaluate policies, programmes, and practices for SARD
- 4) Strengthen civil society institutions and facilitate development of new fora for dialogue with government

The expected outcome of the Initiative is the speedier implementation of SARD and chapter 14 of Agenda 21. The design and inception phases completed, the Initiative has now entered the implementation phases, scheduled to run from 2003 to 2008<sup>3</sup>.

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1 <http://www.fao.org/wssd/sard>

2 From <http://www.fao.org/wssd/sard/> (A fifth point was mentioned). The process behind these objectives' coming into being is not known. The objectives are found in a slightly different phrasing in the SARD Initiative Progress Report.

3 The themes and priorities to be addressed by the Initiative emerged and were discussed at a series of events: The 8<sup>th</sup> session of the CSD, (Commission of Sustainable Development) (2000); the SARD Forum held concurrently with the FAO Committee on Agriculture (2001); the World Food Summit, 2002 (<http://www.fao.org/worldfoodsummit/>); The International Conference on SARD in Mountain Regions (2002); The SARD Electronic Forum (2002-present); Several local and national consultations; and the WSSD preparatory process.

### The SARD-Initiative as a Partnership for Sustainable Development

The SARD-Initiative is one of the Partnerships for Sustainable Development. These are described as voluntary, multistakeholder initiatives that emerged as complementary outcomes of the WSSD, aimed at implementing sustainable development as described in Agenda 21, the reports from UN General Assembly 'Rio+5' special session and Johannesburg Programme of Implementation<sup>4</sup>. As of February last year 300 partnerships were registered with the UN's Commission on Sustainable Development Secretariat's Partnerships for Sustainable Development<sup>5</sup>. Nine Donor Countries had by last year signed up to support the SARD-Initiative (FAO, undated b).

Development partnerships are widely seen as a valuable means to boost effectiveness in international development (Runde, 2006), and the UN has increasingly been using a partnership building strategy in recent years (UN General Assembly, 2003). In this light it is interesting that civil society responds to this change by highlighting a series of constraints to pursuing this path of increased civil society involvement. These include claims that: The United Nations system of governance is undemocratic; national governments show growing resistance to civil society involvement, which inhibits dialogue; and that capacity-building programmes continue to be top-down and Northern driven (World Civil Society Forum Group, 2003). In turn, it has within the UN been pointed out, that motives of civil society organisations are being questioned, including their representativity and legitimacy especially when they seem to push a Northern agenda (UN General Assembly, 2004). These comments are recurrent, and it seems that the SARD-Initiative may represent a significant learning process for all stakeholders involved<sup>6</sup>.

### Major Groups and Multistakeholder Dialogue

The SARD-Initiative draws upon the Major Group Mechanism. The Major Groups represents a division of civil society into nine Groups who can coordinate their contribution and participation to the discussions in UN regarding sustainable development<sup>7</sup>. Originally, this was seen as a new form of participation, which emerged from the United Nation's Conference on Environment and Development in Rio in 1992. Major Groups are perceived as partners in the WSSD follow-up and they are expected to give inputs to the Commission on Sustainable Development meetings and enter cooperation with other partners. Their participation is guided by so-called Major Group Entry Points. More than 700 representatives from 134 Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) contributed to the Commission on Sustainable Development of 14 May 2006<sup>8</sup>, and Major Group participation at the regional level appears currently to be in progress. In line with future organisation of the work of the Commission on Sustainable Development, Regional Implementation Meetings are suggested to provide for contributions from Major Groups (CSD, 2003). A Focal Point<sup>9</sup> has been appointed for

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4 JPOI: <http://www.un.org/jsummit/html/documents/documents.html>

5 <http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/partnerships/partnerships.htm>

6 Thorough detail is today given to the study and prospects of UN governance reform and may be of interest for the implementation of the SARD-initiative, especially experiences with best practices in management of multistakeholder partnerships (e.g. Malena, 2004), or information networks like the Non-Governmental Liaison Service ([www.un.ngls.org](http://www.un.ngls.org))

7 The major Groups comprise, as defined by Agenda 21, women, children and youth, indigenous people, non-governmental organizations, local authorities, workers and trade unions, business and industry, scientific and technological communities, and farmers

8 <http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/csd/csd14/mg/guidelines.htm>

9 Representative person or organisation with responsibility for facilitating SARD communication. Major Groups Focal Point as described below represents their specific segments of civil society at for instance meetings within the Commission on Sustainable Development.

Regional Implementation Meetings development in Asia and the Pacific<sup>10</sup>, and a Regional Commission Meeting was scheduled for January, 2006. The work via the Major Groups is perceived as a multistakeholder dialogue. Multistakeholder Dialogue Sessions and Segments are held at the Commission on Sustainable Development where representatives of the Major Groups can raise their concerns. FAO also seeks to maintain this dialogue by meetings in the Major Group Forum. This represents a high-level dialogue with clear policy aims.

### **Evolution of the SARD-concept and the Initiative**

The roots of the SARD concept are to be found in the growing environmental awareness of the 1980s, and its fundamental idea dates back to the discussions revolving around the Brundtland Report of 1987. Acknowledging that the capacity to meet the demands for food of an increasing population by the year 2025 was uncertain, Chapter 14 of Agenda 21 argued the need to integrate sustainable development considerations with agricultural policy, particularly in developing countries to enhance food security. This led to the crystallisation of the concept of SARD at the UNCED. The SARD Programme of Action, as presented in the Agenda 14, aims predominantly at policy level, asking for action by national governments. The role of peoples' participation was from the outset appreciated, but action initially expected by governments.

At the 16<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Committee on Agriculture in 2001 FAO presented its view that *'while SARD remains a valid development paradigm... new and sometimes contentious developments have rapidly altered perceptions and issues in agriculture and rural society'* (FAO, 2001). FAO sees SARD as both a paradigm for holistic development and as promoting success with respect to the Millennium Development Goals as well as other targets. Consequently, it was acknowledged that albeit encouraging developments had emerged since the Earth Summit, many objectives had not been met. Recognising thus, in line with the general apprehension of Agenda 21 outcomes in the late 1990s (Langeweg, 1998), the Committee on Agriculture seized the chance for reflection on the evolution of the SARD concept prior to the WSSD in 2002, where renewed discussion were to be held. One of the important changes in perceptions of SARD since Rio was in this dialogue seen to be the expansion of the idea of sustainability to comprise not only environment, but also social, economic and institutional affairs. It followed, that trade-offs had to be made and losses in natural capital accepted to satisfy local requirements (FAO, 2001). This more holistic understanding of sustainability may be seen to have provided a more flexible basis for constructive dialogue allowing for the Initiative to emerge.

From experiences with implementing SARD it had been realised that the methods of implementation had to vary between cases, but that the need for stakeholder dialogue was cross-cutting (FAO, 2001). Consequently, in the preparatory process for WSSD, a decision was made to increase the role of stakeholder partnerships with active participation of civil society. The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation adopted at the WSSD provided a framework for renewed action to implement the original UNCED goals and in the Commission on Sustainable Development preparatory process increased attention was given to creating the needed multistakeholder dialogue. The Partnership Programmes, including the SARD-Initiative, emerged to appreciate this process, whilst FAO and government partners continue to work for SARD also in other ways. The SARD-Initiative may in this light be seen

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10 Ms. Rikke Munk Hansen, Economic Affairs Officer, Environment and Sustainable Development United Nations Building, Rajdamnern Avenue, Bangkok, Thailand.



as a high-level re-interpretation and amendment of the initial SARD-concept of Agenda 21. With reference to the principles of sustainable development as outlined in the Agenda 21, the SARD-Initiative may be seen to specifically emphasise the ability to ‘*act on a partnership basis*’ (Principle 4), so that SARD can ‘*be socially just*’ (Principle 3). Hereby, the operationalisation and implementation processes may be perceived to foster an ability to ‘*think globally, act locally*’ (Principle 5).

As should be evident, the Initiative distinguishes from earlier generation of efforts to achieve SARD, or SARD-like objectives, in that it is a global initiative with an elaborate network of supporting mechanisms for multistakeholder dialogue and cooperation. A network intended to span from global to local scale. The SARD-Initiative thus represents one of the recent developments in thought on behalf of the ‘international community’ concerned with poverty, hunger and environmental degradation – and especially the inter-linkages between these conditions. For the generations brought up during the spread of the environmental movement in the North initiatives like this may be perceived as spearheads in the efforts to really do something about sustainable development.



**Figure 1:** The next generation of Viet Namese playing around rice field. Thua Thien Hue Province

#### On track and with expectations

The SARD-Initiative seems from the information provided by FAO to be well on track at central level. A side-event on SARD and civil society was held at the 19<sup>th</sup> session of the Committee on Agriculture, and the SARD-Initiative Business Meeting was held in October 2005, where six of eight Major Groups and the FAO SARD-Initiative Team met in Rome to review achievements and set goals for the coming year. Expectations are high that the SARD-Initiative will contribute significantly to the Commission on Sustainable Development 2008/2009 cycle where themes of agriculture and rural development, among others, are to be addressed. A detailed description of the evolution and milestones in the development of the SARD-Initiative has been provided by the FAO SARD Team<sup>11</sup>.

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11 <http://www.fao.org/sard>

## The broad strategy for achieving SARD

### Good Practices

The attention given to Good Practices represents one of four Focus Areas of the Initiative, but appears to be the key action-oriented means to meet its overall aim<sup>12</sup>. Also, the upscaling and replication of Good Practices is one of three Immediate Objectives of the Initiative, the two others being the enhanced access to information and concrete actions taken by grassroots (FAO, undated b). It has been appreciated that Good Practices is ‘*a growing theme in national and international development, working towards sustainable systems and appropriate technology for agriculture*’ (Neely and Forster, 2002, p.1). This was seen as recognising the importance of wider stakeholder participation to scale up both innovative and traditional practices. The attention to Good Practices existed already during the stakeholder consultations in the preparatory process for the WSSD (Neely and Forster, 2002) but it is not clear how they initially came to attract attention. It has nonetheless become a major premise of the SARD concept and its implementation that good practices exist and can be shared among groups and regions.

Defining Practice as ‘*an action, approach, innovation, solution, process, experience or a technology that has been viable over time or introduces change at local, national or international level*’<sup>13</sup>, this may include both how people interact with each other and with the environment.

Good Practices has been defined by FAO as ‘*practices that produce measurable impacts toward the achievement of development outcomes while being environmentally sound, socially just, culturally sensitive, economically viable and technically practical. A good practice is sustainable, effective, efficient, replicable (easily adopted by a wide range of communities facing similar constraints), responds to real local needs and is adapted to the specific local conditions*’<sup>14</sup>.

In this light, it is particularly surprising that the focus hitherto has been almost exclusively on technical issues, also as it has been recurrently recognised that political and institutional aspects play a major constraining role in the sharing of Good Practices (see e.g. Sustainet, 2006). For instance, the Sustainet project (see p. 12), describes its rationale for action: Much experience has been gathered as to the practices that promote sustainable agriculture, but that economic, social, and political constraints hinder their wider application and transfer of knowledge. Further, defined by clearly subjective and value laden terminology it can already from the outset be imagined that whilst Good Practices may on the surface seem to unite stakeholders, marked disagreements can be contained within what is experienced as ‘just’, ‘sensitive’, or indeed ‘good’.

### Up-scaling of Good Practices

At the SARD-Initiative Business Meeting 2006 in Rome a SARD Initiative Implementation Plan for Multi-Donor Trust Fund Components was drafted. Assuming that Good Practices can be replicated between contexts, one of the three components was ‘Good practices upscaled and replicated’ (from SLU/SEI, 2006). A ‘communicative’ approach is being taken on behalf of FAO SARD Team with initial focus on information sharing, participatory communications, training and visits, and there are hopes of capitalising on the experiences of other SARD

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12 <http://www.fao.org/SARD/en/init/964/index.html>

13 <http://www.fao.org/sard>

14 <http://www.fao.org/SARD/en/init/964/1578/index.html>

related Partnerships. The Resource Facility has been created to share experiences and knowledge of Good Practices<sup>15</sup>, hosting or linking to a range of e-platforms for information sharing. Naturally, the proper use of these resources presupposes the access to internet and knowledge of their existence. Via the Upscaling Component, the SARD-Initiative seeks 'to build the capacity of poor rural communities to become aware of and adopt good practices that facilitate the transition to SARD'<sup>16</sup>. At the SARD-Initiative Good Practices Workshop in 2005, the participants from the International Farming Systems Association's Global Learning Opportunity (IFSA GLO) explored aspects of Good Practices and their use. Four phases were recognised in the use of and dealing with Good Practices (Identification; Assessment; Sharing; and Upscaling) (IFSA GLO, 2005).

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15 <http://www.fao.org/SARD/en/init/1574/index.html>

16 <http://www.fao.org/sard>

## Chapter II: Enabling civil society response via the Initiative

### Accomplishments within the Initiative

The FAO Resource Secretariat maintains a Database of Success Stories<sup>17</sup>, and communicates information about outputs for SARD in general. A Compendium of Land and SARD cases was compiled to support FAO's Task Manager Report to the Commission on Sustainable Development 2002 (Pretty, 2001), and the Retrospective Study by Constance L. Neely used multistakeholder criteria developed with the Focal Points for the Major Groups to review selected sources (Neely, undated). This can be put in wider context of the efforts made by the Commission on Sustainable Development Secretariat since 1997 to record successful efforts to implement Agenda 21<sup>18</sup>. Several workshops and events have been held in 2006 alone, including a Good Practices scaling up workshop at FAO headquarters, and a side-event at the International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development in Brazil March 2006, where civil society participation was judged to be significant<sup>19</sup>. A project tool-kit has been developed for the promotion of sustainability in management of agricultural and rural development projects (FAO, undated c), and FAO has provided an extensive collection of information material on SARD and the SARD-Initiative<sup>20</sup>, including materials on furthering peoples' participation, gender-relations, and natural resource management. In this almost scholarly search for knowledge of approaches and tools, many avenues may still be open for exploration, and innumerable organisations, networks and projects are playing ball on local and global levels with aspects which may share more or less clearly the ideas of SARD and the Initiative<sup>21</sup>.

The Sustainet project was launched by the German Council for Sustainable Development, as part of the Programme of Action 2015 of the German Federal Government for combating extreme poverty and hunger. It is implemented as a joint project by GTZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit) and several German NGOs and aid organisations (Sustainet, 2004), and is recognised as one of the SARD-Initiative's partners. The objective of the Sustainet project is '*to systematically evaluate possible scaling-up processes of sustainable agriculture concepts by compiling structured information on success factors and dissemination constraints*' (Coulibaly et al., 2004, p. 1). Suitable best practices are aimed to be furthered via intermediary local organisations in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The Scaling-up objectives of Sustainet focus on the spread of agricultural practices, where the civil society mechanisms are seen as means hereto<sup>22</sup>. As used by Sustainet, scaling-up can be furthered vertically (between groups) and horizontally (regional dissemination). The framework developed by Uvin and Miller (1999) is used for further sub-dividing the Scaling up process into e.g. quantitative and qualitative types. The Initial Workshop was held in India in September 2004 with Indian NGOs and 17 listed project partners. Stockholm Environment Institute was involved, presenting ideas on mainstreaming SARD in national planning. Mismatches were revealed between the Government of India's report for WSSD and the National Development Plan where SARD was not mentioned. Consensus emerged, that lack of political will and enabling environment were main hindrances to national implementation rather than lacking knowledge of Good Practices. This seems to necessitate a

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17 <http://www.fao.org/wssd/sard/stories-en.htm>

18 <http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/mgroups/success.htm>

19 <http://www.fao.org/sard/en/init/1364/index.html>

20 <http://www.fao.org/SARD>

21 It could be relevant to compare with activities of the Institute of Development Studies (<http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/pvty/pvfoodfac.html>), working for instance in Ethiopia

22 <http://www.sustainet.org>

reflection of the focus of the Initiative and the Upscaling component, but it appears that issues related to civil society self-organisation were not addressed. This may be due to the condition that the existence of a relatively elaborate NGO network in India creates a feeling that this is not one of the major constraints. However, it was mentioned that privatisation has lessened the voice of NGOs in Indian agriculture (Sustainet, 2006). In general, Sustainet may be a very valuable source for ideas<sup>23</sup>. Sustainet project partners are also listed for Kenya, Tanzania, Peru and Bolivia<sup>24</sup>. Bolivia is together with India presented as a candidate country for SARD-Initiative implementation in 2006<sup>25</sup>.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO), a specialised agency of the UN, and the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF), an international federation of trade unions for workers in agriculture and other branches, have collaborated on a number of joint outputs. With FAO, they work with SARD in its relation to the conditions for agricultural and rural workers and promote the contribution to SARD of both workers and trade unions (FAO, undated d). With the spread of market forces and wage labour the 'worker' becomes a key subject in the improvements of livelihoods for disadvantaged and marginalised groups. FAO and ILO have compiled some ideas on how these workers can contribute to SARD (FAO-ILO-IUF, 2005).

As presented by the Resource Secretariat a number of actors, predominantly from academia and government agencies, have supported the Initiative. In Viet Nam the Agricultural Science Institute (VASI)<sup>26</sup> conducted research into participatory rural environmental management (Doanh et al., 2004). The International Centre for Sustainable Development of Rural Areas (ICSAD) has begun the work on a range of activities for developing a nationwide information system, including agricultural extension centres, education services, and micro-credit schemes. Several other supporting initiatives are listed, including a research study on human-wildlife conflicts, and the German non-profit UNSER LAND Umbrella Organisation with the overall goal to allow civil society to shape their living environment. These 'initiatives' do not however seem to have explicit linkage to the SARD-Initiative, or indeed the SARD-concept of Agenda 21, and appear to represent collected material for information sharing.

A range of specific civil society contributions has been collected by FAO. These contributions appear to be contracted via a grants scheme from FAO (SARD Initiative Team, 2005). In addition it seems a number of projects in Guyana have used SARD criteria in their work but it is unclear if these projects are linked to the Initiative<sup>27</sup>.

Kenya has been identified as a target country for 2006. Through multistakeholder consultation between FAO, Major Groups, the National Environmental Management Authority, which is Commission on Sustainable Development Focal Point in Kenya, and other civil society actors the Kenyan Freedom from Hunger Council was selected as overall national facilitator. This work seems also to be supported by GTZ's Sustainet. A workshop for sharing of knowledge on Good Practices was held by the Global Livestock Working Group<sup>28</sup> in Namanga March 2006. Convened by the national SARD Civil Society Focal Point, local stakeholders from

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23 One of the anchor persons on SUSAINET has been contacted by email but with no reply

24 <http://www.sustainet.org>

25 <http://www.fao.org/SARD/en/init/967/index.html>

26 Which has now gone through organisational restructuring (see Chapter XII)

27 See <http://www.agrinetguyana.org.gy/sard/index.htm>

28 Launched at IFSA GLO 2005 (<http://www.ifsaglo2005.org/info/themes.html>)

pastoralist communities, SARD Major Groups in Kenya, and international guests and government actors participated (FAO, undated e). Activities for implementation of the Upscaling component in Zambia appear to have been initiated but no information has been found by the author. In Viet Nam, no response has been recorded from civil society, or from any other stakeholders.

### **Exercise of civil society leadership**

There appears from the above to be limited response from civil society to the Initiative and it is relevant to consider in more detail how the civil society leadership and multistakeholder dialogue can be exercised.

#### FAO's role as facilitator

In addition to being Task Manager for chapter 14 of Agenda 21, FAO is acting as facilitator for the SARD-Initiative. FAO hosts the SARD-Initiative Secretariat, and conducts its facilitating role in close consultation with the Major Groups. FAO was from the outset, i.e. since UNCED in 1992, perceived as a neutral, technical agency, to be uniquely positioned to play a crucial role in taking messages related to agricultural challenges to international attention of national governments, civil society organisations and the private sector (FAO, 2001). With the management of the SARD-Initiative and its multistakeholder dialogue, however, FAO may be seen as having entered affairs that are somehow more complicated than when it initially set out to defeat hunger. Until the WSSD and the launch of the SARD-Initiative, FAO had a more passive facilitating role for the work towards SARD. After years with limited outcomes this role has changed slightly to involve more direct advocacy for action and the hosting/initiation of dialogues. Naturally, this changes FAO's status as 'neutral, technical', entering the scene of political dialogue. Despite the continued reliance on scientific knowledge as foundation for action, it has been recognised that views are dependent on interests and needs (FAO, 2001), but it seems appropriate to draw attention to the fact that during the evolution of the SARD-concept and Initiative, also the ground for situating it properly in societal context has changed, probably rightfully, and it seems no longer suitable to view the Initiative, or the role of FAO or any other involved agency, as apolitical, neutral or purely technical.

#### Mechanisms for civil society leadership and structures for dialogue

The Major Group Business Meeting appears to be the highest discussion forum within the Initiative for negotiating the path of implementation, e.g. channelling of funds. In turn, FAO receives guidance from the Committee on Agriculture. The Monitoring and Evaluation System of the Initiative further appears imperative to secure participants' control and ownership of the Initiative's activities, but it has not been possible to find information about its mechanisms.

The Major Groups Mechanism seems as such to comprise the most significant entry point for civil society. Non-governmental actors who wish to participate in Commission on Sustainable Development meetings are subject to rules set out by the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) (ECOSOC, 2005). These organisations are accredited by the UN to be granted consultative status by the ECOSOC Committee on NGOs, consisting of 19 member countries. Some were accredited in 1992 to the UNCED, others have been granted rights to participate later, e.g. by placement on the Commission on Sustainable Development Roster (ECOSOC, 1996). The Major Groups Mechanism allows representation of these organisations at the Commission on Sustainable Development meetings, and represents a fairly high-level entry



point to the Commission on Sustainable Development, and Regional Implementation Meetings. Non-governmental and non-profit organisations with competence to do so are continuously encouraged by FAO and other partners to engage in the Initiative, and the SARD Working Group involves Focal Points from eight of the nine Major Groups<sup>29</sup>. With relevance for this pilot study, it is noted that Indigenous Peoples are represented by the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC)<sup>30</sup>, Farmers by International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP)<sup>31</sup>, and NGOs by International Partners for Sustainable Agriculture (IPSA)<sup>32</sup> (FAO, undated b). The Focal Points assist the Project Team in the operationalisation of the Initiative, and engage in activities of implementing the Initiative. At FAO head quarter in Rome this work is facilitated by a Project Coordinator, a SARD Officer, a Major Groups – Civil Society Organisations Liaison Officer, and a Resource Facility Manager. IPSA was created as a programme of EarthVoice, an NGO which in turn was created as a global environmental arm of the Humane Society of the United States in 1991. Grounded on a belief that *‘the fate of planet Earth and its vast diversity of living organisms [are] being threatened with destruction and extinction as never before in history’* EarthVoice works with IPSA *‘to promote organic production and to stop the spread of factory farms abroad’*<sup>33</sup>. There is therefore a need for IPSA to reconcile the objectives carried with the status as Focal Point with those of its own in order to fully take on the communication of diverse messages. IITC sent out a call for participation in response to its admittance as Focal Point on an interim basis. Here, it was recognised that the Initiative could further the Indigenous Peoples organisations’ interests, mainly in facilitating communication with like-minded organisations<sup>34</sup>. It is an open question, however, whether people whom by others may be seen as ‘indigenous’ may feel best represented by this group or via e.g. the Farmers or Women’s Major Group. It is often seen that populations that well could classify as ‘indigenous’ choose not to ask for this identity as they perceive their needs and interest better accommodated by other means (e.g. in Barnes et al., 1995). A great deal of coordination could be achieved via the National Focal Points for Commission on Sustainable Development, as well as through the national FAO Offices in UN member countries. However, this represents very formal government and FAO channels which may sometimes be little conducive for civil society voices. Also the development of Government anchored SARD-activities within for instance National Sustainable Development Plans may play an important role for civil society involvement. Finally, there appears to be room for spontaneous self-organisation of civil society actors within the framework of the Major Groups mechanism. For example, a group of NGOs, the Sustainable Agriculture/Food Systems (SAFS) Caucus from the Association of Barbados NGOs, meet under the auspices of the Commission on Sustainable Development NGO Steering Committee with IPSA as Secretariat. The SAFS Caucus coordinates inputs to the Commission on Sustainable Development meetings, especially at the Multistakeholder Dialogue sessions, from its member organisations. It is described as a self-organised group, with regional focal points and various issue caucuses (SAFS Caucus, undated).

In addition to the global SARD-Initiative, a special platform for SARD in mountain regions (SARD-M) was set up in 2002 – the Adelboden Group. The Declaration adopted at the Adelboden International Conference states that the Group is intended as *“a platform for discussion of policies and policy instruments, exchange of experience, and preparation of*

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29 Local Government has not yet designated a Focal Point

30 IITC, Rolland Pangovish, ([rolland@treatycouncil.org](mailto:rolland@treatycouncil.org))

31 IFAP, David King, ([david.king@ifap.org](mailto:david.king@ifap.org))

32 IPSA, Linda Elswick, ([ipsa@igc.org](mailto:ipsa@igc.org))

33 <http://www.earthvoice.org>

34 [http://www.treatycouncil.org/new\\_page\\_5241224213.htm](http://www.treatycouncil.org/new_page_5241224213.htm)

*initiatives*' (Adelboden Declaration, 2002). The key objective is *'to facilitate the design, implementation and evaluation of new policies for sustainable agriculture and rural development in mountain regions'*<sup>35</sup>. Keeping in line with its 'discursive' intensions, the SARD-M project aims to conduct this facilitation in 2006 via assessments of mountain policies, analyses of negative externalities of mountain regions, and the strengthening of local institutions via training materials and courses (Adelboden Declaration, 2002). For Asia, International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) has been appointed Regional Focal Point (FAO, 2006).

A Partnership E-forum is being developed to enhance communication and coordination between Partnerships. The details of the Partnership Programme can be found on the Commission on Sustainable Development Partnerships Database, including list of partners, goals and objectives, and targets and progress<sup>36</sup>. Progress reports are submitted to the Commission on Sustainable Development and can be presented at the Commission on Sustainable Development Partnerships Fair. The E-conference on Assessing Progress and Next Steps on Land has extended from the first Rio+10 round in 2001 and participants can sign up to contribute to the dialogue via direct involvement, case studies, and further involvement via stakeholder meetings<sup>37</sup>. The outcomes of the first round between 24 June and 17 August 2002 are presented in Neely & Forster (2002). The Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) seems also to be involved in the SARD-Initiative and has joined also in a CGIAR-NGO Committee.

### **Limited grassroots response**

Continued support, representative and motivated response, and continued willingness from the Initiative's stakeholders are all listed as Important Risks/Assumptions for the Initiative's implementation (FAO, undated b). It is thus greatly appreciated that the successful implementation of the Initiative depends crucially on the positive and lasting response from civil society. Regarding actual and widespread civil society response the accomplishments are however few.

The mechanisms for civil society leadership are embedded in relatively formal FAO channels. Together with the structures for multistakeholder dialogue this may enforce a quite strict understanding of the Initiative on potential stakeholders, and contain certain prejudices as to who such stakeholders are and how they can be involved. Further, it seems that despite the Task Manager's intentions of taking a more active role in the facilitation of dialogue, most achievement remain within high-level policy discussions or different forms of information sharing. It has also been noted by FAO SARD Team that the Major Groups do not fully represent the civil society or social actors with interest in sustainable development, and that many groups and social movements feel that they either are not well represented or have interests as stakeholders that cannot be channelled via these Groups (In Motion Magazine, 2002). Remembering also that some NGOs may compete in attracting funds and members, it is little surprising that 'calls for participation' if only voiced by emails or newsletters may lead to limited response. Being a flexible and dynamic 'organism', it may sometimes be difficult to delineate the SARD-Initiative from other Initiatives and efforts. For example, several of the papers presented on the SARD Initiative Good Practice Database do not include

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35 <http://www.fao.org/SARD/en/sardm/about/650/index.html>

36 <http://webapps01.un.org/dsd/partnerships/public/partnerships/28.html>

37 [http://www.fao.org/wssd/land/econf\\_en.htm](http://www.fao.org/wssd/land/econf_en.htm)



any mention of their relation to SARD<sup>38</sup>. It appears that within civil society the majority of contributions to the Initiative have come from large, international or regional Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). As civil society actors do not respond automatically to the Initiative, it is unfortunate that direct work with civil society actors at grassroots level has only begun recently and in few countries.

The SARD-Initiative is perceived by members of the FAO facilitation Team as representing a quite unique process, at least within FAO. With few precedents, it is appreciated that the implementation of the Initiative will, as aired by a NGO representative: *'take a great deal of thought, a great deal of work, and a lot of planning on the part of civil society to be effective'* (In Motion Magazine, 2002). Hopefully, the contribution of the SEI/SLU Consortium can assist in this learning process which should involve all actors.

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38 <http://www.fao.org/SARD/en/init/1574/1846/index.html>

## **Chapter III: The SEI/SLU contribution**

Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) (from now 'the Consortium') have been encouraged by the Task Manager to head the facilitation of the Upscaling component of the Initiative via a Multi Donor Trust Fund. As the executing agency for this component the Consortium will head an essential part of the SARD-Initiative on global scale.

### **Scope of implementation**

The overall programme intends to learn from the implementation of the Upscaling component of the SARD-Initiative in selected countries in South East Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa<sup>39</sup> and the Balkans. Different parts of the agricultural sector as well as civil society will be chosen as focal areas in these countries. The selected countries are hoped to serve as 'flagships' for their respective regions so that experiences gained via action research projects can be used for subsequent implementation in their wider region.

### **Preliminary project design**

Before the field study, the author was briefed as to some of the ideas regarding the national structure in Viet Nam<sup>40</sup>. The engagement in Viet Nam could be divided into four projects targeting different sectors and regions in the country. It was on a preliminary basis suggested that these, for instance, could comprise cases on:

- 1) Ethnic minorities and forestry/agro-forestry;
- 2) Peri-urban agriculture;
- 3) Mountainous area and forestry/agro-forestry;
- 4) Water in the Mekong delta.

The different case studies could provide for cross-case learning useful for the upscaling process. It was mentioned that a major emphasis would be on identifying existing structures and needs for establishment of new networks for upscaling. Likewise, it was appreciated that Viet Nam may represent a significantly different context for implementation of the Initiative as civil society here is relatively less active than in other countries where the Initiative is being implemented, e.g. Kenya.

A multi-donor trust fund project will be prepared by FAO to support its contributions to the SARD-Initiative, including the Upscaling component (FAO, undated a). Currently, a grant from Sida (Swedish International Development Agency) has been approved to support the initial planning of the Initiative during 2006. It is unclear to the author exactly how far is the process of generating contributions to the Fund, and how the funding for the implementation of the contribution is to be found.

The SEI/SLU contribution intends to deliver in three project phases corresponding to the phases in three distinct action learning cycles:

#### **Phase 1: *Implementation* (18 months)**

Working with civil society groups to identify and assess Good Practices and processes of desired practice change, and implementing upscaling activities. Emphasis will also be on

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39 There is mention at the FAO Resource Library that some activities have already been initiated in Sub-Saharan Africa, although it has not been possible to find detailed information.

40 Dr. Neil Powell, pers. comm., Ha Noi, 19 April 2006.

promoting policy-practice links, and prepare national reports for reporting to the Commission on Sustainable Development technical review. It is intended to work closely with national Major Group Focal Points.

Phase 2: *Assessment* (12 months)

SEI staff will introduce impact monitoring tools and prepare impact reports with policy recommendations, to serve as basis for national reports for Commission on Sustainable Development policy review in 2009.

Phase 3: *Exit* (6 months)

Closing workshops will be held; Synthesis of lessons learned.

In brief, the objectives of the current planning phase are:

- 1) To agree on project approach and selection of countries
- 2) To review and decide between available methods and tools for implementing this approach
- 3) Prepare full project document

Via the following activities the planning phase is as such intended to produce guidelines for a three-year support programme for national implementation of the Initiative:

- Desk studies and reviews of methods and tools;
- Participation in workshops; discussions of concepts with MG Focal Points and other stakeholders;
- Confirmation of interest in selected countries and identification of local contact persons;
- Consultations and country visits

**Aim of contribution: Up-scaling of Good Processes**

With its contribution to the Upscaling component of the SARD-Initiative, the Consortium in turn aims at '*enabling a self-organising civil society for SARD*' (SLU/SEI, 2006). This can be seen as a response to the limited response from civil society to the Initiative to date.

In the Consortium's interpretation it is clear that 'Good Practices' are not perceived of as being specifically agricultural/technical in character, but to embody a process outlook. 'Practice change' is for instance in the project description understood as '*the processes and feedback that operationalises a change in practice, that corresponds to the perspectives of stakeholders*' (SLU/SEI, 2006). The apparent attention to social processes as part of SARD Good Practices reflects an inclusion that observes the original FAO definition and steps away from seeing practice as only technical. It also complies with the widespread recognition which has emerged from the Initiative's activities so far, of the role which socio-political constraints play, and it is clear that Scaling-up in Sustainet and Up-scaling, as used by the SEI/SLU Consortium, are not similar concepts. As the SEI/SLU Good Practices are perceived as processes (primary aim of the engagement) that allow people to share knowledge and experiences of agriculture (supposed to be an emergent property), it is suggested here that the Consortium applies the notion of Good Processes instead. This will avoid confusion with FAO Good Practices, also used in Sustainet, which are (as practically applied) clearly more technical. This will also reflect more rightly, that the contribution is aimed at the stakeholder process behind the sharing of Good Practices.

### Working definition of Good Processes

A Good Process could on this stage be defined as a process of social interaction that facilitates the sharing (upscaling) of Good Practices for SARD as an emergent property. As a process in inherently context dependent, adaptation must be a closely linked means for upscaling.

### Role of interpretation

Interpretation plays, not surprisingly, a major role in shaping the SARD-Initiative, and there seems to be some confusion in the vocabulary between the FAO presentation and the SEI/SLU contribution already on this early stage of planning. We have seen that the interest in multistakeholder dialogue positions the Initiative in a potentially contested space between stakeholder perspectives, and that the current interpretation may set certain limits to grassroots participation. As such, the experienced limited response from civil society may rely partly on the dominating interpretation of the conceptual underpinnings of the Initiative, as well as the approach taken by the Task Manager.

### **Problem statement**

A limited response has been observed from civil society actors to the Initiative, especially from grassroots level. The current interpretation of the Initiative may play a significant role in determining this situation as it uncritically perpetuates a highly politicised discourse of civil society and 'Good Processes' in a contested context of multistakeholder dialogue.

## **Chapter IV: Pilot research objectives and questions**

### **Research objective**

- To re-interpret the Initiative for enabling constructive dialogue on SARD

### **Sub-objectives**

- *To develop an understanding of the conceptual underpinnings of the Initiative, and how they may impact on its implementation*
- *To re-think the Initiative for more inclusive grassroots involvement, and show the efficacy of this framework by applying it in Viet Nam*
- *To identify key social structures and networks for linking the Initiative to ongoing efforts, and assess the current state of the SARD-Initiative in Viet Nam*

### **Central research questions**

1. *How may the interpretation of the Initiative impact on its own success?*
2. *How may the interpretation of the Initiative be adapted to better enable the operation of the Initiative via a multistakeholder process?*
3. *How can a re-thinking of the Initiative for dialogue be employed in Viet Nam, and which avenues are revealed for further operationalisation?*

## **Chapter V: Exploring the Initiative's interpretation**

### **Linear logic or systems thinking: Upscaling and Good Processes**

The attention to Good Processes as the turning point for achieving SARD places specific demands on the overall approach for implementation. Action research has by the Consortium been chosen to meet these demands. Action research is learning by doing wherein research is linked to action through iterative learning cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Checkland, 1999). The stakeholders are hereby included as co-researchers, and research is positioned more constructively in contested space of multiple actors with diverging interests and perceptions (Powell, 2004). Working with processes may overall be seen as representing a quite new approach within natural resource management. It draws attention to process parameters as conducive policies and learning processes which have been seen as '*another way of conducting public policy*' (Jiggins, 2003, p. 1) but can be used for addressing environmental questions of resource partitioning. Adding the term 'social' to 'learning' most clearly shows why this form of learning is seen as a systemic process. Following Etienne Wenger, it means that engagement in social practice is the fundamental process by which we learn and become who we are, with the primary unit of analysis being the informal 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998, p. intro). As such, '*human engagement in the world is first and foremost a process of negotiating meaning*' (p. 53).

By integrating the environmental management and public policy sectors, this incorporates a great deal of methodology from organisational theory (e.g. Davis and Luthans, 1980). These approaches are frequently inherently systemic in their outlook, often drawing on hard or soft systems thinking. The work by the recent EU 5<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme Project Social Learning for Integrated Management pioneered in developing new approaches for social learning in environmental management (see SLIM, 2004). Interactive learning was here described as one kind of governance mechanism, and action learning as facilitated in a research project may therefore help positioning the work in a larger governance context in the selected country. Systems thinking suggest a turn from determinism and reductionism, to appreciation of circular causality. The philosophical level of the sciences of systems and complexity has by some been termed emergentism, arguing that the system is more than the sum of the system's parts (see e.g. Fuchs, 2003). While systems thinking aims at taking a holistic picture of the world, or at least the issues at hand, linear thinking tends to zoom in at specific, and linear, cause-effect relationships. Much of the literature on rural development and agriculture pursues this latter approach. When working with people with hugely varying perspectives, where everything may potentially be contested, linear logic has proven often to be a malign assumption, giving rise to unexpected and perhaps unwanted outcomes. The critique of such 'command-and-control' type approaches in natural resource management was initiated many years ago (Holling and Meffe, 1996). In the field of development, Rihani (2002) has been one of the advocates for the use of complex systems thinking. Good Practices differ from Good Processes, and seems from the reading of the SARD-Initiative material sometimes to embody a reliance on 'linear logic'. This is especially so when Upscaling is related to the intentions of 'replicating' experiences. As known, agro-environments exhibit extreme diversity and so do the social processes that people engage in. While replication is suggested to take place with consideration for local situations, the terminological pitfalls persist. Further, the idea of upscaling seems to contain optimism to the existence of experiences and current practices or processes in the system under examination. In cases where such a 'wealth of capital' is not existent in the system, a process of innovation may be needed. It is suggested here, that the implementation of the Upscaling component may need to

include attention to innovation. The learning approach embedded in action research appears here to be well chosen.

Together with its practice-oriented outlook action research and learning, as aimed applied in the Consortium's contribution, represents a *research approach*. This should be distinguished from the *theoretical research framework*, which provides the researcher with a set of lenses for, on a preliminary basis, understanding the system in which he/her wishes to engage. The approach and the framework hence represent complementary and mutually assisting 'handles' for the Consortium. This pilot has aimed at developing some ideas to inform the research framework.

### **SARD-Initiative as part of the 'Civil Society Programme'**

Despite the great variation in conceptions of 'civil society', it is generally applied as a core concept in a political programme that aims at building good governance based on democratic principles. Specifically, civil society is seen as one of four approaches to the 'deepening democracy field', which has been described as '*a school of thinking that focuses on the political project of developing and sustaining more substantive and empowered citizen participation in the democratic process than is often found in representative democracy alone*' (Gaventa, 2006, p. 3). Strengthening civil society is frequently expected to assist in combating corruption, increasing accountability, and in general to be something that by default has to be furthered. This efficacy of civil society relies, for instance, on the idea that it can link citizens both within and across nations for increased national and transnational cooperation (e.g. Pishchikova, 2006), and the proliferation of NGOs has led to the conclusions of the currencies of 'globalising civil engagement' (Clark, 2003), or an 'associational revolution' (Clarke, 1998). Hence, a Panel of Eminent Persons on United Nations–Civil Society Relations states that '*constructively engaging with civil society is a necessity for the United Nations, not an option*' (United Nations General Assembly, 2004, p. 3). The application of civil society to questions of natural resource management and rural development appears to reflect a further elaboration on the 'human turn' and participatory discourses which has grown throughout the last decades. It relates, for example, to ongoing debates over humans' place in nature and preferences for 'exclusionary' or 'inclusive' environmental management (Redford and Sanderson, 2000), to discourses of empowerment in development (Scheyvens, 1999), and the 'new conservation paradigm' (Brown, 2003) in biodiversity conservation, where community-based conservation and people-centred approaches are seen as musts. Representing the 'state of the art' in relation to participatory approaches, the SARD-Initiative may be seen to build on the assumption that participatory approaches, wherever embedded in society, are most likely to succeed when part of a larger political project (Hickey and Mohan, 2005).

The concept of civil society goes back to the writings of Locke and Kant. Until 18<sup>th</sup> century civil society was interpreted largely as 'political society', i.e. as a contrast to the uncivilised nature of humanity. Several assumptions have been made to the medium in which civil society exists. Marx perceived civil society as the social organisation growing out of production and commerce, and saw it as inextricably linked to the emergence of class society and the bourgeoisie. Hegel suggested that civil society was a market mechanism, but also that civil society could be the arena where citizens learn to legitimately develop individuality and the value of group action. Tocqueville adds to Marx's dichotomy between state and society, where civil society is the arena of private interests and economic activity, a third dimension, namely the political society where the 'art of association' can be exercised (Kumar, 1993). In

more recent usage civil society is broadly taken to mean the social space between family and state, and Kumar identifies one common understanding of the concept, as *'the arena of non-state institutions and practices that enjoy a high degree of autonomy'* (Kumar, 1993, p. 384).

The civil society concept has from these traditions only relatively recently re-entered the sociological debates. This seems especially to rely on the view of civil society as a concept and a programme for helping post-Communist societies out of earlier predicaments (Kumar, 1993), and the wider recognition amongst decision makers that civil society could play a crucial role in societal changes growing out from experiences also in a number of post-colonial nations, for instance India (Kapoor, 2005). Whilst it is seen mostly in Western countries as a revival, Eastern scholars may as such see it as more novel, as a promise for challenging the totalitarian one-party state. The development of a civil society in post-Communist countries is commonly perceived as a major pillar for their political stability, which is one of the motivations for furthering this structure, where civil society development and democratisation are seen as mutual and interlinked processes. Yet, civil society is also claimed to bear radical imprints of the political climate and history in which it is situated (Magner, 2005). In Myanmar, civil society is regarded as a partner in the nation building process after the years of isolation, and as essential for both the country's 'coming out' process and the implementation of Agenda 21 (James, 2003). Many sociologists have endeavoured into creating typologies of civil society conceptions (see e.g. Anheier, 2005) but civil society as a concept remains an extremely loose, amorphous, and heterogeneous phenomenon. Like many other varieties of civil society, the 'sphere concept' sees civil society in contrast to the government, and argues that it is *'the realm of social life...characterised by plural identities [and] freedom for individuals to associate'* (Jensen, 2006, p. 41). Often, civil society may be seen to encompass all that is good and virtuous. Kumar (1993, p. 388) cites a Romanian journal editorial stating that the reconfiguration of Romanian civil society depends on a discussion of themes like pluralism, political parties, free elections, independent unions, and parliament. Arguably, this may represent quite a lot, and he asks (1994) whether civil society as a 'society of citizens' can not more precisely be described using other terms such as citizenship or civility which may be less ambiguous. In any case, as it appears below civil society is not necessarily as virtuous and ideal as is perhaps sometimes assumed.

### **The contingencies of 'civil society'**

One clear shortfall of the 'civil society programme' is its creation of a range of contingencies which make the Initiative vulnerable to non-participation from actors considered as parts of civil society. This 'lack of response' can naturally depend on a range of factors such as awareness and sympathy, but it has within multistakeholder negotiations recurrently been shown that especially dealing with disadvantaged groups the assumptions made by the facilitator can severely impair the dialogue process (Edmunds and Wollenberg, 2001). Let us consider four of these critical contingencies (summarised in table 1).

Firstly, as we saw above, in public usage civil society enforces a dichotomy between the polity (the political sphere) and the citizenry. Hereby, the nation state and its Government are necessary presuppositions to the civil society existence. This brings the discourse into conflict with perspectives that challenge the authority of nation states, or may even see them as an enemy, which may be the case for some indigenous populations. A Filipino anthropologist used Friedrich Nietzsche's word (from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*): *'Where a people still exists, there the people do not understand the state, and hate it as the evil eye and a sin against custom and law'* (Gatmaytan, 2006). Enforcing a strict civil society conception in the



Initiative may threaten the participation of indigenous actors. It may also contribute to the hegemony of a unitary model of citizenship, which enforced by the state bureaucracy leads to marginalisation of ethnic minorities, and therefore does not acknowledge the multiple dimensions which shape peoples identities (Carens, 2000).

Secondly, civil society is closely linked to democratic forms of 'good governance', often modelled on a Western template. When civil society is perceived closely as linked to '*mature capitalist economies, liberal democratic political systems with robust civil societies, and well developed legal systems characterized by rule of law and a modern bureaucratic administrative system*' (Peerenboom, 2003, p. 1), it makes the debate vulnerable to ignorance of other and potentially equally legitimate modes of governance, and cases where no structured governance may exist. For instance, it has been widely argued that discussions of civil society may not be applicable to socialist countries. In China, other kinds of social networks have been argued to play a more significant role, replacing civil society as known in Western societies (Peerenboom, 2003). Likewise, if citizen solidarity manifested as 'civil society' is widely perceived as a mechanism against the totalitarian state apparatus little chance for constructive dialogue can be expected with un-democratic regimes. Further, it has been pointed out that 'traditional' democracies or quite undemocratic regimes may function at least equally efficiently in securing peoples' rights and sustainable resource management (Muriuki, 2006; Poffenberger, 1998). It may also serve to divert the attention from the highly heterogeneous spectrum of governance processes and structures in play in natural resource management at local level, especially amongst indigenous peoples. The civil society concept has therefore been criticised for excluding modes of cooperation based on religion and kinship or other traditional relationships (Korovkin, 2001). Likewise, it may be difficult to distinguish sharply between state actors and civil society as, for instance, citizens from the state extend their political actions into the space of civil society. Notably, parties and party system can extend networks of organisation throughout society, binding voters to parties (Mair, 1998). If, at all, the work with civil society should be seen as a 'mechanism' for democratisation, it seems necessary to follow Whitehead's suggestion of seeing democratisation as a '*long-term, complex, and partially open-ended process*' which depends crucially on a political community receptive to democratic ideals so that it responds to the changes inflicted on it (2002, p.3). From this perspective he argues, as do others (e.g. Gaventa, 2006), that the search for causal linkages is impractical and that the process must be understood as a discursive and interpretive social construction.

Thirdly, presumption of a developed market economy and division of labour disqualifies the existence of civil society in many rural areas with subsistence economy. Likewise, the 'reinvention of governance' in South Asia has led to increases in market driven policies which have had adverse impacts on citizen entitlements and rights (Haque, 2003).

Fourthly, the Civil Society Programme is partly founded on a presumption of a 'transnational civil society'. The rise of the environmental movement, indeed the background for the Agenda 21 formulation, can be seen as closely linked to an emergence of the idea of global citizenship. It is well known that the assumption of the necessity of observing the responsibilities emerging from global citizenship has inflicted much suffering on rural dwellers in the developing world. Civil society may by local people be seen as only one dimension of the larger globalisation process which appears to bring a new number of threats increasing the vulnerability of farmers, including especially trade restrictions and liberalisation in many countries in the region. Asian NGOs seem to pay special attention to these threats imposed by the effects of globalisation (Tripathi, undated). Global civil society is

often seen as direct out-growth of domestic civil societies, but NGOs may play very different roles in domestic and international settings and the extrapolations is argued to be far from linear (Anderson and Reff, 2004). Likewise, the dialogues exercised domestically and internationally are quite different, especially as the voice of civil society at the global levels is seen to be weak (Scholte, 2004). Importantly, civil society at all levels might not fight to any particular degree for the democratic institutions that people often think they do, but have their own agenda and vested interests, thereby undermining their alleged legitimacy and accountability, especially towards the poor people they are thought to represent (Kaldor, 2002).

<b>Contingencies</b>
1) State - Civility dichotomy
2) Democratic and Western-centric 'good governance'
3) Market economy
4) Transnationalism and global citizenship

**Table 1:** Contingencies of civil society that may enable appropriation and hidden dissension

**The risk of appropriation**

The contingencies of the programme may render ‘civil society’ an easy prey for conscious or unconscious acts of hidden dissension (compare to Morrow and Hensel, 1992), and it seems inevitable that the debate on civil society will be appropriated by dominant actors for furthering own interests. Indeed, the huge variety of civil society conceptions has been argued to be caused by the vast number of political actors that use it for varying purposes. It has even been suggested that civil society conceptions are often explicitly crafted for the purpose for which they are to be used (Scholte, 2004). Naturally, a tendency of political actors to ‘craft’ the conception of civil society for their particular usage, renders the concept vulnerable to become ‘politically sensitive’ and it may as a politicised concept become an unhealthy content of dialogue rather than its vehicle. The mode of application of the civil society concept in the formulations of the SARD-Initiative represents well the seemingly paradoxical combination of a normative and an instrumental approach. Because the debate appears to be based on strong values of social equity and justice, it assumes a more coherent structure for its instrumental purpose. Because, on the other hand, it appears to have a clear intrinsically good purpose the civil society concept grows and is embedded with more normative values – further contributing to its instrumentality. Overall, civil society can be a convenient concept for powerful actors. It is narrow, inherently value-laden, and presupposes a wealth of presumptions to be born by the people in question. These assumptions, as shown, do not always hold.

**Re-framing the Initiative**

The current proximity of the civil society concept to the discourses of deepening democracy and good governance is what creates what has here been termed the civil society programme, where a wealth of assumptions and presuppositions are in play in a series of parallel debates. It is not entirely clear, for instance, which social processes are part of civil society and which of a good governance sphere, and the causal links between civil society and democratic rules of law seem to be able to go both ways. Spencer (2000) has, as a case in point, described how the confused interphases between governance and civil society inhibit our ability to work constructively with each. It should not be surprising that sociological structural distinctions are difficult to enforce under critical scrutiny when the instrumentality of definitions and

conceptions are exposed. They are indeed constructs of the human mind, and have, as we have seen, certain limitations. What should rather occupy us here is that there is a possibility that the debate on civil society can be understood as being about something entirely different than most frequently imagined. This is especially possible if we allow a shift of focus from a sociological/structural orientation to a process outlook. Such a curiosity should naturally be motivated by the anticipation that maintaining a 'strict' civil society grasp of the Initiative may endanger the opportunity of facilitating a constructive multistakeholder dialogue. In order to search for a conceptual framework for the Initiative that is not as tightly linked to the contestation revolving around civil society, we may depart from the appreciation which has emerged above, that a core characteristic of civil society as commonly conceived is its distinctness from, yet part of, a wider governance system. Let us look briefly at the core processes that bring 'civil society' and a 'governance' system into existence.

#### The process of civil society: Self-organisation

The understanding of civil society as a sphere of deliberation, association and relative autonomy can be seen as reflecting the core process of its creation and re-creation: self-organisation. Self-organisation as an explanatory force for civil society has for instance been applied in understanding the emergence of the Forest Stewardship Council certification system in forestry (Kern, 2004). Civil society self-organisation is often seen as dependent on a combination of communicative processes and social networking. The global movement of indigenous peoples' rights organisations has been acknowledged to depend crucially on the growth in information technology and expansion of communication channels (IWGIA, 2003), enabling the world's indigenous peoples to become '*indigenous cultures in an interconnected world*' (Jentoft et al., 2003). Another prerequisite for civic engagement in public policy, and therefore self-organisation, is said to be the existence of social capital (Roberts, 2004). Social capital in Putnam's original view is argued to take the form of social networks of trust amongst individuals. Putnam defines it thus: '*the connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them*' (cf. DeFilippis, 2002, p. 791). Despite providing what Putnam termed a meta-indicator for societies, social capital is however mostly aimed at describing the individual citizen and his network relationship with other individuals.

#### A key principle of governance: Hierarchy

Many forms of governance mechanisms have been identified by scholars and practitioners, but one penetrating feature of governance is that its invention is often inherently structured around metaphors of hierarchy. It is, intuitively, noticeable from the common notions of 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' management. Decentralisation and devolution in governance processes associated with natural resources' management, which has developed to become a common-place in both academic discourse and management practice, also embody the hierarchy metaphor when rights and responsibilities are transferred between 'levels of government'. When Marinetto (2003) argues that decentralisation represents a shift from a hierarchical organisation to a network structure he is also using the hierarchy metaphor. While traditional types of government typically embody hierarchy metaphors, the introduction of network notions (e.g. Ward and Williams, 1997) in new ways of conceptualising governance does not seem to out-rule the metaphor. Indeed, a series of developments point to an increasing popularity of 'thinking in hierarchies'. The emphasis of good governance, including decentralisation, and a move from 'government' to 'governance' i.e. the wider appreciation of decision making processes, is one example, and perhaps also a reason for the

intermingling with the civil society concept<sup>41</sup>. When the World Bank President speaks on the topic of good governance he points out the importance of the interplay between several levels of organisation, e.g. civil society, international bodies, and national governments<sup>42</sup>. The growth in multi-level governance theory also shows the interest in hierarchy as explanatory mechanism, especially in relation to understanding the workings of the European Union. Here, multi-level governance is used as a synthesising theory of the EU, member state, and sub-national actors (Smith, 1997). As influential actors in policy level discourses on good governance have attention to EU matters, this development may be significant also in context of development discourse. In the field of natural resource management a wider appreciation of decision making types has stimulated attempts to seek to develop what may be termed cross-scale governance theory. This endeavour originates largely in adaptive ecosystem management and is seen as a type of governance that connects individuals and institutions at various organisational levels (Folke et al., 2005). Specifically, stakeholder-networks linking actors across spatial and organisational scales have been seen to determine whether people end up as losers or winners in resource management (Adger et al., 2006). Clearly, this attention to hierarchy sets governance apart from civil society, where self-organisation plays the key role.

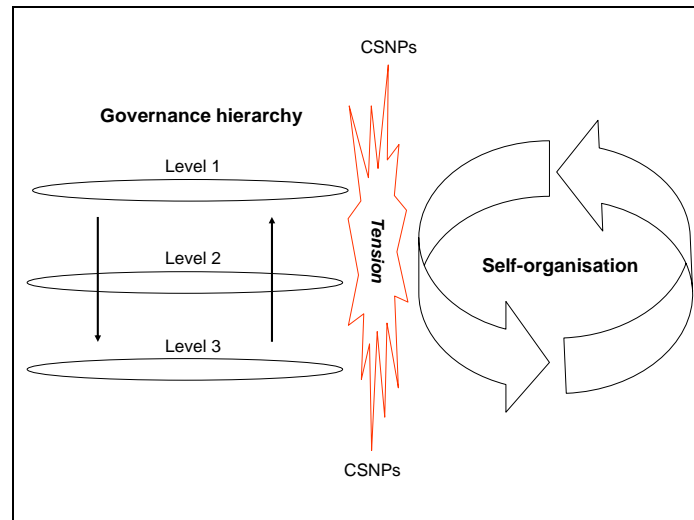
### Civil Society-like Negotiation Processes

It has been attempted to describe how we can view civil society and governance (including concepts of good governance and democracy) as founded, respectively, on inherent processes of self-organisation or hierarchy. These two processes can, as will be argued in the following sections, both be seen as representing a system mode of adaptation, yet they are distinct: As we will see more clearly below, the purpose of self-organisation is to create and re-create a 'self', whilst the purpose of hierarchy processes is the enhancement of coordination and harmony between governance 'levels'. Instead of focusing on 'civil society' and ideas related to 'governance' it could be relevant to have an interest in these two different-intentioned processes. In turn, the Civil Society Programme could be seen as being one attempt to deal with this 'tension', arising from potentially opposing intentions, between the two modes of system adaptation. This would open up for the possibility that other debates than those on 'civil society' could be of interest for the Initiative, for instance different manifestations of negotiating issues related to questions of public participation and human-centred development and resource management. These emergent debates will here be called 'Civil society-like negotiation processes' (see figure 2), and it is hoped that this 'conceptual flip' in the interpretation of the Initiative can help avoid the danger of the state-civil society dichotomy and the other contingencies which may disqualify the Initiative in some countries and to some actors. It is important to emphasise, however, that this new interpretation is perceived not to be in conflict with the view that the Initiative is about civil society self-organisation, rather it opens the space for plural legitimate views in a future stakeholder negotiation process, where the fundamental idea of civil society is retained, but the vocabulary can be more experimenting and flexible.

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41 It seems that the 'local governance' context is exactly the arena where discourses of civil society and self-organisation meet the governance outlook (see e.g. Reddel, 2002).

42 See Paul Wolfowitz's speech on 'Good governance and development: a time for action' held in Jakarta, Indonesia, April 11 2006 (<http://web.worldbank.org>).



**Figure 2:** The civil society-like negotiation processes are suggested to emerge from the tension between two kinds of perceived and enacted modes of system adaptation.

### **Systems adaptation by hierarchy and self-organisation**

To enable the applicability of this overall re-interpretation, we must conduct an investigation of the two modes of system adaptation as they are frequently described, and arrive at an understanding as to what determines their constructive interconnection. In complex systems thinking self-organisation and systems adaptation by hierarchy processes are not clearly separated, indeed they are often treated as closely interlinked. Whilst this is a justifiable position in some cases it does to the self make the whole difference whether events are 'internal' or 'external'. The two modes of adaptation are therefore here seen as distinct, but it is important to remember that this difference is appreciated only by the self.

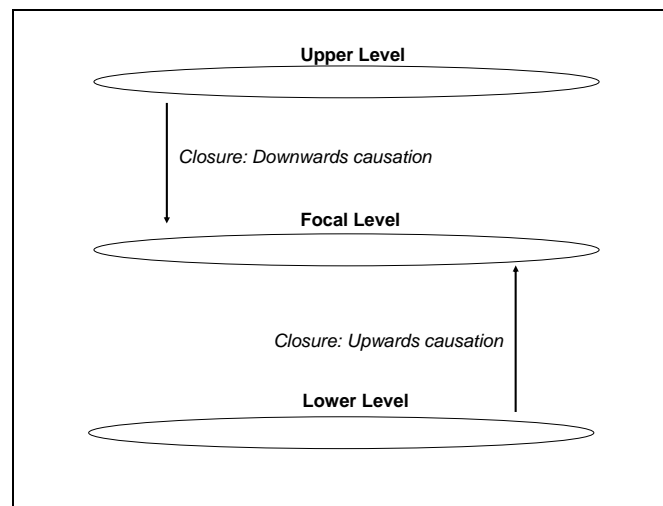
#### Hierarchy and resilience

A strong case for the use of hierarchy as explanatory mechanism for adaptation is found within the natural resource management field. Holling and co-workers have presented an integrative theory where the complexity of social-ecological systems (SES) is created and maintained by a small number of critical processes organised in hierarchies and scales (e.g. Gunderson and Holling, 2002). The system is composed of many levels of dynamic hierarchies, which form the Panarchy (pan-hierarchy). Each level serves two functions: To conserve and stabilise functions on smaller and faster levels, while generating and testing intra-level experiments (Holling, 2001). The Panarchy concept grows out of this as '*a representation of a hierarchy of adaptive cycles*' (Holling, 2001, p. 396). The adaptive process takes place via four cyclically repeated processes of conservation, release, exploitation, and re-organisation ('Hollings cycle'). This form of systems approach has for instance led to conclusions that scale mismatches are major driver of conflicts and non-sustainable natural resource management (Cumming et al., 2006).

#### Linking the system levels: Closure

Feedback processes establish an important mechanism for creating the causal loops between levels in the hierarchy. The interaction between levels in the Panarchy, as a case in point, happens via a process of such communication with different cycling times. Feedback is however seen as regulated by the effect of closure. Exteberria and Morreno (2001) explain closure as the process of collection to a higher level of organisation of elements from a lower level. This is in agreement with Lemke (2000, p. 100) who explains the idea of closure as '*the*

*fundamental proposal...that each new emergent level of organization in the dynamics of the system functions to re-organize variety on the level below as meaning for the level above*'. In his review of this three-level paradigm, the processes of closure, which selects information between the hierarchy's levels, take place from an 'upper' and 'lower' level to provide, respectively, constraints and constitutive elements for the middle level. This creates a dual process of downwards and upwards causation (see figure 3). Of crucial importance for the middle, focal, level is the 'requisite variety' at the constitutive level, a point that has been emphasised in governance systems, where this affects overall stability. In the social structuration theory by Pattee (see Fuchs, 2003), closure arises from constraints produced from existing structures' collection of information for new structures. A 'specification hierarchy' as extensively elaborated by Salthe (1993) emerges from such selective and causal closure between levels. Specification means exactly this selection process of how information can be exchanged between levels. Closure therefore denotes the constraints in a causal chain posed by the effect of the first event's coming into being on the next. We will not here distinguish sharply between upwards and downwards causation in the hierarchy as this must depend on the interpretation of the self (see below).



**Figure 3:** Closure selects information for the inter-level communication (with inspiration from Lemke, 2000).

### Self-organisation needs internalised logic and circular causality

Adaptation by self-organisation seems intuitively beneficial for rural farmers in that it allows them to enhance their influence on own living. But how does it work? How can they initiate these activities from within? In its widest sense, self-organisation is the adaptive transformation of a system from one configuration to another. In physics and chemistry it has been described as the emergence of order out of chaos within a system (Prigogine and Stengers, 1984). Self-organisation can thus be seen as a spontaneous process of development of an organised structure, where spontaneous means that it is not directed by the external environment. In placing both cause and effect within the same system, self-organisation, with the whole complexity paradigm, challenges the philosophical tradition dating back to Aristotle, where causes were seen as external to their effects (see e.g. Hoffmeyer, 2005). The circular causality of self-organisation arises from feedback processes between events in the system, the self. These events cannot by outsiders be separated on linear or spatial temporal scale as it then loses meaning to the self. Self-organisation as applied in social systems theory, socio-cybernetics, is often said to originate from Niklas Luhmann's application of the idea of biological autopoiesis to social systems (1984: *Soziale Systeme*, see Vanderstraeten,

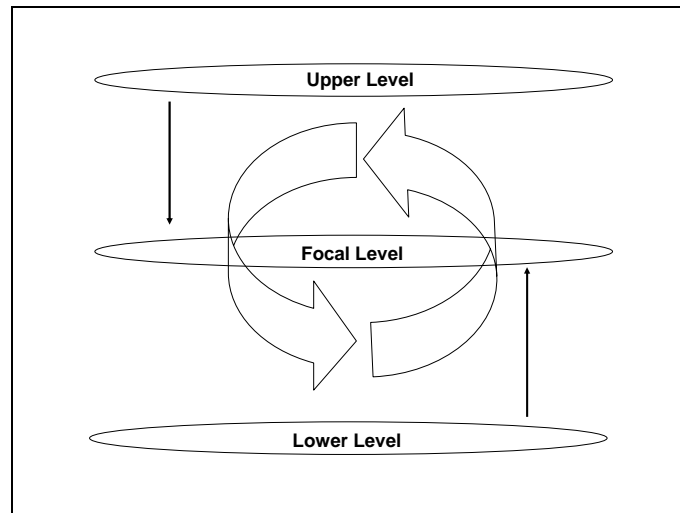
2000). Luhmann's theory on socio-communicative systems has been interpreted as a shift from earlier action theory to communication theory, where it is the systemic communication processes rather than individual actions that comprise the focus (Leydesdorff, 2000). Importantly, Luhmann's theory of communication aims at another level than that attained by individual human consciousness, and is '*situated at a different level of the realisation of autopoietic systems*' (Luhmann, 1992, p. 252). In social systems theory, which has informed some of the ideas we will use in this study, the system cannot be described in terms of observable structures but only by its operations, and Luhmann's social systems theory focuses on human interactions as events, not on humans as individuals. It is appreciated that this touches upon a wider debate on communication and action theory, which will not be followed any further here. Rather, these arguments are presented as they underline the efficacy of viewing the circular logic of self-organisation in an inherently systemic and processual context.

### Dangers of rejecting the self

The mechanisms of closure are necessary for linking system levels as the logic at one level of the system does not work at another. This incomplementarity of the levels' logic is indeed reason for the existence of levels, and thus the hierarchy. However, the incomplementarity of levels' logic can also contribute to rejecting the internal logic of the self (see figure 4). Hierarchical structuring is as a matter of fact the interpretation often made of the idea of self-organisation, but it creates a logic inconsistency: How can the complex dynamics of a system with supposed circular causality guiding its adaptive process of being be explained by linear causal mechanisms between levels? If adaptation by hierarchy is to allow self-organisation, the system, or self, must include all levels in the hierarchy, otherwise the causal links will transcend the self and dissolve it. For the self, requisite variety of course is not a concern as this is an externality to the self. The self is not primarily concerned with such abstract phenomena as overall system stability. What matters is its own 'well-being' and this is what triggers the causal cycles inside the self. Reliance on an adaptation by hierarchy view can easily be elitist in that it seeks a super-observer discourse where the overall system state assumes importance over the self and its internal logic. The incomplementarity between the two modes of adaptation exists in the mind of the observer, and as the observed is created in the process of observation, it matters hugely what we theorise. This observer-observed dependency, wherein both parties are simultaneously and momentarily created by the influence of each other, springs fundamentally from the basis of complex systems thinking<sup>43</sup>. With the active role of the researcher in action research, this dual creation assumes even greater significance. Also, if research shall *stimulate* and not only observe self-organisation, then the researchers' theoretical framework must be explicitly aware of the self-reflexive and autonomous function of the selves in questions, i.e. it must 'allow' emergence of new forms of self-organisation and thereby 'allow the self'. It seems this can be achieved only if we acknowledge the full integrity of the self, not as a number of components, or as a part of some larger adaptive and hierarchical system. This demands placing the choice, autonomy, and spontaneousness within the self.

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43 E.g. from Non-Classical Thinking emerging from research on quantum mechanics (Plotnisky, 2002).



**Figure 4:** Danger of rejecting the self due to incompleteness of levels' logic. The internal and circular logic of the self challenges the levelled causality of the hierarchy. In turn, the closure imposed by hierarchy adaptation seeks to reject the self.

#### Allowing the self to organise: The role of self-reference and interpretation of closure

To work with self-organisation as a process where the causal links are embedded in the self, instead of in a hierarchy that transcends it, we may depart from Soren Kierkegaard's view on the human self: *'The self is not the [self relating to it-self], but that the self relates...'* - i.e. a process of relating' (cf. from Hoffmeyer, 2005, p. 43, this authors own translation). The self-referential dependency of the self is also appreciated in second-order cybernetics as what we may term an internal prerequisite for self-organisation. As coined by Heinz von Foerster, second-order cybernetics is the cybernetics of observing systems (see Scott, 2004), i.e. about the processes by which a system collects information about if-self and its functioning. Geyer (2002) identifies this as a 'stronger second-order cybernetic view' on self-reference with relevance for human beings or social systems. The ability to self-reference can be seen as one prerequisite for self-organisation, and should be perceived of as related to the re-creation of the self-identity. The referential process requires an inside-outside distinction, i.e. some characteristic that defines the self from the non-self, and the self exists only due to this self-reference and self-recognition (see also Hoffmeyer, 2005, 2001).

A second grand prerequisite for self-organisations to be applied in this study is interpretation. Arguably the nature of the self and its interpretive functions have hardly been treated in more depth than in semiotics. The interpretive ability of the self is especially elaborated in the semiotics of culture and nature developed in relation to the idea of the Semiosphere and the Umwelt. Semiosphere is seen as reflecting a post-modern version of semiotics, standing on the shoulders of Jacob Von Uexkull's Umwelt and Peirce's semiosis (Lotman, 2002). The notion of Semiosphere was coined with reference to Vernadsky's notion of biosphere (Kotov, 2002), and Mihhail Lotman (2002) asserts that the Semiosphere is cosmologically linked to Prigogine's writings on complex systems. Both Semiosphere and Umwelt are suggested to be an interpretable environment produced by the interpretive ability of a self. Specifically, the Umwelt is produced by the organism in its interaction with its environment, while for Yuri Lotman, text takes the place of the organism, and the environment becomes the context of the text, the context being produced by the text. This places the interpreting functions in the self, reversing the popular assertion that for instance the organism is dependent on its environment. The semiotic 'signs' involved, it must be emphasised, are in the view of the Tartu semiotic school, which Yuri Lotman was part of, considered to be produced *in* the analysis (or interpretation). In relation to the hierarchically imposed closure on the selves, we may view



the interpretation as the creation of information from closure which is meaningful to the self, and which in interpreted form can be used for self-reference and self-organisation. The idea of meaningful information is taken from Luhmann, who refers to Bateson's idea of the difference that makes a difference (from Leydesdorff, 2000). The generation of meaningfulness on behalf of the closure depends on the existence of constraints. The lesser the freedom from constraints, the lesser the information conveyed by the semiotic manifestation, and the less significant the interpretation by the self. The interpretation is however conducted with the self as prime vehicle and only in the interpretation gains the closure significance<sup>44</sup>.

### **Re-interpreting the Initiative**

The SARD-Initiative, it is thus suggested, is not primarily about civil society, but about the conflict between views on, and therefore enacted modes of, systems adaptation for SARD. We have defined the responsive function of selves via self-organisation as dually dependent on two grand prerequisites: Self-reference and closure interpretation. The first appears to be an 'internal' prerequisite re-enforcing the self's identity and hence its 'self-ness', the second an 'internal-external linkage' prerequisite, which directly enables the self's adaptation to its closure. Self-reference and interpretation may thus be expected often to impose competing influences on the self.

If the Initiative aims at strengthening the constructive connection between self-organisation and hierarchy processes, then Good Processes can centre on the creation of a suitable balance between self-reference (R) and interpretation (I), i.e. a harmonious R/I-relation (see figure 5).

To be able to identify and upscale such Good Processes a first step is to explore current forms of ethnic minority (indigenous) selves in Viet Nam and their R/I-characteristics. Self-organisation is thus understood as re-organisation in response, proximately, to own functions of self-reference and closure interpretation. This observes the fact that societies and social systems at all scales are almost always highly organised. When planning learning processes in action research it should furthermore be remembered that when the habituated processes of self-organisation create the self, learning, as a change of these processes of re-creation, may hurt the self and it should not be expected that the self voluntarily engages in learning. Self-organisation can mean the 'killing' of some parts of the self and replacement with new organisation. This process is a contradiction of the very existence of the self and it may resist this change by its utmost intensity until a threshold is reached where the change is perceived as beneficial. At this stage the self has already begun to re-organise. To engage in self-organisation, the change must be perceived as necessary in order to retain other and more valued elements and processes. This is the essence of the self.

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44 A range of frameworks exist which could be used for developing the understanding of the interphase between interpretation and closure but they will not be explored here (starting points could be Leydesdorff, 2000; Hoffmeyer, 2005; Brier, 2001).

### Glossary for the terms applied in this study

As this study applies a specific understanding of some terms which are widely used with very different connotations, the core meaning for each are here provided as a kind of ‘working definition’. For each term, notions which also are defined here are in *italics*, and an example is provided to show the use. For elaboration see the discussion above.

Hierarchy: A systemic mode of adaptation characterised by a multi-level structure which communicates via *closure*. Perpetuates intentions of inter-level coherence by means of feedback loops. Example: A government system with local and central government offices, where communication channels select the information conveyed between them and may enable feedback for determining the consequent overall structure of the management regime.

Closure: The process of inter-level communication in an adaptive *hierarchy* that determines constraints and constitutive elements for the focal levels’ re-organisation. Enables the *hierarchy’s* existence by bridging incomplementary logic of its levels. Example: The selective transfer of information that passes between a local government office and the central administration.

Self-organisation: A systemic mode of adaptation characterised by circular causality (e.g. the internalised placement in the *self* of two events which can act both as cause and effect in relation to one another), and by being open-ended and spontaneous. From its totality emerges a *self*. Example: When actions within a group of farmers mutually influence one another and allow for creative adaptation towards an unidentified and uncertain future, e.g. the emergence of new agricultural practices.

Self: A habituated set of processes with common traits of organisation shaped by significant patterns of circular causality and *self-organisation*. Driven by intentions of own survival, and continuously re-negotiated as consequence of *self-reference* and *interpretation*. Example: A group of farmers concerned with the group’s income from agricultural produces and for this purpose establish certain habits of interaction to enhance yield and earning.

Self-reference (R): The first pre-requisite for *self-organisation* and the existence of a *self*. Relational interactions which collects information about the current state of the *self*, thereby enabling re-creation and re-negotiation of its identity. Maintains the *self* - non-self distinction via internal reference. Example: When farmers within a self-organised group discuss their views on the way they together handle the marketing of products.

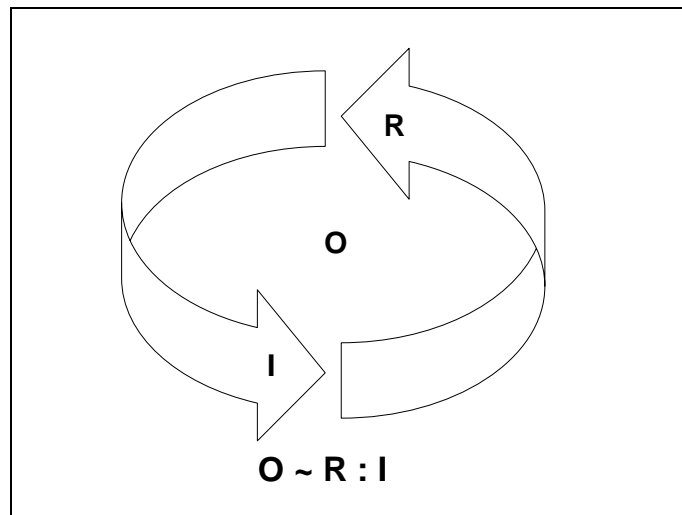
Interpretation (I): The translation of *closure* to meaningful and subjective information via internal-external reference which constructs the *interpretable environment*. Example: When farmers in the self-organised group observe changes in the local market and consciously and collectively translates this into meaningful knowledge.

R/I-relation: The balance between *self-reference* and *interpretation* which determines the *self’s* ability to adapt consciously to *closure* while maintaining preferred identity features. Example: When the farmers find a constructive balance between discussion amongst themselves and communication with other groups and purchasers of their products.

Interpretable environment: The translated *closure* which after the process of *interpretation* contains subjective information for *self-organisation*. Example: The sum of meaningful

information which the farmer group has translated from other actors' perspectives into a form they can use and relate to.

Civil-society negotiation process: Debates and dialogues emerging from the tension between different-intentioned ideas and enacted modes of *self-organisation* and *hierarchy* adaptation. Frequently revolving around issues of civil society, participation, democracy, governance, or empowerment. Example: The emergence of the SARD-Initiative.



**Figure 5:** Self-organisation (O) and its two prerequisites. The balancing of self-referencing (R) and interpreting (I) functions enable the self to adapt to its interpreted environment (or Umwelt/Semiosphere). R re-creates the self-identity and self-ness, I transforms closure to an interpretable environment

## **Chapter VI: Background on Viet Nam**

The new framework for operationalising the Initiative was employed in Viet Nam. This chapter serves to provide some background information before discussion of the findings.

### **Indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities, or civil society**

53 ethnic minorities are recognised by the Government of Viet Nam (GoV), numbering 10 million people. They compose 14 % of the total population, but 29 % of the poor (IWGIA 2005), and live mainly in the uplands, frequently in remote areas close to borders with China, Lao Public Democratic Republic or Cambodia. Whilst Kinh form the majority of the population in Viet Nam, the other ethnicities may in the uplands locally compose the majority. Despite having sufficient grounds for viewing a significant proportion of these ethnic groups as indigenous peoples, this is not a category employed by the GoV, and this identity seems not to contribute to acceptance in Viet Nameese society. Comprising a recognisable part of the population and living in border areas in a country with a long history of foreign aggression, ethnic minorities in Viet Nam get special attention from the central Government, albeit not always positively.

This study started out with a focus on ethnic minorities as one segment of civil society, represented by the Indigenous Peoples Major Group. The critique of the civil society concept must however also imply an undermining of the objectivity of the Major Group Mechanism of Agenda 21, and we should from the outset use notions of 'indigenous' and 'ethnic minority' with caution (for some pitfalls of uncritical reliance on the notion of indigenesness or indigeneity see Kuper, 2003). For the moment lacking a better term, it is suggested to use idea of 'indigenous selves' as those of interest for the study, but with the necessary implication that this is an 'identity for convenience' on behalf of this study. As noted elsewhere (see chapters II and XI), 'indigenous people' is an instrumental label with clear policy aims and it must be used as an open-ended and re-negotiable identity. Indigenous people or ethnic minorities are however characterised by certain significant features which to some extent qualify for drawing this initial conceptual boundary. As mentioned below, this includes marginalisation in relation to virtually all vital forms of capital and the disproportionate poverty rate.

The Civil Society Programme faces a challenge when applied in Viet Nam, where the one-party state extends its control throughout society. The concept of civil society has been quite uncritically applied to the governance scene in Viet Nam, frequently without any specification of what is meant. One relatively early study of civil society was conducted by the ADB in 1997, where it was concluded that civil society was weak. Yet, this study was conducted without clearly defining or adapting the concept to Viet Nameese conditions. The Mass Organisations were included as civil society despite also seen as branches of Government. It was appreciated that local NGOs were not formally recognised but had nonetheless grown in numbers over the past decade, as had international NGOs. ADB perceived the working relations between NGOs and the Government as generally good (ADB, 1997). Adhering to the civil society programme also the World Trade Organisation (WTO) accession is seen as an opening up for interaction between Viet Nameese civil society and globalised multilayered democracy (Scholte et al 1998).

### **Viet Nam's transformation: Reform and economic development**

Viet Nam is often seen as a country in radical transition. The Renovation Reform, *Doi Moi*, was promulgated at the 6<sup>th</sup> National Congress in 1986, and the country has since the embarkment on open-door policy and market economy in the 1990s been in a situation that politically, economically, socially, as well as ecologically, is influenced widely by the process of governance reform. Manifested in a significant decentralisation programme, Viet Nam has joined the rest of East Asia, where public management reform associated with decentralisation are acknowledged to have gained significant momentum (World Bank, 2005). This is partly due to the fact that decentralisation has currency across the political spectrum and is seen as the popular remedy for renovating public bureaucracies suffering from excessive concentration of decision making and authority with the central government (Turner and Hulme, 1997). This reform process appears, however, not to have been spurred by wishes of sustainability or democratisation, but to ripe quick economic gains within a socialist programme. Whilst the initial aspirations in the reform process seems to have been overall ideologically founded in the first years, economic realities later instantiated a more pragmatic understanding of the reform-programme, especially in the agricultural sector that had to provide the strong shoulder (Naughton, 1983). It was before the field work less clear exactly how this balance is between socialist ideology and economic ambition, and how it may influence processes of self-organisation.

Viet Nam, with its 58 Provinces, 600 Districts, more than 10.000 Communes, and 3 Municipalities, is ruled by the Communist Party of Viet Nam, which has approximately 2.5 million members. More than half is recruited via the Youth Union, one of the Mass Organisations (MOs) (ADPC, 2003). Viet Nam is one of the two countries in SE-Asia where Communism has retained power<sup>45</sup>. The National Assembly is composed of members of the Communist Party and Viet Nam operates as a one-party state.

Economic growth has recently averaged close to 6 % per capita which is the eight highest in the world (World Bank, 2006a), and the reduction in poverty has impressed foreign observers. Despite the decline in the share of national Gross Domestic Product (GDP), agriculture has been the backbone in reducing poverty and food insecurity since the 1980s. Analyses of the Living Standards Surveys conducted in 1993 and 1997 conclude that the rising incomes in the agricultural sector accounted for close to 60 % of the poverty reduction (Haughton et al., 2001). Paddy rice is the primary crop, and Viet Nam is today the world's second largest exporter of rice. Major export products also include coffee and rubber, and since the 1990s pepper, cashew, tea, and sugar cane for international trade. From a centrally planned economy Viet Nam has gone through a series of changes, approaching conditions of liberal market economy. Subsidies and trade barriers play, as for other developing nations, a major role in determining the countries ability to promote further economic growth (WTO, 2006a). Viet Nam's last bilateral market access negotiation with 28 countries or regions was completed in May this year, and efforts are now focusing on clearing multilateral arrangements. Viet Nam has to this end scraped its agricultural export subsidies and has committed to a number of agreements (World Bank, 2006b), which may in the long run have impact on local trade relations and thereby ethnic minority farmers.

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45 The other being Lao People's Democratic Republic.

### **Challenges to rural development and a sustainable agriculture**

There appears to be a widespread consensus that the economic and social changes during *Doi Moi* are accentuating poverty amongst marginalised rural communities in the uplands<sup>46</sup>, partly as result of development policies which lead to for instance immigration from the lowland (e.g. ADB, 2002). A multi-stressor study by SEI staff concluded that the elevated degree of interconnection of household economies and the evolving role of local institutions have led to a vacuum in coping mechanisms where new mechanisms for adaptation yet have to develop. The introduction of liberal market forces has added a new layer of decision making far removed from local farmers, but with huge influence on local livelihoods (Lindskog et al., 2005). Activities within the paper and pulp industry and the large scale hydropower developments, for example, seem to be enacted with little or no consideration of the poor, rural farmers, especially ethnic minorities. Ardent criticism is aired towards continued support by the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and Sweden's bilateral support to the activities (Lang, 1995, IWGIA, 2005), and it appears, the minority groups are increasingly exposed to the 'laissez-faire environment' of liberal trade and market forces when the economy is starting to thrive. The increase in average wealth has been followed, as is often the case, by a rising inequality (Thoburn, 2004), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) sums up the reasons for the disproportionate poverty rate among ethnic minorities as isolation and general lack of access – to physical and social capital as well as participation. It seems that despite having benefited moderately from recent economic gains, ethnic minorities continue to lag behind (UNDP, 2002). Three different socio-economic development strategies have however been identified amongst ethnic minorities in their attempts to gain access to the developments in the wider Viet Nameese society. One group seems to follow a strategy of assimilation with high school enrolment rates, little practice of religion, and relatively high degree of intermarrying with Kinh people. A second group attempts to integrate economically in the development process while retaining their cultural heritages. And a third group appears to have been left behind (mainly groups in Central Highlands and H'mong people) (Baulch et al., 2002). Overall, the current transformation process thus seems to endanger the social sustainability in the uplands.

#### Unsustainable upland agro-forestry

The ecological dimension of sustainability seems to be equally threatened. Food production and food security have first priority in the planning of agricultural development in Viet Nam (FAO, 1997), and the increasing population poses therefore significant threats to remaining natural forests and other natural resources as well as biodiversity. The economic development has had its price, and Viet Nam has for years had one of the highest reduction rates in forest cover (FAO, 1998) and continuing replacement of natural forest with plantations<sup>47</sup>. FAO expects rising demands on fuel wood and timber for construction and furniture-making, and that the urbanisation and general increase in infrastructure will lead to encroachment on the remaining forest (FAO, 1997). Also, the displacement of people necessitated by the large scale development programmes is argued to represent a serious threat to Viet Nam's remaining forest (Lang, 1994). High priority is however given to the development of the uplands. In this 'new revolution' (Quy, 1992) a number of ambitious political programmes have been implemented to reverse the situation of resource degradation, for instance the Regreening the Barren Lands (Decree 327) Programme, and the 5 Million Hectares Reforestation Program (see e.g. Junker, 2000). It is often aired by indigenous peoples' organisations that because of their long history of attachment to their land ethnic minorities often hold valuable knowledge of local conditions and adapted agro-forestry practices associated to traditional land rights

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46 No distinction is made between uplands and highlands in this study

47 <http://www.fao.org/forestry>

systems and governance processes. Yet, in Viet Nam they appear to have few platforms for providing feedback on the local impact of policies to decision makers. Further, it should not be forgotten that the whole debate over the environmental affairs in Viet Nam takes place on a background scene of severe damages from 30 years of warfare. The US herbicide spraying programme has left lasting imprints in the soil, ground water, and the creation of barren land whereon few if any food crops can be grown (Quy, 1992).



**Figure 6:** Viet Nam’s lowland and upland meet. Thua Thien Hue.

## **Chapter VII: Field work approach**

Grounded in the theoretical framework developed for re-interpretation of the Initiative and evaluation of the findings from the field work in Viet Nam, the immediate objectives of the field work were:

1. To identify civil society-like negotiation processes allowing the Consortium to constructively enter the debates in Viet Nam.
2. To identify indigenous selves, and their processes of self-reference and interpretation.
3. To explore the major sources of closure and the discrepancy between closure and interpretation.

### **Methods**

The methods entailed qualitative interviews, review of grey literature, and general observation by being, seeing and feeling in the field locations. It was also planned to use a few workshops and focus groups with ethnic minority farmers in the uplands. This proved however not to be possible due to difficulty in accessing the grassroots level. Due to the author's lacking language ability, interviews and meetings were, whenever possible, carried out in English. Translation was sometimes required when talking to some government officials, and for field trips.

The participation as a co-facilitator in a RDViet network course on action research helped with introduction to basic working conditions and also initiated a personal network amongst Viet Nameese professionals. Interviews and meetings centred on discussions of various issues related to the civil society-like negotiation processes identified. Topics were chosen that were hoped to act like 'Trojan horses', enabling constructive discussions and initiating reflection on new topics. Selection of project participants took place via a process of qualified randomness: Some actors it seemed obvious I needed to engage, others were discovered from talking to their friends and/or professional relations.

### **Field work and initial findings**

The pilot was conducted as research assistant from Department of Urban and Rural Development, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Uppsala. Sida supported the work with a Planning Grant. The RDViet Office at Hue University acted as local partner and research base during the field work. RDViet (Rural Development in Viet Nam) is a bilateral multi-institutional Swedish-Viet Nameese research collaboration, which is part of the Sweden-Viet Nam bilateral cooperation<sup>48</sup>.

### **Study sites**

The pilot study's field work took place in Hue City including one field trip to Phong My Commune in Thua Thien Hue Province, Ha Noi, Van Chan District of Yen Bay Province in the Northern Mountain Region (NMR), and in Dak Lak in Central Highlands (see figure 7 and table 2).

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48 See <http://www.sarec.gov.vn/english/> and <http://rdviet.net>



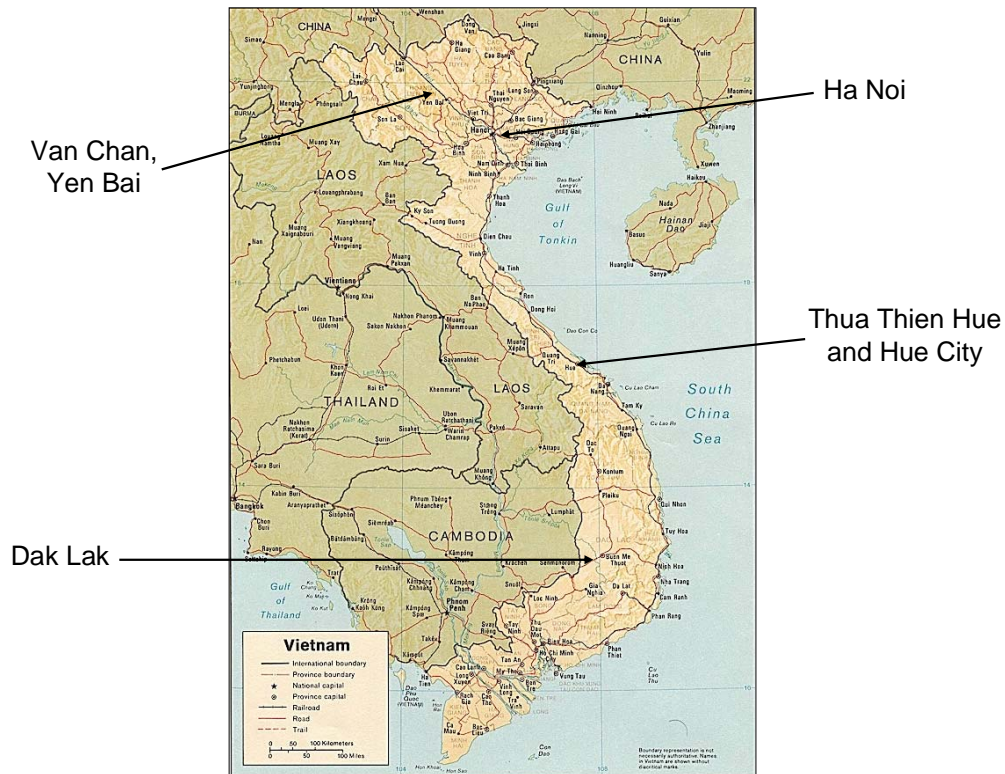


Figure 7: Map of Viet Nam with field work sites<sup>49</sup>.

Dates	Activity	Location
1 April – 17 April	Preparing for pilot study	Copenhagen, Denmark
19 April	Arrival Viet Nam	Ha Noi
24 – 28 April	RDViet network course	Hue University of Agriculture and Forestry (HUAF), Hue City, Thua Thien Hue, North-Central Coast
24 April – 29 May	Interviews and meetings	Hue City
19 May	Field trip	Phuong My Commune, Thua Thien Hue
29 May – 17 June	Interviews and meetings	Ha Noi
8 – 10 June	Field trip	Chia Se Project, Van Chan, Yen Bai, Northern Mountain Region
13 – 17 June	Workshop: ‘Locating the Communal in Asian Land Tenure’	Buon Ma Thuot, Dak Lak Central Highlands
18 – 26 June	Preliminary assessment of outcomes	Research base, Hue University
27 – 30 June	Interviews and meetings	Ha Noi

Table 2: Time line for field work April – June 2006

49 Map from: <http://www.english.uiuc.edu>

### Meetings and interviews

Meetings and interviews in Hue City and Ha Noi are listed in table 3. In addition, a number of communications took place with people during the two field trips and at the workshop in Dak Lak, as well as a number by email. Altogether, more than 100 people kindly enriched the study with their insights during the field work. Often, the communicative context was formal, e.g. a meeting room or the like. In other situations discussions took place in villages, on the road, and at cafes and eateries, which clearly provided a more free setting for discussion. Mr. Le Phi Khanh, lecturer at Hue University of Agriculture and Forestry (HUAF), kindly acted as translator in Thua Thien Hue, and Ms. Mai Hong Yen, assisted during field trip to Yen Bai and Van Chan.

<b>Locality</b>	<b>Type of Organisation</b>	<b>Contributors (people)</b>
Hue	Government	3
	Research organisation	15
	NGO or Association	4
	Development agency	5
Ha Noi	Government	11
	Research organisation	9
	Super-national bodies	4
	international NGO	12
	local NGO	8

**Table 3:** Summary of meetings and interviews during field work in Hue City and Ha Noi.

Confirmed status: No Initiative in Viet Nam

There appears not to be any wider appreciation of the existence of SARD or the SARD-Initiative amongst stakeholders in Viet Nam and no activities have been implemented within the Initiative. The FAO Office in Viet Nam is not aware of any attempts to link up to the global Initiative and concentrates currently the majority of its resources on issues related to avian flu<sup>50</sup>. Senior people involved in policy work confirmed to have knowledge on the existence of the SARD-concept. It was less clear however, if this implied attention to the Initiative.

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<sup>50</sup> Meeting with FAO Representative, Ha Noi, 2 June 2006

## **Chapter VIII: Civil society-like Negotiation Processes**

### **Emerging dialogue on the ‘emerging civil society’**

Featured as the first report on civil society in Viet Nam, a national Stakeholder Assessment Group composed of experts from a range of sectors applied the Civil Society Index Shortened Assessment Tool (CSI-SAT) to evaluate the current conditions and future prospects of civil society in Viet Nam<sup>51</sup> (Norlund, 2006). Civicus has a vision of a global civil society and institution-building<sup>52</sup> and the study must hence be understood as rooted in the Civil Society Programme. The assessment has been conducted primarily by the Viet Nameese members of the assessment group, and on a meta-level of reading the report thus provides some insights into how the idea of civil society is imagined amongst Viet Nameese people with key positions in society. In the study, civil society was seen as encompassing MOs, community-based organisations, Vietnamese NGOs and professional (international) NGOs, which has been suggested to represent a focus on function rather than structure on behalf of the Stakeholder Assessment Group members (UNDP-SNV, 2006). The dialogue in the Stakeholder Assessment Group provided a new kind of platform for debating different viewpoints on the idea of civil society, public participation and good governance, and with the attention to function over structure it appears that Stakeholder Assessment Group members considered their task as exactly a dialogue process. As such, the Stakeholder Assessment Group members were occupied primarily with framing the concept for its use in Viet Nam, rather than focusing on what civil society may mean elsewhere. This is probably also what made the exercise possible in the first place. That only 20 countries had completed their report within the deadline seems to suggest that using the CSI tool in general has been a challenging process. Of the many findings in the report it shall only be mentioned here that the Stakeholder Assessment Group members observed a limited connection between the different kinds of civil society and that some of these are still not widely recognised in Viet Nameese society, and that CSOs rarely reach the remote uplands areas. In the view of one of the Stakeholder Assessment Group members, the report has contributed to making civil society an acceptable concept for dialogue<sup>53</sup>. Despite the increasing debate, it appears however still to be a potentially contentious issue, especially in the provinces, and it is widely advised to use the term with caution<sup>54</sup>. A Chief Technical Advisor in a large development project clearly stated that he would not like to be involved in any way with projects with civil society outlook. He was concerned that it could destroy his contacts to local government. The Access Initiative, which is aimed at strengthening informed public participation and refers to the principle of the Rio Declaration, has not yet been implemented in Viet Nam<sup>55</sup>.

### **Grassroots democracy is more widely accepted**

As civil society is still a relatively new topic of debate and not widely accepted, it was by various actors suggested that the Initiative could focus on grassroots democracy instead. The Grassroots Democracy Decree (typically shortened ‘GDD’) (Decree 79)<sup>56</sup> from 2002 forms the basis for the project of deepening democracy and targets the democratic exercise at commune and village levels. A process of high-level dialogue has led to the UNDP policy

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51 This model was developed by Civicus and the assessment funded by UNDP and SNV. 74 indicators were used to assess four dimensions of civil society: structure, environment, value, impact.

52 <http://www.civicus.org/>

53 Informal discussion, Ha Noi, 7 June 2006

54 Informal discussion, Ha Noi, 7 June 2006, Informal meeting, Ha Noi, 27 June 2006

55 <http://www.accessinitiative.org/publications.html>

56 The ‘first Grassroots Democracy Decree’ was issued in 1998 (Decree 29). After four years it was in 2002 appreciated that the implementation was slow and ineffective, and the amendment (Decree 79), was issued.

brief on '*deepening democracy and increasing popular participation*' (2006). Here, it is acknowledged that uncertainty still exists in the Communist Party as to what a 'civil society organisation' is. The Grassroots Democracy Decree stipulates which decisions of local government people must be informed of, which require consultation, and which require supervision and inspection by the people. Commune People's Councils and Committees are directly responsible for implementing the decree without further order from higher levels (Mekong Economics, 2006). The Grassroots Democracy Decree builds on the good experiences with furthering public participation, the core ideas of which are said to have been introduced by international NGOs 5-7 years ago. Experienced international NGO staff has seen the change in attitude amongst grassroots and central and local government officials to now widely embracing participation as a means for improved and effective management.

### **Ongoing negotiation**

The ongoing negotiation of the interconnection between self-organisation and hierarchy processes is well best represented by the dialogue on the Law of Association (in other texts often shortened 'LoA'). This is perceived as the future 'law on civil society'. The debate on its formulation started in 1993 and more than 8 drafts have been produced (Van Nghe Weekly, 2006). While many international NGOs are involved in the debate on its formulation, only few local NGOs are active in this lobby activity. Van Nghe Weekly has provided column-space and arranged conferences for discussions on the Law of Association, and this year a compilation of these discussions were printed (in English) (Van Nghe, 2006). The recurrent theme is said to be the conflict between the Government's wish to control the emerging civil society and civil society's wish for at least a 'facilitative' law. The current legislative vacuum for NGOs seemingly serves both to allow the Government freedom to view it as a trial situation in which they retain power, and to satisfying foreign donors. The existing draft of the Law of Association is by NGO staff seen as quite restrictive on the rights of the associations which it is supposed to regulate<sup>57</sup>, and the debate on its formulation may therefore be a path to increased manoeuvring space.

The terminology employed in the civil society-like negotiation processes is changing with the increasing introduction of ideas on civil society and public participation to Viet Nam as well as the development of new understanding nationally. Often, translating these ideas between Viet Nameese and English proves difficult due to the very different traditions of conceptualising government and governance. According to a Ha Noi based NGO, the official Viet Nameese translation of 'civil society' is rather confusing and hard to understand. It seems people simply do not use it and prefer to talk about other issues related to participation<sup>58</sup>. As a corollary it can be mentioned that it was during the field work experienced that a well educated Viet Nameese perceived the introduction of more 'democratic principles' to be the reason why some youngsters now more often ride their motorbike without observing traffic rules. Altogether, there appears however to be a range of civil-society-like negotiation processes in play in Viet Nam and therefore ample space for implementation of the Initiative. The understanding that the CSI study represents part of an 'action learning process' only in the offing (Norlund, 2006, p. 13) does indeed suggest that there should be good prospects for bringing in the SARD-Initiative.

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57 Informal discussion, Ha Noi, 7 June 2006

58 Meeting, Ha Noi, 6 June 2006

## **Chapter IX: Indigenous selves with high-R/I**

For the purpose of this first assessment it has been chosen to apply a heuristic division of indigenous selves and the self-organising processes associated with ethnic minorities into two groups: those with low R/I-relation and those with high. Whilst it is acknowledged that this leads to a very coarse scale representation of the insights generated during the field work, no in-depth local level information was generated with ethnic minorities. The high-R/I selves treated here are the village and the 'community'. Figure 8 in the end of the chapter seeks to summarise the findings.

### **Selves, and their self-organisation and self-reference**

Today's communities of ethnic minorities have come into being during a turbulent process of translocation and resettlement programmes, and villages are often not more than 30 years old. The village appears to be the traditional unit of organisation for ethnic minorities, although for instance the Muong and Tai in the Northern Mountain Region each are said to have organised into smaller 'kingdoms' of 10-30 villages with distinct administration during the colonial era. By not acknowledging the village as part of the state administration, the Government rejects the core mode of organisation of ethnic minorities. Besides the rejection of competing forms of organisation to the one party state, it may also have contributed to this choice that the so called 'crown domains' of some ethnic minorities were systems set up by the French colonial administration. With reference to the 'co-habitation' of several ethnic minority groups on same land it was judged by the Government that they had no claim to autonomy and the ideals of nation building quickly assumed more significance than arguments in favour of traditional institutions. It was then, with the rise of the modern Viet Nameese State, that the many ethnic groups with distinct linguistic and cultural traditions became 'ethnic minorities'<sup>59</sup>. As a rule, the institutions and modes of organisation of ethnic minorities have not been recognised and often sought destroyed, e.g. by the policy of New Economic Zones which led to the interprovincial relocation of people, and the Fixed Cultivation and Sedentarisation Programme. Sedentarisation was enforced as swidden farming was perceived as being a key cause of deforestation and land degradation. Instead, ethnic minorities were ushered to embark on intensive paddy farming with wet rice (Kemf and Vo Quy, 1999). It seems that after the resettlement programmes of the 1980s, most communities live by major roads, but may continue to have a 'field house' where the adults may spend up to nine months a year while the children remain in the house in the settled village<sup>60</sup>.

### **Self-reference and agriculture are causally linked**

Customary law and traditional resource management institutions play significant roles for self-referencing. The community makes common decisions re-enforcing their identity whenever there is a need to cooperate, and often, this is in relation to farming, e.g. for planning the seasonal calendar, and irrigation systems. In Thua Thien Hue, it was custom amongst the upland minorities that the person who clear an area in the forest has the right to use it forever<sup>61</sup>. A Viet Nameese anthropologist describes customary laws as being '*created collectively on the basis of common agreement by the whole communities, and ... transferred to the next generations by memory*', and further, that '*customary laws can be seen as part of indigenous knowledge which is accumulated through the life experience*' (Chinh, 2006, p. 2). Experiences with community based forest management have shown that indigenous

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59 Informal discussion with Viet Nameese anthropologist, Ha Noi, 31 May 2006

60 Informal talk with researcher, Hue City, 12 and 26 May 2006

61 Informal meetings, Hue City, 12 and 26 May 2006

communities in the uplands sometimes have maintained traditional practices for resource management (ETSP/SNV, 2005), and it seems clear how the self-referencing functions are linked to agricultural practice, especially of shifting cultivation. The names of ethnic groups often refer to the place where they live and have developed understanding about agricultural techniques. For ethnic minorities in Thua Thien Hue, it was explained how Ta Oi and Pa Coh can translate into English as ‘living upwards on the mountain side’, that Pa Hy means ‘in the middle [of the sloping land]’, and Bru Van Kieu means ‘people who live at the top of the river’<sup>62</sup>. Ethnic minority groups’ ‘cultures’ in wide sense only exists via the perpetuation of their specialised farming and a place-based adaptation to prevailing ecological conditions (Vien, 2003).

The impacts on agriculture, livelihood and identity can therefore hardly be separated, and the agricultural intensification in recent years leads jointly to erosion of cultural diversity and crop varieties. The sedentarisation and prohibition of shifting cultivation has killed many locally adapted practices amongst ethnic minorities, and the agricultural extension services’ continued introduction of lowland technology further contributes to this process. The current situation of one formally recognised village headman perhaps shows the transformation of the community’s traditional institutions. The councils/assemblies that existed in pre-colonial and colonial times largely disappeared during the sedentarisation programmes (UNDP, 2006). Traditional resource management institutions can when this practice is prohibited take a ‘dormant’ form, and it was suggested that some customs were only remembered by people, but not actively in play<sup>63</sup>. Great differences may however exist between locations and populations. In some areas ethnic minorities comprise the majority of the population within their local government sphere, as seems to be the case for the Muong in Hoa Binh<sup>64</sup>. In such situations it appears to be easier to maintain preferred traditions for environmental management. Ka Tu in Thua Thien Hue were seen having lost most of their traditional culture for natural resource management, whilst Thai and H’mong people in some remote Provinces in the NMR had managed to retain theirs. The Thai appear to have stronger existing natural resource management institutions than other minority people, and still actively protecting what is perceived as grave and ghost forest, and fields close to water resources, a system largely incompatible with the government’s classification scheme (National Assembly, 2004). Overall, however, local NGOs see traditional customs disappear, often together with the natural resources. In Thua Thien Hue NGO staff described how the ethnic minority groups in locations trying to establish eco-tourism activities to exhibit local culture have to re-learn dances and traditions<sup>65</sup>. A Viet Nameese researcher thought that the war and changes after reunification have affected the ethnic minorities in Thua Thien Hue so severely that they can hardly ‘remember them-selves’<sup>66</sup>. This leaves us with an impression of the indigenous self undergoing rapid change, whilst the observer maintains a rather fixed idea of its identity. It is not surprising that identity changes and adaptations are appreciated faster by the self, yet it raises the question whether perceptions of identity (and hence self-reference) should more conveniently be perceived as emerging from the interaction between self and non-self, or if a fundamental difference exists between internalised and externalised identity.

Despite the loss, compared to the low-R/I selves described in following chapter this however represents a relatively high degree of self-referencing. Combined with the limited

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62 Meeting with Viet Nameese anthropologist, Hue City, 17 May 2006

63 Informal talk with Viet Nameese researcher, Hue City, 18 May 2006

64 Meeting with NGO staff, Ha Noi, 30 May 2006

65 Meeting, Hue City, 23 May 2006

66 Informal talk with Viet Nameese researcher, Hue City, 18 May 2006

interpretation of the closure changes ongoing in Viet Nameese society in these years, this leads to the creation/perpetuation of relatively autonomous units. It is therefore not surprising that an oft-cited proverb goes: '*The Kings Law stops at the village gates*' (vn: Phep vua thua le lang, see also Malesky 2004), although it may be questionable to what extent this is really the situation today. Likewise, the interconnection between different high-R/I indigenous selves seems to be often very low. A rural development expert from Hue University presented what was assumed to be general knowledge: '*They stay in the uplands. They do not know of each other, and do not share language with other minority groups*'<sup>67</sup>. The language barrier is indeed presenting a major obstacle to ethnic minorities in accessing the official communication channels, and people suggest that they are often seen as foreigners to Kinh people. Notions of 'custom' and 'tradition' are however dominated by the effect of adaptation to imprints of closure, and have changed significantly over the years. Naturally, this adaptation process is a hierarchically structured one and has, as is discussed elsewhere, been a major driving force in the environmental degradation. As such, even the high-R/I indigenous selves have experienced radical transformation over a number of decades.

#### Self-organisation can influence sustainability of upland agro-systems

It was a consistent finding that decision makers consider the uplands as characterised by 'complicated terrain' and difficult conditions for agriculture (see also Doanh et al, 2003). At its root, this implies however incoherence between expectations of the mode of agriculture and its outputs, and the reality in which it is practiced. It seems that a linear transformation process for upland agriculture have guided the interventions till date. It was described how the common conception was (or is!) of a process that transforms slash-and-burn farming to sedentarised upland dry rice farming (Nuong nay = 'to cultivate in dry land') to wet rice agriculture (Ruong nunc (or lua nuoc) = 'to cultivate in a field, wet land')<sup>68</sup>. Yet, building on many years of research, a well-informed interpretation of the recent history of upland agriculture was provided by researchers at Northern Mountainous Agriculture Forestry Science Institute (NOMAFSI). They described how the increase in food security and production during the 1990s removed the incentive for poor farmers to climb to 60 degrees sloping land to cut forest. In their view, the introduction of effective technology and rice varieties then enabled the re-growth of forest despite the continuously increasing population in the uplands. The goal as expressed by one of the coordinators of the SAM-1 programme (see chapter XII) is '*to retain the beneficial situation of the sufficient production, exploit market options, and to make the situation sustainable!*'<sup>69</sup>. In short, to do so means observing the special agro-environment of the uplands and NOMAFSI recommended a diversification away from rice mono-cropping, more efficient introduction of 'advanced' technology, and live stock on the very steep slopes. Naturally, 'traditional' methods and indigenous knowledge contained within the high-R/I selves could play a key role in creating a sustainable agricultural production here, if allowed. Agricultural experts at MARD suggested that the inertia encountered in enabling a more sustainable upland agriculture owes to a coupled 'sender' and 'receiver' problem, due to little local awareness and knowledge of how to communicate and gain understanding of newest regulations<sup>70</sup>. However, no clear distinction seems to exist between advanced/modern and traditional practices, and the conduit metaphor (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) for sustainability communication may not necessarily represent the best handle on the complex dilemmas faced. An independent researcher described the present situation of ethnic minorities' upland agriculture as a confusing mixture

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67 Informal meetings, Hue City, 12 and 26 May 2006

68 Meeting with Viet Nameese anthropologist, Hue City, 17 May 2006

69 Meeting, Ha Noi, 12 June 2006

70 Informal discussion, Ha Noi, 5 June 2006



of old and new caused mainly by the sedentarisation programmes. The degree of sedentarisation differs between locales, but is said typically to have led to an increased pressure on land, clear cutting of forest and increased erosion<sup>71</sup>. There is a need for taking the discussion of sustainable agriculture beyond existing tendencies to dichotomise alleged ethnic identities into ‘traditional’ or ‘advanced’ and challenge the very idea of sustainability. Also the disadvantaged stakeholders must, as part or not part of civil society be able to shape this dialogue so that sustainability can become a vehicle for debate and change and not a burden (Lélé and Norgaard, 1996). To guide the possible facilitator in such a learning process, attention should be paid to the several research programmes which have been implemented in Viet Nam’s uplands focusing on development of sustainable agricultural practices (some of these are mentioned in chapter XII)<sup>72</sup>. There will also be a need for drawing more specifically on a wider range of sustainability science perspectives within a constructionist epistemology.

### Low interpretive ability

Several factors may contribute to the discrepancy between closure and interpretation, i.e. the low level of interpretive ability. Amongst these are the many incidences of violent conflict between ethnic minorities and government, many of which are reported by Human Rights Watch<sup>73</sup>. Considering the long history with an unhealthy relationship to the State it is not surprising that ethnic minorities may try to avoid foreigners, Kinh people or foreigners. Anthropologists appreciate that it may take long time to obtain acceptance and a close relationship for constructive dialogue<sup>74</sup>. Further, the tradition of provision of subsidies from government to ethnic minority groups appears to have contributed to this ‘barrier’. Development agencies observe how people ask for money instead of training, and it was argued that although minorities get more support from government, they contribute less, and often just sit on the ground and wait for development staff to do everything<sup>75</sup>. Religious differences also seem to contribute to this discrepancy. Whilst religious diversity exists in lowland Kinh population, the diversity seems more significant among ethnic minorities. Dominant traditions are Animism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam (for Cham people), while Buddhism is the major religion for Kinh people. By ethnic minorities Buddhism may, as explained by a researcher, ‘*naturally be considered the invaders’ religion*’. Some Catholic Kinh people fled from the North to amongst other places the Central Highlands and appear to have a better relationship to ethnic minorities<sup>76</sup>. Protestants amongst ethnic minorities may sometimes have a more tense relationship to local governments. For instance, it is rumoured that the protestant ‘Montagnards’ in Central Highlands have an exile leader and government in the US, to whom they pray. ‘Lacking self-confidence’ was mentioned often as reason for ethnic minorities’ inability to gain access to the developments in mainstream society. It was often suggested that even when the policies allow for local people to present viewpoints to the authorities, they do not do so as they either fear the consequences, or blindly trust the government officials.

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71 Informal discussion, Ha Noi, 7 June 2006

72 According to a Japanese researcher, already in 1965 Le Cuong Khanh wrote a book on how swidden agriculture can be combined with afforestation (Informal discussion, Buon Ma Thuot, 14 June 2006)

73 <http://hrw.org/>

74 Informal discussion, Ha Noi, 3 June 2006

75 Interview, Hue City, 11 May 2006

76 Informal talks, Buon Ma Thuot, 13-17 June 2006

### Some patterns of modern local decision making

Clear evidence exists for the adaptive nature of the self-referencing functions. According to a rural development expert<sup>77</sup>, three institutions can be distinguished in the community. The *Gia Lang* is described as the 'traditional' system - a council of elders who represent kinship groups. In the *Gia Lang* there is a traditional village leader, one person who typically has respect and trust from the rest of the community, and healers, spiritual men, and other elders. The role of *Gia Lang* is declining. In contrast, the *Thon Truong* is a leader designated to the community by the authorities. He is a community/village leader like is found in the *Gia Lang*, but has is backed by the policy and state law. The *Thon Truong* can be seen as an extension of the state administration into the village, that is, below the commune level. Thirdly, the Communist Party which collects information, reports to higher levels, and organises support for the *Thon Truong*. Although these three different systems may be composed of different people, they co-exist in a small environment, and it may happen that in a household the father can be leader in the *Gia Lang*, and the son being appointed *Thon Truong*. The *Thon Truong* has often vice-leaders, and the local branches of the MOs also answer to him. Decisions from the top are disseminated in the community at meetings convened by the *Thon Truong*. Messages from the traditional system must pass via the local administration, i.e. the *Thon Truong*, to the Commune and higher levels, and replies are delivered to the *Thon Truong*. Conflicts are often resolved via the *Gia Lang*, but as the people acting as mediators are not paid by the administration they must receive compensation from community members. Activities related to agricultural extension is managed by the *Thon Truong*, who is paid by the administration. The traditional system is characterised by low yield but high quality, while the agriculture furthered by extension services is the opposite. In general, the administrative system is in the village experienced as wishing to increase effectiveness and simplification, which sometimes conflicts with the customs, e.g. when customs demand sacrificing bulls<sup>78</sup>.

Valuable literature provided by Viet Nameese researches were collected during the field work, and it was also appreciated that customary law and community dynamics seems to increasingly capture the attention and interest of Viet Nameese scholars. Interestingly, in 1995 Viet Nameese anthropologists were perceived as generally supportive of the Governments policies towards ethnic minorities (Evans, 1995). However, this appears to have changed, with more criticism being aired towards top-down imposition. What has not been discussed here in detail is the relationship between village and community, and indeed the ambiguity of the concept of 'community'.

### **Closure against self-reference: Re-invigoration of Oneness**

Whilst the village and the community may be seen as having a high level of self-referencing functions embedded in the customary system of law and management institutions, strong forces of closure have over decades strived to replace these processes with a submission to the Oneness of the State. This seems to be a continuing trend. For example, in a village visited during workshop in Dak Lak, the leader of *Gia Lang* was sitting by the feet of the *Thon Truong*. Only when the meting for a few minutes addressed questions of how 'things once were' many years ago, the *Gia Lang* answered - after he was told to do so by the *Thon Truong*.

One overall type of closure that seems to contribute to the limited interpretive ability of the high-R/I selves is what can be termed 'the re-invigoration of Oneness'. Naturally, this will

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77 Informal meetings, Hue City, 12 and 26 May 2006

78 Informal meeting with researcher, Hue City, 12 May 2006

influence all types of selves in Viet Nam, but perhaps especially those indigenous selves with high self-reference and thus identity, as the state ideology may view them as disturbing sources of heterogeneity in the population. Dating back to Ho Chi Minh's thoughts, which continue to play a very important role in shaping state governance, is the idea of the state as characterised by Oneness, i.e. as a collective whole which should act in concert for the common good of the people. This view seems to rely on key tenets of Communism as employed in Viet Nam by the Communist Party. The traditional view on participation as mobilisation of people via the MOs (UNDP, 2006), makes public participation by default in state concerns, prioritising the state's Oneness over the identity of indigenous selves. Building on Marxist thinking, state management is within the Communist Party said to be understood in relation to the aims of achieving 'mastery of the people', i.e. providing the working class with a voice for decision making – not that they can make those decision them-selves, and the creation of a people's rule by a broad class-based movement led by the Party (UNDP, 2006). This is also reflected in the description of the purpose of the Fatherland Front as '*a place where the people express their will and aspirations, the entire people's great solidarity bloc is built up, the people's mastery is brought into full play*' (National Assembly, 1999). The Oneness of the country, sought by 'mastery of the people', demands a solid 'Master Plan', and the State thus becomes both intentional and organismic. The idea of Oneness may also be a driving force for the deep wish for consensus. In Viet Nameese society much emphasis is placed on consensus and agreement and people will go along way to achieve this, and avoid that anyone loses face. The one-party state is consequently said to seek 'consensus-governance' where important state decisions go through extensive consultations at several administrative levels prior to approval (Norlund et al., 2003).

The governance bodies, from the National Assembly over local councils to the Mass Organisations, have been formed in the process of nation building after the hard years with foreign aggression. Viet Nam is however a country with dramatic changes taking place alongside perpetuation of tradition, giving rise to a society which may never have been more heterogeneous. The significant stability owes clearly to the strong leadership of the Communist Party. State governance is enacted via a principle of 'democratic centralism', often understood as '*the horizontal unification of the [legislative, executive and judicial branches] of government, and the vertical integration of administrative ranks from lowest commune to central state*' (UNDP, 2006, p. 6). Hereby, the part must always submit to the whole and minorities to the majority. Consequently, it is not surprising that the 'fragmentation' of civil society, i.e. the lacking coordination between activities, amongst Viet Nameese is seen as a disadvantage with a need for increased coordination (see e.g. Norlund, 2006). The idea of collectivity and a common, shared goal persists as such even in civil society debates. The ideological boundaries within which indigenous selves can pursue their existence can also be seen at the policy level. The *Doi Moi* has been described as '*a search for ways to make Viet Nam prosperous yet socialist in a world lacking a functioning model*' (Turley, 1993, p. 1). Despite the existence of possibility for adaptation clear restrictions remain within the socialist frame. Like China, Viet Nam is seen to perform '*a political experiment...testing whether a communist party-state can liberalize its economic system without weakening the dictatorship of the party*' (Morley, 1997, p. 15). The notion of governance is often in Viet Nameese translated directly into 'state management', thus emphasising the integrity of the State.

#### Indications of the Master Plan

Whilst the self-referencing of indigenous selves often depend on the perpetuation of certain agricultural practices, the State's Master Plan for agriculture seem to be largely opposed to the

idea of locally adapted practices. The hierarchical processes seem to have the purpose of adapting the agriculture, by means of rural development activities, to maintain and develop vital functions in compliance with the principles of Oneness. Agriculture and associated rural development activities play in the eyes of the Party and Government a crucial role for food security and thus social stability, and composes the backbone of the State's economy. The major concern is therefore how to adapt to market conditions, by controlling and creating mechanisms for adaptation to utilise the new forces in society. In this plan, environmental protection, and thus SARD, is of interest as a complementary objective, or when clear ecological constraints exist for developments in economy and/or food security (see e.g. UNDP/FAO, 2001). Contrary to locally adapted practices, infrastructure development is seen as critical for economic development (World Bank, 2006a), and plays a significant role in absorbing overseas development aid. There is no sign this picture will change significantly. The 10-year Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development aims at restructuring the agricultural sector to be more demand driven and competitive, and the strategy for the National Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP) 2001-2010 emphasises the intensions to speed up agricultural and rural industrialisation and modernisation, the development of a 'rational' production structure, and to enhance scientific and technological potentials (MPI, 2006). One indication of possible future coherence between indigenous selves' self-referencing and the closure from the Master Plan is however found in the increasing interest in agricultural diversification as a means to lower the dependency on low-value rice production. This is expected to better manage risks associated with the market, especially after WTO accession, and to provide for more sustainable growth (e.g. World Bank, 2006c). Other such avenues can be expected to exist.

#### The state management hierarchy

The rights of ethnic minorities seem quite elaborately described in the national constitution, but the preservation of ethnic minority culture is selective, and this selection is largely made by the supervising Government<sup>79</sup>. The main objective for the governance hierarchy, indeed its very *raison d'être*, is to organise its constitutive elements in ways suitable for its functioning, and the processes of closure associated with the re-invigoration of Oneness are largely brought into play by the state management hierarchy. The hierarchy is widely recognised within the state-organisation, and by the general public, and penetrates the entire society. This very strong sense of hierarchical order demands sub-ordinate agencies to respond to super-ordinate. In two exercises where a person mapped out what he perceived as important actors, sketches were drawn with a hierarchical order and varying kinds of interactions (from only 'control' to include also some degree of feedback). From the centre, Ha Noi, line agencies promulgate decisions to the very periphery of the state administration, and the distant corners of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Some of the ministries of relevance for SARD at central level are the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE), and the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), but also Ministry of Science and Technology (MoST) and Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA) play an important role for NGOs (see p. 71). The Commune is the lowest official level in the formal state administration. The Politburo of the Communist Party sets the overall strategic directions for the policy and transmits through the Office of the Government, run by the President (Akram-Lodhi, 2002). Elaborate reporting mechanisms are said to be in place, with 'checking' of information and conduct as an integral part<sup>80</sup>, and interim and year-end reports are submitted from People's Councils upwards to the Council at the level above. Decisions from the GoV are implemented via the promulgation of laws and decrees from the Ministries,

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79 Informal discussion with Viet Nameese anthropologist, Ha Noi, 31 May 2006

80 Informal talk, Ha Noi, 6 June 2006

and laws are passed by the Parliament. Policies, including decrees, are submitted to the Prime Minister from the Ministries for approval. They serve to specify how the laws, which can be very vaguely formulated, shall be used and interpreted, and each province and district can produce own policies in their local parliament<sup>81</sup>. It appears laws generally pass through a great number of drafts and are frequently amended which shows something about the quality of the law making process. Laws are said often to be poorly written, and that there are conflicts between new and existing regulations<sup>82</sup>. It becomes difficult for people in general stay notified, not to say for the rural farmer. The recurring descriptive metaphor of the governance systems is naturally that of being 'top-down' and authorities often do only what they are told from above and there is very limited space for independent manoeuvring. Thus, people experience that often officials do not act until provided with specific guidelines. The exercise of provincial governance varies hugely (Malesky, 2004), and the limited attention to education of local leaders seem to be a cause of lacking human resources.

Democratic principles of election exist within the party but access to the party appears to rely on non-democratic principles. Members of the People's Committee are selected from the People's Council. The Council is controlled by the Party and members elected to the Council by all citizens above the age of 18. Everyone has the privilege to decide to run for office, but a pre-screening of candidates provides what is termed 'democracy within a frame', where the frame is provided by the Party (Norlund, 2006). Officials therefore appear to seize their position through a joint process of selection and election (Kerkvliet, 2004). Whilst the governmental hierarchies demand a high degree of formality and observation of official channels, it seems that knowing people is also a very important way of getting things done, and people also show their worth and value by highlighting friendship with others and more senior officials. Many local NGOs are established by people with a background in Government. The potentially lacking transparency of decisions made in personal networks may particularly inhibit the interpretability for ethnic minorities. Local people can raise complaints to Government if they feel badly treated because of poor leadership. Albeit seldom aired, in some cases it seems public protest can be quite powerful, as an example shows where it allegedly halted a private company and local government from completing the construction plans close to Hue City. News correspondents are seen to play an important role for such 'collective action' for making the higher levels hear the voice of the people<sup>83</sup>.

### Decentralisation

Special forces of closure change arise from the decentralisation programme in the natural resource management sector. The sub-national government framework has been increasingly formalised since the mid-1990s, and provinces are said to exert far the most powerful discretion of the sub-national levels (Smoke, 2005). The increasing autonomy of the Provincial Peoples' Committees as implementing agencies makes the provincial level of Government very important for agricultural policies (McCann, 2005). A researcher from Hue University has observed that decreased communication costs and higher work efficiency are some of the outcomes of the decentralisation<sup>84</sup>. Linked to the land allocation process new offices, working groups, and other formal or semi-formal fora develop. More attempts have also been made with channelling funds directly from National to Commune level in the development of Village and Commune Development Plans. Despite an apparent limited

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81 Meeting, Ha Noi, 29 May 2006

82 Informal talk with foreign consultant, Ha Noi, 6 June 2006

83 Meeting with conservationist, Ha Noi, 28 June 2006

84 Interview, Hue City, 18 May 2006

opportunity of assessment from the research community<sup>85</sup>, there appears to be some sort of consensus that decentralisation often goes slowly, is very complicated, and with poor implementation by local authorities. Also, it seems that decentralisation of responsibilities tends to happen disproportionately faster than of rights. As is the rule in the general state management hierarchy, the promulgation and implementation of legislation is diluted with the distance from the administrative centre, and governance qualities are suggested to differ markedly between provinces, influenced by the local leadership. The levels structure of the state hierarchy creates the space for the lacking implementation when higher levels hope for lower levels to conduct experiments, from which they can sample, but lower levels fear for consequences and wait for orders<sup>86</sup>. A government official in MoNRE said that the reform policies for decentralisation in the agricultural sector are ‘fine’, and that only the resources for their implementation are lacking. The decentralisation *is* taking place, all the way down to the grassroots level with allocation of responsibilities, but MonRE is only 4 yrs old and it takes time to develop the efficacy of the new offices<sup>87</sup>. The NGO world in Ha Noi is still curious whether the people-centred reform featured by the GoV is a real wish or merely consequence of a donor push<sup>88</sup>. If NGOs feel unsure about how real the people-centred aspects of the reforms are, then it is little surprising if local grassroots caution to test the assumed new space for participation.

Other related legal instruments have been put in place, e.g. the Public Administrative Reform and a Law on Complaints and Petitions of citizens. These will not be discussed here. MPI (and DPI) has the major responsibility for issues related to administrative changes, such as the PAR and economic reform.

#### The hierarchy tradition in Viet Nam

Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism have all influenced Viet Nameese society but Neo-Confucianism appears to have played a more dominant role in the shaping of the modern, post-colonial ideas of the nature of reality and proper social relationships. The Viet Nameese society, it is suggested, has been constructed upon a world view that uses a cosmological scheme of Yin and Yang as two primordial forces whose proper balance determines harmony in social life. Yin encompasses ideas of greater egalitarianism, female values and conflict dispute mechanisms, while Yang embodies male values, rigid hierarchies and competition. Indeed, the coming into being of the modern Viet Nameese nation state has been analysed as a continued fight between Yin and Yang sub-systems. The recreation of a social hierarchy *was* the traditional society, especially as found in rural villages. Here, children obeyed their parents (filial piety, vn: *hieu*), younger brother was answering to older brother (vn: *de*), and the ‘righteous path’ (vn: *nghia*) was determined by role based behavioural ideals, a rigid code of conduct and sense of duty. The focus was on the welfare of the collective rather than the individual (Jamieson, 1995)<sup>89</sup>. Amongst historian scholars on Viet Nameese culture a disagreement exists however as to the role of Yin organisation based on values of spontaneity and feeling (vn: *tin* and *nhan*) in contrast to the Yang hierarchy. It could be relevant to

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85 Viet Nameese researchers find it hard to meet and talk to local authorities on and the topic of re-allocation. This is suggested to be due to the sensitivity of questions of transfer and exercise of power. Local authorities may fear that researchers have come to investigate them for the higher levels, and good insights are hard to get as people are afraid to hand out what is considered ‘personal information’ (Interview with researcher, Ho Chi Minh City, 3 May 2006).

86 Informal meeting with researcher, Hue City, 18 May 2006

87 Meeting, Ha Noi, 12 June 2006

88 E.g. meeting with NGO staff, Ha Noi, 31 May, 2006

89 Indeed, individualism, the idea the individual preferences may in some cases have prominence over those of the collective, is said not to have emerged in Viet Nam until the American influence during the 60s and 70s.

consider, whether the interplay between hierarchy and self-organisation in Viet Nameese society may better be seen as a reflection of the Yin – Yang dynamism. However, the Neo-Confucian inspiration for the modelling of society is not embedded in the cultural roots of the ethnic minorities as of Kinh and it could be necessary as well to explore cultural attitudes towards ‘society building’ in ethnic minority communities. It has been suggested that Communism was appropriated by Ho Chi Minh and Viet Nameese intellectuals to retain independence and modernise society (Williams, 1992), and in this process, it appears, the derailed ‘traditional’ Confucian ideology was developed into Neo-Confucianism.

This is merely a note on a very important issue and for the implementation of the Initiative it may be advantageous to familiarise with lessons from the accumulated literature on Viet Nameese culture, ideas of citizenship, religions and ideologies. The interest in Neo-Confucian and Communist-Marxist ideologies is of special relevance insofar as the renovation reform is seen to suggest only minor adjustments within the ‘basic societal model’. Much in harmony with the findings from the interview analysis, it has been suggested that *‘the basic model of the party as commander, the state as executor, and the people as supporter was not questioned [with the Doi Moi]. The fault was found rather in failing to articulate each of these roles correctly and to establish effective institutions to coordinate them’* (Morley, 1997, p. 19).

#### Assimilation and the idea of brotherhood

The unique political conditions in Viet Nam makes the relationship between the country’s indigenous peoples and the State different from what is found elsewhere (for a comparison see Wessendorf, 2001). One aspect of this is naturally the rejection of the idea of indigeneity, as this would in the discourse of international human rights acknowledge that special consideration had to be given to these people, challenging the Oneness and homogeneity of the State. Compared to other nations Viet Nam is retaining an assimilationist policy towards ethnic minorities, where ethnic identity remains often to be considered more significant than individual human rights as expressed in the 1948 Human Rights Convention. Ethnic minorities may thereby be seen predominantly as such, and not as Viet Nameese citizens. In cases where the equality of citizenship is observed it seems that the one-dimensional conception of citizenship (Carens, 2002) does not allow space for institutions that seek to alleviate the malign effects of majority rule.

The supposedly increased space for public participation appears, in the mind of government authorities, to demand that ethnic minorities accept to work harder, just like their Kinh brothers. The differences of the minorities and their customs can be tolerated as long as it does not impact on the Oneness of the State. Slogans like ‘help the highlanders catch up’ and ‘we must bring civilisation to the backward highlanders’ appears to have guided the assimilationist policy towards ethnic minorities for five decades<sup>90</sup>. It appears that decision makers try to build a brotherly relationship to the ethnic minorities, but as suggested by a Viet Nameese anthropologist there is no doubt as to who is the big brother and who is supposed to be the attentive little brother<sup>91</sup>.

Ethnic minorities can naturally occupy highly influential positions in government, both in the provinces and centrally, and have according to some statistics been represented to a degree

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90 A Viet Nameese anthropologist mentioned how ethnic groups were often depicted on a linear path of cultural development in relation to land use, from the groups in the Central Highlands, over Ka Tu, Dao, H’ mong, and Tai, to Kinh as the having the most developed methodologies (Informal discussion, Ha Noi, 3 June 2006)

91 Informal discussion, Ha Noi, 31 May 2006

that exceeds their proportion in the general population (Jamieson et al, 1998). While it may be that this represents cases where ethnic minorities have been co-opted into the mainstream society thereby losing direct touch with the collective forms of indigenous selves, this may also provide a starting point for balancing the R/I-relation. Another possible source of cooption is the special education programmes for ethnic minorities. At Hue University 25 students are selected each year from special schools for ethnic minorities in the Provinces. These children have been selected when they are 5-7 years old and brought to the Provincial capitals to study. Some of these students may return to their home Districts or Communes and occupy leading positions<sup>92</sup>. A teacher of the minority class at Hue University thought the students were able to retain their original ethnic minority values and culture, but acknowledged that he had to arrange Kung Fu classes to keep them from drinking and fighting<sup>93</sup>. In addition, a special TV channel, the VTV5, exists for treating ethnic minority issues and propagating news to the uplands. Whilst much effort is done to assimilate the ethnic minorities in the mainstream Viet Nameese society, their cultural symbolism is also used by this society. Several national conferences have been held celebrating the cultural diversity of the country, Ha Noi has a beautiful Museum of Ethnic Minorities, and a central Office for Ethnic Minority Culture exists to further culture and art. This inclusion of visual markers of ethnic diversity in the creation of outwards national representations can be seen as means of continued nation-building and of furthering national pride (Taylor and Jonsson, 2002).

Special governmental bodies manage policy matters related to ethnic minorities. The Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs (CEMA) is the national committee for ethnic minority issues, which was formed from originally two like bodies, one in Government and one in the Communist Party. The provincial level has a provincial branch of CEMA and a Province Committee for Ethnic Minorities. Both are responsible for implementing policies towards ethnic minorities. The latter is directly under the supervision of the Provincial People's Committee. In Thua Thien Hue, Department of Agriculture and Rural Development contains a Board for Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas. This Committee works directly with communities, and within the vertical lines from the Provincial Peoples Committee each District has an Office for ethnic minorities affairs, which is under the direction of the District Peoples Committee and a 'Chairman' is responsible at the commune level for submitting monthly reports upwards. At Commune level, one man (the *hoi dong nhandan*) works under the Commune People's Committee with ethnic minorities<sup>94</sup>. Several pathways thus exist for the Government to reach down to the communities. It seems that people of ethnic minority background often are employed in the Committees or lower offices as it is recognised that the ability to speak the languages of the minorities is required. In Thua Thien Hue, the Vice-Director of the Provincial Committee was Ko Tu.

### **Closure change: Reform for re-organisation**

After decades where closure which is ideologically firmly rooted in the aim of re-invigorating the Oneness of the State has often impaired and degraded the self-referencing functions and interpretive ability of the indigenous selves, the results are increasingly seen in degraded natural resources. It is increasingly becoming clear to Viet Nameese decision makers that new incentives for coordinated environmental protection must be put in place. What is widely seen

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92 Informal meetings with Viet Nameese researcher, Hue City, 12 and 26 May 2006

93 Informal meetings with Viet Nameese researcher, Hue City, 12 and 26 May 2006

94 Informal meetings with Viet Nameese researcher, Hue City, 12 and 26 May 2006



as a conflict between State and customary laws provides one of the motivations for such thinking.

#### Conflict between state and customary law

Whilst the conflict between ‘norms’ of different levels and systems of governance appear to have existed in Viet Nam since its creation as a nation state, and indeed may be said to be the focal point for the whole debate on indigenous peoples’ rights, experiences during the land allocation process has on new exposed the need for reconciling these differences. It is clear they can not be ignored, or managed by top down regulations. In Dak Lak, as a case in point, it was after 3 years recognised that the Government must listen to what people say if the allocation shall have any effect on forest protection<sup>95</sup>. Government recognises the need of seeking constructive interplay between state law and customary law, forced by the continued loss of forest and degradation of environment. While slash-and-burn farming has been prohibited by law, it continues to be relatively widespread. Both anthropologists and NGO staff emphasise the meeting between customary law and state as a key factors for sustainable agriculture. In general, the question of how to enable fruitful interplay between customary and state law appears to be nested within the larger context of meeting between traditional community and nation state, also manifested in the differing concepts of ownership: communal or individual.

High-ranking officials have the liberty, and responsibility, to be more realistic towards the current critical state of affairs in the country’s resource management. Motivated by the limited enforcement of government legislation a Senior Officer and a Director General, both from MARD, independently explained the needs they saw for reversing this situation. The Senior Officer, working with policy formulation, presented the view that the major problem was ‘*how to organise the ethnic minorities to protect the forest*’<sup>96</sup>. He saw the land allocation process as only a first step which must lead to a new mode of organisation amongst the ethnic minority groups. For this, he stated, many government policies need be changed<sup>97</sup>. The reason for the inadequacy of the current government policy is, in his view, their conflict with local village customary laws. A forestry law which he was in process of drafting had to be translated all the way down to the village level, and the village law would be sought changed via guidelines from MARD, and by means of having inspectors visiting the communes to suggest changes in village regulations. The reporting system ensures that villages that can not change accordingly are supervised to do so. A core problem for him was to obtain useful ideas from the field. ‘*Farmers do not know how to argue*’, he said. ‘*I am sitting here and can change the law, but I do not get any ideas*’! The major pathway of reporting, both upwards and downwards, was seen to lie within the extension system, rooted in the Agricultural Extension Center, which has lines to District level.

The Director General appeared to have a special interest in how customary law could support state law in forest management<sup>98</sup>. He directed special attention to the Village Charter, which he defined as a set of rules for a small community (a village) adopted by the whole community to govern social relations on the basis of self-autonomy, with the goal of

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95 Foreign researcher, informal talk, Buon Ma Thuot, 16 June 2006

96 Meeting, Ha Noi, 29 June 2006

97 It was suggested that the Consortium should in the planning phase consider that certain policies would be changed before the project implementation, and that departments within MARD will be merged shortly.

98 See the two supporting hand-outs for the presentation at the Dak Lak workshop. It appeared to represent an ‘official’ line of action of the FPD. Naturally, this presentation was given for a group of international and national researchers and managers, so the perspective provided may differ slightly from what is the ‘working strategy’.

maintaining good customs and supporting law-based state management. To integrate what was seen as two systems of law, it was suggested that the State must encourage the communities to use their customary law for environmental protection, that the charters need be strengthened in their focus on protection, and that local authorities should guide the communities in this process. This appears however to represent a view on customary law within a formal law frame, and it may act to perpetuate the top-down control of communities, leaving little incentives for them to put efforts into the 'integration process'. It could be relevant to compare with experiences from the 'project of integration of knowledge' for indigenous peoples as critiqued by Nadasdy (1999).

A range of responses can be observed to re-configure the organisational schemes for resource management. As will be clear below, however, they do often not observe the importance of the two pre-requisites for self-organisation, and it seems that attempts to stimulate self-organisation, as is the case for the low-R/I selves in the subsequent chapter, are manifested as efforts to impose re-configuration forces. The reforms for increased participation has not been launched to stimulate self-organisation *per se*, but to enable a more effective government system.

#### Devolution of land tenure

The search for new models for forest management and protection is said to be rooted in a conflict between local people's continuing 'encroachment' on natural resources and the Forest Protection Department's responsibility to protect<sup>99</sup>. Realising that keeping people from caring for the land has been a major reason for impairment of the environment, the new policy line seeks to enhance such 'caring'. The provision of use-rights is one example. With the amendments of the Land Law, land has been de-collectivised and user rights granted. As in other socialist countries there is no conception of individual ownership of land, which is owned by the public. State Forest Enterprises are being reformed, but they remain together with DARD to manage large tracts of forest land at Provincial level. This seems especially so in relation to environmentally sensitive areas, when the resources have major socio-economic and/or political significance, e.g. water bodies, or when too many stakeholders are involved for any other solution to be perceived as advisable. The extremely low degree of transparency and high level of corruption in the land allocation has shocked people with experience from other Asian countries<sup>100</sup>.

Whilst the land allocation process started out following a three type model with allocation only to individuals, households, and groups of households, it has now been realised that there is a need for acknowledging stronger forms for selves. It was criticized from Viet Nameese researchers that even after 5 years with a three model allocation no evaluation of its efficacy has been implemented<sup>101</sup>. Yet, experiences during field trips showed that individual land tenure enhances vulnerability to shocks, for instance if a landslide destroys a farmer's field he may find him-self in a very difficult situation as all other land has been occupied by other farmers and no system is in place for sharing and compensating<sup>102</sup>. It also creates a very rigid system where newcomers or new couples in a community can have difficulty gaining access to land. Importantly, however, individual tenure also proved to be costly and very difficult to enforce. MARD (and DARD) and MoNRE (and DoNRE) have the key responsibility regarding land reform and devolution, and the decentralisation has led to District level,

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99 Informal meeting with Viet Nameese researcher, Hue City, 18 May 2006

100 Informal talk with foreign researcher, Ha Noi, 6 June 2006

101 Informal meeting, Hue City, 18 May 2006

102 This was experienced during the field trip to Van Chan.

specifically the District People's Committee, often resuming responsibility for implementing the land reform.

The changes in the new Land Law of 2003 and the revised Law for Forest Protection and Development of 2004, opened up for conducting community allocation within a legal framework. Hereby, Vietnam may be seen to follow a global trend towards increasing community-based forestry (Sikor, 2006). The regulations and inventories required for forest management are however so complicated that local communities, and even local officers, can not carry out the procedures without help from professionals (ETSP/SNV, 2005). Prior to the amendments, village allocation was in Thua Thien Hue conducted on trial without policy framework. According to observers, this allows the Government to experiment with new ideas without retaining responsibility for failure<sup>103</sup>. Dak Lak appears from 1999 to have had an early mode of communal land allocation, and the 'Dak Lak model' is today of interest for people outside the Province<sup>104</sup>. The equal sharing of land use rights between men and women was not formally recognised until the Land Law of 2003, but one of the local NGOs, TEW (see chapter XII), has been able to work for a *de facto* equal sharing since 1997 in some project sites. In Thua Thien Hue people knew of between 3 and 5 examples of community forestry.

It appears that the devolution process is still ongoing but thanks to development agencies and some international NGOs land allocation and titling has been conducted many places. As these non-state actors play an important role, provinces with few of them present seem to suffer from halted implementation as resources often do not exist within local government. In Thua Thien Hue, a forester said, the land allocation can not work without this assistance<sup>105</sup>. It seems that development agencies play a major role in carrying out the land allocation and planning in the wake of the different versions of the Land Law, but that NGOs cannot be directly involved unless invited in special cases (Gray, 2003). In Thua Thien Hue, SNV (Netherlands-based development organisation) and Helvetas (Switzerland-based development organisation) play the major role as they support the Government, e.g. by conducting surveys, mapping of land, and meet with farmers to explain the policies. The presence and activity of these agencies is what determines that Thua Thien Hue has allocated almost all forest land while some other provinces are lacking behind. In Thua Thien Hue the importance of public participation was acknowledged by SNV and Helvetas and the initial reliance on government staff was shifted to increased participation from the onset of the planning process. The approach taken by the ETSP (Extension Training and Support Programme) of Helvetas, and the other NGOs and development agencies drawing on the same tools, is to combine land allocation with land use planning. According to a Helvetas staff member, their participatory approach is very effective in mobilising the farmers<sup>106</sup>. The traditional village leader is invited to participate in village meetings in the ETSP projects, and a collaborative forest management group is established to oversee the management. It was suggested that community allocation often works better than allocation to individuals or households as communities can better manage the poor quality land, better protect the forest from encroachment, and as it reduces the overall level of conflict. The 'Community culture' school of thought has been suggested to embody a criticism of state-led management, to advocate political reform and for the

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103 Informal meeting with researcher, Hue City, 18 May 2006; Interview with researcher, Hue City, 9 May 2006

104 Presentations at Workshop in Dak Lak

105 Interview, Hue City, 9 May 2006

106 Meeting, Hue City, 23 May 2006

strengthening of civil society<sup>107</sup>. Whilst Viet Nam's 'civil society' has before had to work very informally for the survival of indigenous peoples, with the new directions of the land law they feel they now have a way to work also formally<sup>108</sup>. More detailed information on the process of land allocation and the approaches to establishing community forestry used by the development agencies and NGOs involved can be found elsewhere (e.g. Huy, 2006). See also the resources of RECOFT<sup>109</sup>.

An example provided from a NGO director from Pu Mat Nature Reserve in Nghe An may show some of the difficulties encountered during land allocation, especially where it interacts with other management regimes. Here, a 5 million USD European Union funded project allegedly failed in supporting people in the buffer zone via land allocation. After the project has been finalised, compensation for protecting the forest has seized but the restrictions remain. Local communities have received land but do not have the autonomy to decide how to use it. While they now cooperate in planting trees on their land, presumable with household certificates, they have to wait for the District and Province to give directions for harvest<sup>110</sup>. In Phong My commune of Thua Thien Hue, a Land Solution Group had been formed with members from Commune People's Committee, the DONRE in Phong Dien District, and lower commune officers for resource management, and representatives of farmers. This Group is the forum for settling of disputes over land issues. According to one farmer, these mainly classified as distributive dissatisfaction regarding quality and/or quantity of land allocated<sup>111</sup>. The ethnic minority farmers can voice complains via the elected *Thon Truong* in their village. A key point of critique from one of the local NGOs was that although many rights are granted with the land certificate and allocation process, still one right is retained from ethnic minority farmers: the right to make an independent choice<sup>112</sup>. A government official in MARD described that as service and assistance is easier accessible for Kinh farmers, the major problem in the land allocation is the lack of land for ethnic minorities, and a general inequality in the distribution of landed property. In his view the general pattern was that the minority groups do not understand the policies (as they often do not speak Viet Nameese) and therefore sell their land for low pay<sup>113</sup>. Left with no legally titled land, they become encroachers on others' or the State's resources. The Government is now trying to help them by giving them some of the remaining land, this however often of lowest quality, and ethnic minorities are forced to move upwards as good quality land is allocated to Kinh people. Here, they tend to encounter some of the remaining natural forest.

#### Grassroots democracy and community consultation

As stated in the UNDP policy brief, the Grassroots Democracy Decree '*put in place the first legal framework required to expand direct citizen participation in local government*' (2006, p, IV), where the vision seems to have been to effectuate the popular slogan that 'the people know, the people discuss, the people do and the people monitor'. Whilst new space henceforth has been created for citizens to engage directly with local government in the formulation of development plans, a number of constraints remain for its proper utilisation, among these are confusion about roles between government office and MOs, and that the non-state sector is largely unengaged. The problem of 'formalism' is highlighted, meaning that the Grassroots

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107 Presentation by Chusak Wittayapak, Department of Geography, Chiang Mai University, at the workshop 'Locating the Communal in Asian Land Tenure', Buon Ma Thuot, Vietnam, 14-17 June 2006.

108 Interview with NGO staff, Ha Noi, 31 May

109 <http://www.recoftc.org/site/>

110 Informal talk with local NGO director, Buon Ma Thuot, 16 June 2006

111 Interview during field trip to Phong My 19 May 2006

112 Meeting, Ha Noi, 31 May 2006

113 Meeting, Ha Noi, 29 May 2006

Democracy Decree's implementation leads to a few meetings to satisfy expectations, but no real changes in the level of participation. Creation of stronger incentives for participation, both in Government and public, is put forward as a means to improve participatory democracy. Likewise, to develop the representative democracy at local level, it is recommended to expand the village representative institutions, e.g. by creating the position of a vice-headman to supplement the headman (*Thon Truong*) who otherwise is the only person with political experience. Giving official status to village headmen, it is suggested, would make villages official sub-sections of the commune and perhaps smoothen the link between the two lowest levels of decision making. Re-institution of downwards oriented (working for the villagers) village assemblies was mentioned as another means, building on experiences elsewhere in Asia, to increase the involvement of people in democratic affairs (UNDP, 2006). As we saw, these assemblies have largely disappeared as one part of the degradation of the self-referencing functions. With the Grassroots Democracy Decree people are entitled to directly discuss, monitor and supervise the authorities. Villagers can set up groups for different purposes, and village conferences shall be held every six months to discuss and decide on affairs relevant for the community. The village is also responsible for establishing regulations for the internal affairs of the village to '*uphold the community's habits and customs, and are in compliance with current laws and regulations*' (DWC, 2005, p. 25). According to the regulations on implementation of democracy at commune level, the Commune People's Committee, in coordination with the Fatherland Front is responsible for notifying its constituency by use of notice boards, radio broadcasting, dispatches to households, meetings and/or other regular contact. The implementation of the Grassroots Democracy Decree is provisioned by placing with every chairman of the People's Committees the responsibility to report results to the Chairman at the higher levels. The Chairman of the Provincial People's Committee shall annually report to Ministry of Internal Affairs, who is responsible for following up on the regulations and policies. The Fatherland Front and its member organisations shall guide, direct and monitor subordinate agencies (DWC, 2005). An evaluation of the implementation of the Grassroots Democracy Decree after eight years was conducted by Mekong Economics (2006) by use of a measurement index. It was found that the best indicator of grassroots democracy is the village meeting. As reflections on the survey one of the people involved in the analysis described the District level as 'a black box', where the quite extensive participation at village level can lose its significance<sup>114</sup>.

The attention to grassroots democracy has led to the community consultation process during the formulation of the SEDP 2006-2010. The World Bank and ADB donated the funds for grassroots consultation, and international NGOs facilitated the process in 15 selected provinces. The consultations were held in a number of selected districts, communes and villages in each province. In Hoa Binh, attendants were during the consultation grouped into different social groups as this was expected to increase the value and diversity of viewpoints gathered (JICA, 2006). SEDP is seen as a generic paper so although MPI appreciated the benefits of the consultation process, not all viewpoints could be included, but guidelines for participatory planning are being developed in the aftermath of the consultation<sup>115</sup>. The interest in this new kind of appraisal varied however between Provinces, for example, authorities in Quang Tri should have been more interested than the average province<sup>116</sup>.

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114 Informal talk with foreign consultant, Ha Noi, 6 June 2006

115 Interview with international NGO staff, Ha Noi, 6 June 2006

116 Informal meeting with NGO staff, Ha Noi, 31 May 2006

Contrary to other Asian countries where reform processes have been spurred by grassroots protests and mobilisation, the efforts for increasing people's participation and grassroots democracy have in Viet Nam to be initiated from the top. That the disclosure of the planning process takes place with this SEDP was perceived as a joint effect of donor push and grassroots demand. It seems to be common knowledge that the first legislative framework for addressing issues of people's participation, the Grassroots Democracy Decree, emerged from a concern within the Communist Party over rural unrest (UNDP, 2006). Specifically, this first version of the Grassroots Democracy Decree, Decree 29, was issued in response to complaints over local level corruption<sup>117</sup>. The Grassroots Democracy Decree is not only providing space for grassroots, but also – and maybe more importantly – inhibiting them in their freedom. The same is said about the Law of Association. It seems that the Communist Party is aware that its powerbase lies in the countryside and unrest in the Party's heartland, e.g. Mekong Delta as in 1997 and 1998 over corruption, is taken very seriously. One foreign consultant had not heard anything about a donor push having significance, but was on the contrary cynical as to whether the new initiatives were made predominantly to avoid increasing dissatisfaction and challenge of the Party's control<sup>118</sup>. As such, the Government and the Party does respond to the voices of the grassroots and indeed the Grassroots Democracy Decree may be seen as such a response. Yet, this voice has to be conveyed via action, e.g. subversion of rules and demonstrations, and the level of feedback from local to higher levels are clearly limited. International NGO staff feels that the civil society in Viet Nam was quite shocked over the apparent increased space for public participation coming from the top in the Party and GoV. The 'emerging civil society' is seen as being careful, have no experience, and in need of gaining capacity<sup>119</sup>.

The Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (CPRGS)<sup>120</sup> has now been merged with the SEDP, but did also draw on a participatory process. The CPRGS was Viet Nam's response to the Poverty Reduction Strategic Paper initiative<sup>121</sup>, and was approved by the Prime Minister in 2002 after what has been described as a highly consultative process involving civil society, with the Poverty Task Force acting as Government-donor-NGO partnership (Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, 2002). Only international NGOs were seen to play a role in the preparation of the strategic policy documents, and it has been suggested that local NGOs were effectively crowded out by international NGOs in the participatory poverty assessments. Likewise, the partnership process behind the CPRGS was seen as a policy level engagement that had as of 2003 not left imprint at local level participation (Norlund et al., 2003). The mention of environmental issues in the CPRGS has been argued to have been driven by donor influence and government concern, while NGOs have played a diminishing role (Waldman, 2005).

### A21 implementation

The Viet Nam Agenda 21 Office was established in 2004 to implement the national sustainable development plan for the country<sup>122</sup>, the Viet Nam Agenda 21 (Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, 2004). A National Council on Sustainable Development has been organised with a number of tasks, some of which include the advising of the Prime Minister and the supporting of line Ministries and other actors in their formulation of Sustainable Development

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117 Informal talk with foreign consultant, Ha Noi, 6 June 2006

118 Informal talk, Ha Noi, 6 June 2006

119 Meeting with international NGO staff, Ha Noi, 31 May, 2006

120 [www.cprgs.org](http://www.cprgs.org)

121 See also <http://www.imf.org/>

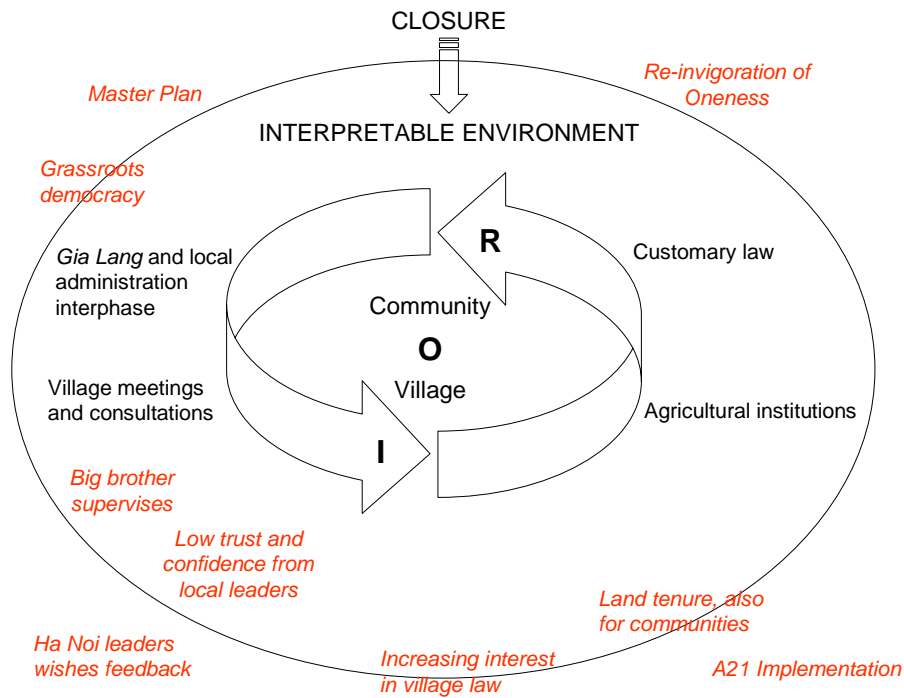
122 <http://www.va21.org/eng/>

Strategies, and the organisation of activities for increasing both discussions and action (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, undated). Its 45 members are from central and local government offices, and a few from Mass Organisations. A consultative meeting was held in June this year with participation from social organisations to comment on the Operational Charter. 10 pilot projects are planned in 6 provinces and four sectors for implementing local Agenda 21 (LA21) Plans throughout the country. By 2010 it is hoped that these LA21 Plans should be in place nation wide. If LA21 Plans are developed with effective participation and place for public deliberation, experiences have shown from other countries that this can provide a mechanism for changed forms of decision making (Doganay, 2004). Yet, A21 projects seem to be planned without any attention to the formal Major Group Mechanism<sup>123</sup>. Located within the DPI, the A21 Office will supervise MARD's implementation of the plans. DPI is will also be responsible for linking LA21 plans to the SEDP.

A distinct National Sustainable Development Strategy (NSDS) does not appear to have been formulated, and the Millennium Development Goals, and SEDP, now with integration of the CPRGS, seem to play the major role in steering the large scale development objectives for the country. This could suggest a low national level prioritisation of the Agenda 21, including its Major Group Mechanism. In the fulfilment of the commitment of mainstreaming Agenda 21, it seems Viet Nam may have followed the path also taken by other signatories at the Rio Earth Summit, and built on existing strategies (see e.g. Lagarde, 2006), i.e. the addition of an environmental 'arm' of the SEDP 2006-2010. The Task Manager for SARD contacted 5 May 2006 the FAO Representative in Viet Nam with a request to send to the Commission on Sustainable Development Focal Point in Viet Nam a letter informing of the wish of FAO to initiate a process of more regular communication and collaboration for promoting SARD. It also contained a request for information about which institution could act as SARD Focal Point in the country.

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123 Meeting with Director of A21 Office, Ha Noi, 7 June 2006



**Figure 8:** Summarising the high-R/I selves. Patterns of self-referencing functions are shown the by the R-arrow (right side), interpretation by the I-arrow (left side), both dark. Sources of closure and closure change (red) have been placed as the author thought it appropriate in relation to their interpretability. The figure should be perceived as a tool for iteration and learning and the processes and patterns identified may be translocated according to different perspectives.



## **Chapter X: Indigenous selves with low-R/I**

A number of 'new selves' are forming amongst ethnic minorities, stimulated mainly by NGOs, development agencies, or different branches of Government, e.g. the extension service or Mass Organisations. These units appear to be characterised by a relatively high level of interpretive ability, predominantly due to the fact that they are created by direct imposition of certain sources of closure. However, they seem to often lack the self-referential functions essential for self-organisation, thereby making them vulnerable to degrade over time. Some actors appear to view the organisation emerging from their engagement as 'self-organisation' (see e.g. NAV, 2005), and a closer investigation may thus be necessary to tell actual self-organisation from hierarchy adaptation. The findings will be summarised in figure 10 in the end of the chapter.

### **Examples of low-R/I selves**

#### Collaborative groups, interest groups, and community-based organisations

Collaborative groups and interest groups are terms used by development actors to denote the creation of groups of farmers, potentially households, which commit to some degree of collective action, often followed by the introduction of new agricultural technology and with the overall aim of linking farmers to the market. This strategy seems to be motivated by the expectation that proper use of market options is the only way forward for ethnic minorities to link up with mainstream society. It may however also incorporate a high degree of uncertainty as the expected declining national protection and increasing external market access may hit local agricultural producers very hard as Viet Nameese economy tend to propagate in a quite direct way changes in external demands into domestic market conditions (Tarp et al., 2002). Interest groups are by some seen as informal and flexible forerunners of cooperatives, but contrary to the cooperatives, these groups can easier dissolve and adapt for changing pressures and regulation. Rural collaborative groups seem to be a phenomenon on which little accumulated knowledge exists, but are said mostly to exist in the south without formal status. Up to 300.000 groups are suggested to exist, and they should all be inspired by donors and NGOs<sup>124</sup>. In contrast to the more market-oriented types of groups, community-based organisations are suggested to work for 'softer' issues such as social welfare, and to be rooted in more traditional forms of organisation, e.g. clan-groups or kinship. According to an official in MARD, kinship groups are now also supported by Government in some cases<sup>125</sup>. One of the relatively new options for ethnic minority communities is to engage in tourism. Community based tourism is being developed especially in the Northern Mountain Region, Sapa in Lao Cai being one of the renowned localities. The choice of conservation and development organisations to work with local communities is, as elsewhere in the world, often rooted in the appreciation that the long-term sustainability of the project lie in the hands of local people. What certainly seems to be sustainable, however, is the debate over the rhetoric on community-based conservation and development. It is far from clear when a project is 'community-based' which seems to depend solely on definition. As a case in point, Fauna and Flora International in Viet Nam promotes the Pu Luong - Cuc Phuong Limestone Landscape Project as the first community-based conservation programme in the country. However, it focuses predominantly on conservation education and awareness<sup>126</sup>.

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124 Informal discussion with independent researcher, Ha Noi, 7 June 2006

125 Informal meeting, Ha Noi, 30 May 2006

126 [http://www.fauna-flora.org/asia\\_pacific/pu\\_luong.html](http://www.fauna-flora.org/asia_pacific/pu_luong.html)

It has been difficult during field work to distinguish between events in the more developed lowlands and the uplands, but to the extent that these forms of organisation develop predominantly in response to economic forces they must be assumed to be relatively less significant in the uplands and amongst ethnic minorities, where subsistence farming is more widespread. Nonetheless, they distort the supposed homogeneity in the ethnic minority community via the facilitation of the introduction of diverging interests which contributes to more pronounced, or maybe even introduced, division of labour and market thinking. As such, it seems the creation of new selves in response to penetration of market forces in rural Viet Nam might be expected to challenge older selves with high-R/I<sup>127</sup>.

### Cooperatives

Cooperatives are formal organisations of farmers collaborating in agricultural activities, seemingly established by the Peoples Committee at the appropriate level, and overseen at central level by the Collective Department in MARD. Contrary to the little popular collectives, cooperatives provides much more freedom of choice for the individual farmer, and focuses often exclusively on the provision of services. It is thus voluntary if a farmer wishes to join a cooperative, he can make his own plan for the farming, and cooperatives help with provision of agricultural technology and materials, e.g. fertiliser and pesticides. It should allow the farmer to access the market as he finds best<sup>128</sup>, and due to their economic structure, cooperatives are by some seen as part of the private sector. It appears cooperatives can also be 'provided' by the Government and in this case village leaders will often take the leading positions. Corruption is however a recognised problem<sup>129</sup>.

The collectives were originally developed upon realising the problems of the New Economic Zone policy, but were mostly present in the lowland deltas. Their success was however limited as farmers did not have incentives to work hard in the fields just to see a vast part of the yield being seized by the collective leadership. In 1981 only 9 % of the rural population in the South were members of such collectives. From central level the reason for the failure of the collectives was then perceived as lacking knowledge and 'proper thinking' on behalf of the farmers (Naughton, 1983, p. 117). The Cooperatives Department in MARD now aims to renovate and develop cooperatives in a new situation of market economy and globalisation, and is currently developing a plan for the period until 2020. New laws have been passed for cooperatives, and some collectives dissolve, some change - and new kinds emerge. A new concept for cooperatives is sought for in MARD, and it is even suggested that cooperatives represent a form of civil society. Trials are in place and experiments supervised by MARD are conducted. The idea that the cooperative can make their own rules are however still hard to accept for local authorities<sup>130</sup>. Cooperatives seem to exist predominantly in the lowlands, e.g. Mekong Delta, where the economy is well-developed.

### Mass Organisations and their new role

Mass Organisations play an important role for coordinating agriculture and rural development in rural Viet Nam, and experience increasing freedom to adapt to local conditions. It remains however somehow unclear to what extent MOs play any significant role in ethnic minority communities. According to the UNDP (2006, p. 7) *'the [MOs] were originally founded during the early years of the Indochinese Communist Party as a way to include all sectors in*

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127 It also seems Philip Taylor has conducted research into Khmer civil society and social differentiation, which could be of interest in this context.

128 Interview with researcher, Hue City, 9 May 2006

129 Informal talk with researcher, Thua Thien Hue City, 26 April 2006

130 Informal meeting with MARD official, Ha Noi, 30 May 2006

*the anti-colonial struggle*'. They are commonly seen as forming the main entry point to the political realm for local farmers. Due to their policies of mainstreaming development thinking it has also been acknowledged that MOs may have a negative impact on the development of indigenous knowledge. 74 % of Viet Nameese are members of at least one of the MOs and on average each person is member of 2,3 organisation (Norlund, 2006). The significantly growing independence of the MOs since *Doi Moi* has led people to view them as a manifestation of civil society. In many communities they may be the main arena for linking between Government and the rural base.

Until 1992 NGOs could not form in Viet Nam and MOs offered the only legalised form of organisation outside the core state apparatus (Gray, 2003). MOs are members of Viet Nam Fatherland Front, which is '*a political coalition organization, a voluntary union of political organizations, socio-political organizations, social organizations and individuals representing all classes, social strata, ethnic groups, religions and overseas Vietnamese*'. As such, the Front (with the MOs) '*constitutes a part of the political system of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, led by the Communist Party of Vietnam; and constitutes a political base of the people's administration*' (National Assembly, 1999). As a case in point, Viet Nam's Women's Union was established in 1930 to mobilise women for war activity but has with the *Doi Moi* policy changed role to focus on gender relations at the grassroots level. The objective is '*to promote and protect the legitimate and legal rights and interests of women and to create conditions for women to achieve equality and development*' (Kaime-Atterhog and Anh, 2000, p. 4). It has the mandate to participate in the formulation of laws and policies related to women and to monitor their implementation. The Women's Union has been likened to a NGO in terms of the activities carried out, but as stated '*unlike a traditional NGO, the Women's Union has offices from the central to the grassroots level, which makes it an effective organisation for working with women throughout the country*' (Kaime-Atterhog and Anh, 2000, p. 4). The Communist Youth Union is strong in universities, e.g. in Hue University where it counts more than 18.000 members.

All unions seem to be controlled by the People's Committees at the level of their operation. That is, a branch of each union can be found at Province, District, and Commune level with a corresponding entry point to the state lines<sup>131</sup>. MO leaders are elected by the respective union members for a certain period, and a Viet Nameese researcher on agricultural economics pointed out how recent studies had shown that the MOs 'are improving'. They are involved in creating infrastructure and setting up formal (i.e. government related) and informal (e.g. for vegetable farming) groups. He pointed out that their functioning and success in adapting to the new conditions depended on the quality of their leaders. Some places the Unions were active and very good for the local people, and may even discuss ideas of democracy with the farmers<sup>132</sup>. Whilst the MOs under the Fatherland Front are supposed to act as channels for voicing people's concerns, the Fatherland Front is seen to be too weak to carry the many duties assigned under the Grassroots Democracy Decree (UNDP, 2006).

During crisis, MOs can play a crucial role. In Van Chan the Women's and Youth Unions mobilised people to clean up after landslides and to organise the aid to vulnerable households. In such situations urgency can lead to perceptions of necessity, where existing structures are taken for granted. Further, it is hoped to involve Viet Nam's Mass Organisations in nationwide agricultural diversification programmes because of their expected extensive networks and potential ability to act as brokers between producers and private interests.

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131 Interview with researcher, Hue City, 9 May 2006

132 Informal meeting, Ha Noi, 2 June 2006

Indeed, it seems that MOs are already involved in the diversification efforts (World Bank, 2006c). Due to their penetration of social life throughout rural Viet Nam, there may be very few development projects not drawing on MO support and assistance.

### **Creative closure**

As mentioned, it is uncertain to what extent some of the above types of organisation can be considered indigenous selves, as they are created from hierarchical closure, i.e. via the direct 'non-interpreted' reconfiguring interference of other selves. Their status as low-R/I also denotes this reliance on hierarchical processes. Naturally, the proximate sources of closure for these low-R/I selves are the actors that participate in their creation. The various selves compose an integral part of the terminology employed by NGOs and development agencies, and it must be remembered that different terms exist within different organisations. As the NGO-world, in contrast to the extension service and development agencies, was assumed to be primarily driven by the goal of self-organisation, and hence be seen as a source of inspiration for indigenous selves in developing their R/I-ratio, this section focuses on NGOs. The discussion employs a distinction between local and international NGOs as this is an important line of division regarding the sources of closure the NGO them-selves may interpret. To the indigenous selves it may however not matter much which type of NGO is involved.

### The emerging NGO-world

According to a senior NGO staff member in Ha Noi, only 2-3 years ago no NGOs were formally recognised in Viet Nam<sup>133</sup>, and from the late 1990s the political space for what is called local NGOs have increased significantly. It has been suggested, however, that they all remain urban based organisation that do not equate 'real' people's organisations or social movements as a 'voice of the poor'. Likewise, it has been suggested that the decision from the Government to scale back the bureaucracy was significantly inflected by a hope that allowing increased space for non-state organisation in the 'science and technology' sector would lead to gains in service delivery (Gray, 2003). As seen below, this has been true in some cases. The 'paradigm shift' in catering for the war invalids is another striking example of such NGOs replacement in service delivery (Vasiljev, 2003).

### International NGOs

The activities of international NGOs in Viet Nam is overseen by Committee for Foreign NGO Affairs (COMINGO) composed of members from government ministries, which assists the Prime Minister in addressing issues related to foreign NGOs. The Viet Nam Union of Friendship Organisations (VUFO) is a nation-wide socio-political member organisation of the Viet Nam Fatherland Front, with the function to promote friendly relations between Viet Nam and other countries. A specialised body of VUFO, The People's Aid Co-ordinating Committee (PACCOM), has the main responsibility in overseeing the work of international NGOs. Amongst other tasks, it must monitor the implementation of policies<sup>134</sup>. NGOs have to obtain permits for operation and for establishment of project and representative offices from the COMINGO. The Committee has office in VUFO, and collaborates with PACCOM, which is responsible for bridging foreign NGOs with local partners (NGO-RC, undated). Some international NGOs have experienced being denied permit for projects, and being asked to move the planned project sites to other provinces judged more suitable by COMINGO<sup>135</sup>. To

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133 Meeting with NGO staff, Ha Noi, 31 May, 2006

134 Information found at <http://www.ngocentre.org.vn/>

135 Meeting, Ha Noi, 30 May 2006

engage in activities in the Provinces, NGOs must further make an agreement with DPI in the selected Province, at least this is the case in Thua Thien Hue<sup>136</sup>.

#### NGO networks and collaboration

International NGOs and VUFO established in 1993 the NGO-Resource Centre (NGO-RC) in Ha Noi to foster increased coordination and dialogue between international NGOs, local partnership organisations and other development actors. The NGO-RC is responsible for coordinating international NGO participation at the Consultative Group Meetings, and the Centre has over 160 international NGO members. The sharing of ideas and experiences between the member organisations is mainly facilitated by a range of sectoral and technical Working Groups, headed over time by different Focal Point international NGOs. In general, the Centre also maintains an extensive resource library on its website and in the Ha Noi Office<sup>137</sup>. The Working Groups may also support local governments with formulation of documents.

The People's Participation Working Group (PPWG) was initially launched in 1999 together with the Public Administration Reform (PAR). Then, it was termed Civil Society Working Group, but it was quickly realised that this label was little helpful. People's participation is a more familiar term, and more acceptable. The government partner is MoHA, but commitment from the Ministry is seen as limited, for instance officials rarely show up for thematic meetings, which are held 4 times a year. The PPWG can also be perceived as a mechanism for enabling the donor community and international NGOs to support the government in raising capacity amongst own ranks. The international NGOs in the PPWG play a crucial role in showcasing participation as a harmless and beneficial path to more effective development<sup>138</sup>. The Ethnic Minority Working Group (EMWG) Focal Point stressed that the WGs have no legal status and therefore no voice, and they can only facilitate information sharing. It was mentioned that it naturally is of high priority that the Focal Point international NGOs for the WGs are strong and with capacity for commitment to the leadership<sup>139</sup>. The Sustainable Agriculture and Natural Resource Management Working Group (SANRM WG) was the clearly less dynamic of the three groups with whom meetings were held. It was formed in the late 1990s but the collaborative environment has changed since then. According to the Focal Point, it seems that many international NGOs have grown so big now that they do not seek further collaboration with other NGOs. Only the small, emerging NGOs were seen to have interest in networking in the way suggested by the SANRM WG, but these organisations were few. Whichever the situation, very few members were showing up for the WG meetings. Some of these are however local NGOs which was seen as a positive development. It was suggested that natural resource management does not represent a high-priority area by for international NGOs in general, and themes like poverty reduction and HIV projects often get more attention<sup>140</sup>.

The number of NGOs in Thua Thien Hue has grown steadily in recent years. With respect to the Green Corridor Project which includes 130.000 ha natural forest and necessarily brings a range of organisations into contact, the NGOs and development agencies quickly learned that they had to meet once a month to avoid overlap between projects<sup>141</sup>. Some organisations may

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136 Meeting with NGO staff, Hue City, 25 May 2006

137 Also, a database with overview of organisations working with ethnic minorities.

138 Meeting with PPWG Focal Point, Ha Noi, 31 May, 2006

139 Meeting with EMWG Focal Point, Ha Noi, 12 June 2006

140 Meeting with SANRM WG Focal Point, Ha Noi, 30 May 2006

141 Meeting with NGO staff, Hue City, 8 May 2006

play a bigger role than others in attempting to coordinate NGO activities. Tropenbos International Viet Nam (TBI) in Hue City invited research partners for a ‘Kick-off’ workshop to create links between researchers and stakeholders and clarify roles (TBI-VN, 2004). In Thua Thien Hue, TBI has facilitated the emergence of a network of NGOs and development agencies with regular informal and formal meetings, every month and third month, respectively. Additionally, TBI is continuously updating an ‘Institutional Landscape’, including more than 30 actors, their activities and objectives in the forestry and natural resource management sectors<sup>142</sup>. It was however appreciated that in reality, people are often busy with their own ideas and projects and there is not always much attention to coordination or cooperation. In fact, a TBI staff member regards the actions of NGOs and agencies as ‘very messy’, and would not be surprised if local villagers get confused about what is going on. To counter this situation, TBI also sets up regular ‘coordination workshops’ in the Province. One of these led to the creation of a common Steering Committee for NGO and development agency projects. This was seen as a major step forward as project specific steering committees, which appear to be compulsory meeting points for Government and non-government partners, lack efficiency, especially caused by government members of steering committees having to commit to the work of many committees. When government officials are not paid for this work or its quality they often do not show up at meetings. Coordination is also hampered by NGOs and agencies often not being long term in a location why it may be difficult for them to build up a close relationship with Government.

Elaborate NGO networks appear to be in place throughout SE-Asia, collaborating for instance by arranging study tours for government officials and farmers between Viet Nam and neighbouring countries to increase awareness, skills and collaboration. As example, Indigenous Knowledge and Peoples (IKAP) is a regional network which started in Chiang Mai 2-3 years ago and is linking up to Viet Nameese NGOs via the EMWG<sup>143</sup>. NGO networks also seem to exist in other countries of the Greater Mekong Sub-region, e.g. Lao<sup>144</sup>. However, international NGOs working specifically for the rights of indigenous peoples often choose to prioritise their resources outside Viet Nam<sup>145</sup>. Further, there are many examples of NGOs collaborating with development agencies on the ground. In Thua Thien Hue, the Green Corridor Project of World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), SNV, and Helvetas cooperates in the community forestry initiative, and the Land Use Planning and Land Allocation (LUPLA) process. It has also been pointed out that there is a growing environmental movement coming into Viet Nam from Thailand via the work of international NGOs (Ojendal et al., 2002).

#### Shifting from international to local NGOs

International NGOs, especially the Focal Points for the Working Groups attempt to involve local NGOs but find it difficult. Often, international NGOs work directly with the local NGOs on specific matters, as local NGOs are more active at grassroots level, with activities for villages and communes. The PPWG has tried to support establishment of local NGO networks. Several should exist in Ha Noi, but this pilot did not come across any. Likewise, none are said to exist with a focus on agriculture or natural resource management<sup>146</sup>. local NGOs are by some deemed still rather ‘undeveloped’ and not ready for furthering people’s participation and some projects decides to work directly with villagers via own participatory

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142 Find it at <http://www.tropenbos.nl/>

143 <http://www.ikap-mmsea.org/>

144 <http://www.directoryofngos.org/>

145 Informal communication with international NGO staff

146 Meeting with international NGO staff, Ha Noi, 31 May, 2006

approaches<sup>147</sup>. The international and local NGOs are also separated by their differentiated relationship to the Government. While international NGOs are tolerated to be much more outspoken, local NGOs prefer to approach Government informally. The collaboration between international and local NGOs is therefore sometimes halted. A local NGO has experienced repression from Government and has been temporarily closed down. Contacts to certain people and organisations have been prohibited and they must now be more careful with how they communicate their messages. An employee in this organisation perceived the aggression as part of a 'game' where the local NGOs are testing the rules, and the Government letting them know when they exceed what is currently acceptable<sup>148</sup>. Another local NGO explained how they have had to follow the development in rhetoric. When they set up their organisation they had to describe their activity as 'poverty alleviation' and use the buzz words of the time: technology and infrastructure. Now they feel the debates have changed and its better to focus on training and knowledge as a key concepts<sup>149</sup>. Local NGOs see that international NGOs are still struggling to obtain an acceptable environment in which to carry out their supporting activities. Although they are not sure if this struggle will ever stop, they expect the role of international NGOs to be outplayed in 5-10 years, where local NGOs will be able to take over<sup>150</sup>. This expectation is supported by several members of the international NGO community in Ha Noi. It is however the author's expectation that the relative roles between international and local NGOs may change over time, e.g. as to whom acts as consultant for whom, but there will continue to exist a demand for intellectual interaction.

#### Associations and local NGOs

As mentioned, no law currently exists allowing what is seen as civil society. All organisations are set up under 'decisions' or decrees, as companies, research organisations, or as government agencies. There appears to be different options for obtaining formal recognition for operation. With Decree 35 in 1993 it became possible to register as an association under Ministry of Science and Technology (MoST). The Decree 81 was issued in 2001 and has since then been the popular choice for local NGOs. Until then Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA) was the only option for local NGO registration. Being registered under MoST as a Science and Technology Association appears to be the most flexible solution, when organisations do not as with MoHA have to renew their permit every year. Despite their legal status not corresponding to NGO in Western sense, it is a common understanding among international NGOs that local NGOs are emerging in these days, via opportunism towards funding options to act as intermediaries between donors and grassroots. A researcher also commented on a local NGO that the reason for its success was the ability to attract funding and make it-self public. Local NGOs contributed to the consultation process during the SEDP formulation with VUSTA as coordinator. Overall, it seems however that local NGOs have a hard time finding out where to register, and often not having sufficient resources they must suffice with doing smaller consultancy jobs. As the provision of funds for operation and the issuance of permits are experienced as closely linked for local NGOs, they often hesitate with raising critique of Government.

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147 Meeting with Project Manager, Ha Noi, 28 June 2006

148 Meeting with local NGO staff, Ha Noi, 31 May 2006

149 Meeting with international NGO staff, Ha Noi, 1 June 2006

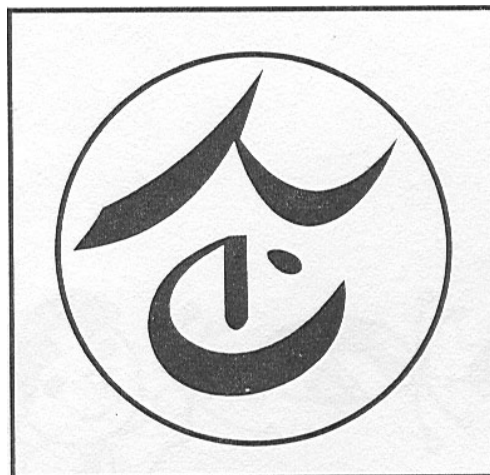
150 Meeting with local NGO staff, Ha Noi, 31 May 2006



### Voluntary associations as ‘fluid networks’ of ideas and activities

A number of voluntary associations, or local NGOs, have been set up with members having other full time employment, often in government offices or research organisations, and with their activities being integrated in the duties of this other employment. Nature Care is here presented as a case study for these types of associations.

Nature Care Association in Thua Thien Hue was established in 1996 by 10 Viet Nameese students from Chiang Mai University in Thailand. The Association comprises 50 voluntarily engaged members, typically from late 20s to early 40s and having full time work, often in provincial government offices or as lecturers at Hue University. The activities comprise community development via awareness raising, technology introduction, and livelihood improvement (see Nature Care, 2003), and Sida has supported Nature Care since its inception, and other donors have later joined in, including SNV and Nord Pas the Calais. The philosophy driving this association rests on aspirations amongst its members of giving something back to their city and province, its environment and people (see also figure 9). As one of the members said: *‘We feel we have a capacity to help because we have studied forestry, environment, or management!’*. He also described how the idea of forming the association was conceived of during a picnic where they came to talk about doing something for their city and the environment: *‘We felt we had the capacity to do something. And nature is very important for the city. It supports the city. We wished to contribute. We had ideas to organise activities’*<sup>151</sup>. Altogether, Nature Care can be seen to comprise a network of highly influential people of a generation of Viet Nameese often positioned close to the aging leaders in the province.



**Figure 9:** Nature Care logo draws on Viet Nameese symbolism. The circle represents heaven, the square represents land. The indication of a smiling face is intended to remind of happy people in nature, in turn symbolised by the N in the top of the circle. The C represents Care (logo from Nature Care, 2003).

Being a voluntary organisation and closely linked to government departments and international NGOs, it seems often difficult to distinguish the association’s activities. Consequently, Nature Care may be seen as both an association conducting community development activities, but also as an ‘idea’ with a network linking Government and international organisations. It was well understood that Nature Care carried out many activities that were strictly government responsibility. However, as the Education and Environment Office in Thua Thien Hue does not have time nor human and financial resources to conduct all its environmental communication duties in the Province, Nature Care can

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151 Interview and informal discussions, Hue City, 8 May 2006



assist<sup>152</sup>. Aspirations are high for upgrading and developing the association, cooperating with the NGO-RC and other local NGOs operating in central Viet Nam. There is nonetheless a feeling that although the Provincial Government has accepted Nature Care, they still have much to learn about its activities. They aim at developing this relationship, and involving the authorities closely in their activities. In the beginning the Government did not believe in the ideas of the group behind Nature Care. Until 2000 they operated as an informal group, and only after finally being recognised and accepted by local authorities did they obtain the status as association. According to its members, Nature Care is the first ever voluntary association in the country<sup>153</sup>. That others had not done the same was explained by it being 'too much hassle'. Nature Care members had a feeling that the Government's positive experiences with international NGOs 'behaving well' had also led to an increased willingness to allow local NGOs. Asked about which recommendations for others who wish to set up an association one of the members explained: Have good and right objectives, start with simple activities, have new and innovative ideas, go step by step and let the Government agree. This had led to a situation where, as he stated '*we can support the Government, and the Government supports us!*'<sup>154</sup>. The environment in which a new association aims at establishing appears to be a matter of importance. Hue City, being the Buddhist centre of Viet Nam, is also said to sometimes stage the scene for conflicts between Buddhist students and the Communist Party. A young student explained that the clash between Buddhist followers and the Party arises as the Party strictly speaking is atheist and do not acknowledge beliefs in God<sup>155</sup>. A complementary example was provided by a director of a local research association from Ha Noi. She described how villages which were supportive of the Communists during the American War, can better claim their rights and voice dissatisfaction with Government rule as the Party can not ignore that they owe them a debt<sup>156</sup>. As an example, what farmers can do and say to the authorities therefore depend on the history of their village and family. For ethnic minorities it is suggested that for instance H'mong people can have a specifically tense relationship with the Government due to some people's support to foreign aggressors<sup>157</sup>.

#### 'Professional' local NGOs

In comparison to the associations which depend on voluntary work, a range of local organisations have developed into a structure which is comparable to NGOs in Western sense. These organisations employ often more than 10 people and engage in community development, social and natural science research related to environment and livelihoods, and conduct lobby activity. In the view of one of these organisations, Viet Nameese civil society emerged with the open door policy and *Doi Moi* in the 1990s where space was being created for new organisational structures and opportunity for approaching donors directly<sup>158</sup>. Lobby activity can take place via the government bodies that regulates NGOs. From VUSTA, five people are introduced every year as members of the Central Committee of the Fatherland Front. As these memberships rotate between VUSTA members, so does the ability to lobby at very central level. For the NGOs with a person in the Central Committee this provides an extra opportunity for influencing change. Associations without any members in central position must use the 'bottom-up' approach, by staging showcases for local government via grassroots activity. A case study has been conducted with TEW (Towards Ethnic Women) by

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152 Interview and informal discussions, Hue City, 8 May 2006

153 Or the province, disagreement existed (Interviews with members, Hue City, 8 and 9 May 2006.

154 Interview and informal discussions, Hue City, 8 May 2006

155 Informal talk, Hue City, 11 May 2006. The Provincial Buddhist Association is located in Tu Dam Pagoda in Hue City.

156 Informal talk with local NGO director, Buon Ma Thuot, 16 June 2006

157 Informal talk with researcher, Buon Ma Thuot, 16 June 2006

158 Meeting with local NGOs, Ha Noi, 31 May 2006

Michael Gray (2003). It was concluded that the massive growth of TEW from 1994 till 2002 gave evidence of the options open for development of organisational structure outside the state. Experience shows, however, that this does not necessarily lead to benefits for the grassroots. As the Director of TEW has stated, the organisation had not been able to meet its objectives in securing the right of Dao people in Ba Vi National Park to live permanently in the National Park buffer zone (Lanh, 2000). This seems to be caused predominantly by the NGOs being excluded from direct involvement in land allocation (Gray, 2003).

### Agricultural extension

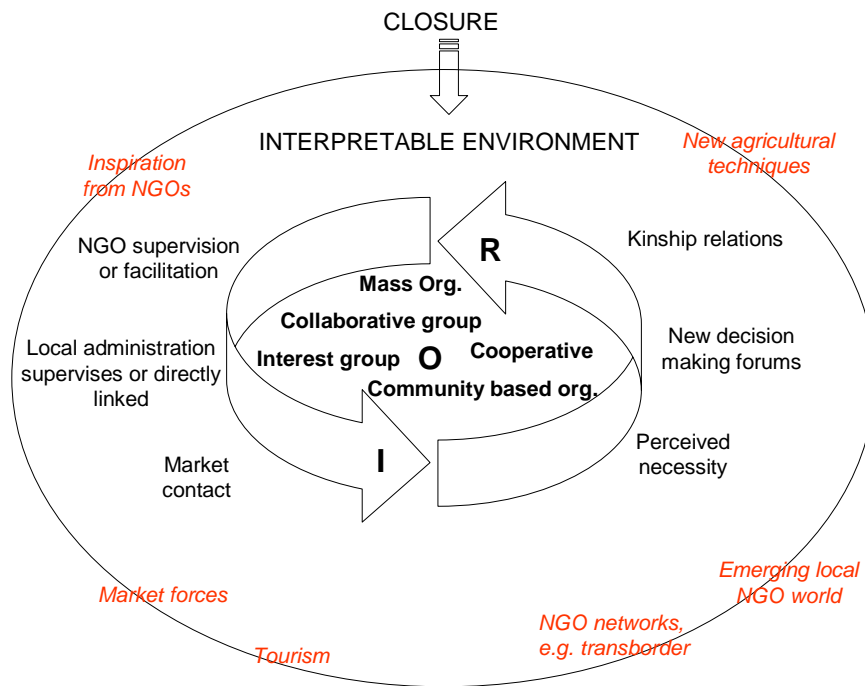
The crisis of the uplands caught in a downward spiral is said to be driven by a series of misconceptions about the uplands, which in turn are put in place due to a powerful imposition of a lowland reality throughout Viet Nam (Jamieson et al., 1998). This domination is suggested to lead to erosion of locally adapted knowledge that is essential for a viable agriculture, and misconceived development projects that tend to further the marginalisation of uplanders. Extensionists were seen to be those with greatest direct influence on the choice of farmers<sup>159</sup>, and despite the usage of participatory methods, the extension service contributes significantly to the imposition. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques are widely used, and the Centre for Rural Development (CRD) with head office at Hue University applies these methods to facilitate projects for poverty alleviation and to obtain insights which can be presented to decision makers. The MO branches at commune level are often used as local partners, and elders are either asked to visit the village leader or, if they are too old to engage actively in the shaping of the project, they are briefed so they know what is going on<sup>160</sup>. It was appreciated that whether or not extension activities lead to top-down imposition depends on the modes of communication employed. The language of the trainer is often Viet Nameese, and the minority languages can have as few as 3000 words in total and without terms for new ideas like 'irrigation system'. Additionally, it seems there is often confusion as to who should participate in which activities, especially as the husband traditionally thinks he needs to be present, even when the courses concern what are typically women's tasks<sup>161</sup>. It appears that PRA techniques do not make much difference when traditional agricultural practices often by default are considered inefficient and unsustainable, and the imposition of a common model for agriculture or forestry often makes the extension services maladapted to local conditions, shows little attention to the farmers' utilisation of the market, and generally does not promote sustainable practices (see also Thanh et al., 2005). Farmer field schools (e.g. Fagerstorm et al., 2005) and Integrated Pest management (FAO, 2004) are other activities in the agricultural sector which seem to enjoy much popularity and should be explored in terms of R/I-impact.

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159 Informal discussion with agricultural specialist, Ha Noi, 5 June 2006

160 Meeting with CRD Head, Hue City, 26 May 2006

161 Informal meeting, Hue City, 26 May 2006



**Figure 10:** Summarising the low-R/I selves. Same presentation and idea as in figure 8. Naturally, both low- and high-R/I selves may share same sources of closure as they may co-exist in same location, and the two summarising figures should be considered jointly for a richer picture of the opportunities for a 'good' R/I-relation. This is attempted in the following chapter.

## **Chapter XI: Towards Civil Indigeneity**

### **Lacking ‘response’ from ethnic minorities**

There appears to be varying perceptions as to the magnitude of the response of ethnic minorities to the new ‘space’ created by closure change in what can overall be seen as governance reform. Importantly, this variation seems to depend on a diversity of opinions as to how the ‘space’ can be understood and what exactly should be the ‘response’. A government official in DARD in Thua Thien Hue thought that ethnic minorities in the Province was responding to the decentralisation and land reform<sup>162</sup>, and it was also suggested that the dissatisfaction with the land allocation process has sparked new and more extensive kinds of self-organisation<sup>163</sup>. On the contrary, others suggest that ethnic minorities are not reacting as hoped for to the decentralisation and devolution due to the history of dependency and pacification<sup>164</sup>. This should have led to a situation where they do not know how to use their new rights. A Viet Nameese forestry researcher raised the question whether the minorities are even capable to manage what he saw as their new responsibility. He suggested there was a deep gap between the reform policies and the actual state of affairs amongst people, due to a lack of supporting policies and necessary capacity building<sup>165</sup>. A widespread opinion was aired for example by CRD staff at Hue University, who described how ethnic minorities in the central provinces do not organise them-selves to use technology provided or introduced to them. It was his understanding that they need help from outside<sup>166</sup>. As we saw earlier, it has also been suggested that a limited degree of organisation amongst grassroots inhibit their ability to engage in the new forms for participatory democracy at grassroots level, and that it contributes to making local government more responsive to higher levels than their constituency. While the number and types of self-organised organisations have expanded markedly over the last years, this growth seems to be confined to the urban areas, and to be experienced as closure by indigenous selves. No self-organisation in the sense applied in this study has therefore been observed amongst ethnic minorities in the uplands as ‘response’ to the closure changes. However, this conclusion may also represent that the pilot did not include much work at grassroots level. It has been recognised that the period since embarkment on de-collectivisation has seen an increase in mutual aid activities in rural Viet Nam (Kerkvliet, 2003). Again, however, this ‘renovation’ may be more pronounced for the lowland deltas.

Elsewhere in South East Asia, concern exists that the grassroots’ proper use of granted rights, which may come from Government only after long and hard negotiations, may be imperative for the further development of management regimes towards community empowerment. In the Philippines the IPRA (Indigenous Peoples Rights Act) has been in place since 1997, and can by contrast to the changes in Viet Nam be seen as one of the pioneering attempts by South East Asian governments to secure legal rights for indigenous peoples. However, concern exists among observers of its implementation that bad experiences will provide the Philippine Government with justification for again to increase state management<sup>167</sup>. Existence of a feeling of lacking response in Viet Nam may equally influence whether the future development of the legal environment may be in favour of indigenous selves’ self-organisation.

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162 Meeting, Hue City, 18 May 2006

163 Informal discussion with local NGO staff, Ha Noi, 7 June 2006

164 Informal meeting, Hue City, 18 May 2006

165 Informal meeting, Hue City, 18 May 2006

166 Meeting, Hue City, 11 May 2006

167 Informal discussion with Filipino researcher, Buon Ma Thuot, 14 June 2006

### **The notion of ‘Civil Indigeneity’**

The recognition of a ‘lacking response’ from ethnic minorities to the changes in closure emerges from a mismatch between other people’s (notably decision makers’) expectations and their view of the reality ethnic minorities live in, and then the actual reality as experienced, lived, and created by the people them-selves. As such, this perception represents simply another manifestation of the domination of closure in relation to indigenous selves. The perceived ‘lacking response’ from ethnic minorities should therefore be seen as expressing the discrepancy between processes composing the government hierarchy and the indigenous selves. It can be seen to rely on the imposition of a world view and values which despite many years of government control remain highly unfamiliar to indigenous selves. It does not matter much that the content of imposition changes to include values of increased participation and grassroots democracy, if the process remains to represent imposition. As we have seen, high-R/I selves have remained rather closed systems in relation to the recent changes, whilst low-R/I selves have been increasingly created with the reform processes in Viet Namese society. With reference to the two preceding chapters, it is thus possible to suggest that the ‘lacking response’ could more constructively be perceived of as a disconnection between high-R/I and low-R/I processes of self-organisation. That is, not of a disconnection between low- and high-R/I selves, but between the processes from which they are created and re-created. Likewise, we can suggest that to enable a ‘response’ it could be a starting point to consider how patterns of low and high R/I-relation can be connected. This would represent a specific usage of experiences so far with how to build up ‘capital’ for the two prerequisites for self-organisation. Good Processes would hence be those that lead to a more harmonious balance between interpretation, i.e. creation of interpretable environment from closure, and self-reference, i.e. processes of identity (re)creation.

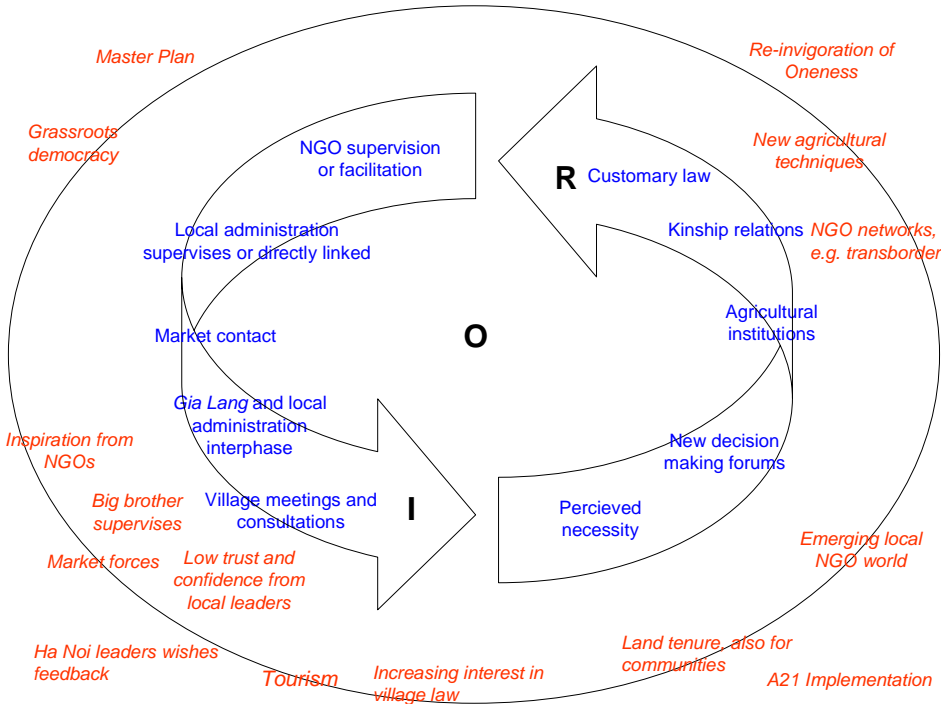
To this end the notion of Civil Indigeneity is put forward, defined as *the ability of indigenous selves to strike a helpful balance between self-reference and interpretation of closure which enables them to self-organise and adapt.*

‘Civility’ is here seen as composed of the processes that ultimately may lead to low-R/I selves. That is, it denotes the processes of re-configuration that increase interpretation but lower self-reference. This includes both self-organisation and externally imposed re-organisation, which in turn represents the effect of hierarchical closure un-interpreted. Civility can thus threaten the identity and existence of the self, and amongst ethnic minorities it may be seen to grow from the efforts of NGOs, development agencies and Government.

‘Indigeneity’ is seen as encompassing the processes that tend to further self-reference over interpretive ability, and to retain the self in a certain configuration and hence exist, but pull it away from adaptation to its, perhaps uninterpreted, environment. Indigeneity is as such seen to exist to varying extent amongst different ethnic groups, but to generally be declining.

Civil indigeneity is therefore exercised when a suitable balance is found between identity re-creation and the linking up to other processes. It also demands a balance between what has been described as centri-petal and centrifugal forces, i.e. social processes that tend to integrate indigenous peoples in wider society, and those that tend to maintain them in their present situation distinct from others, respectively (Ali, 2001). Differences will however always exist between segments of society, and the crucial point is how the learning process proceeds (for SARD). Civil indigeneity may in a learning perspective be seen as the range of optimal states

for learning. The findings from the low- and high-R/I selves are presented in figure 11. Further investigation can explore options for working towards constructive R/I-relations.



**Figure 11:** How to achieve Civil Indigeneity? Summary of findings for both low- and high-R/I selves. The sources of closure which in the earlier chapters have been associated clearly with low-R/I selves have all been (partly) placed within the interpretable frame for self-organisation. Being the author’s choice, it is naturally mostly a provocation for dialogue and discussion, but may also suggest the high interpretive ability of the low R/I-selves. The challenge from this point will be to consider how the various elements of interpretive and self-referencing functions can be utilised in ways which suits local conditions and can lead to emerging pathways for self-organisation. Clearly, this can be a challenge as for instance market contact and high-R/I agricultural institutions may not go well together from the outset. Yet, as experiences presented elsewhere in this study suggest from local NGO efforts and upland research several options may exist for their constructive interplay.

**Good Processes for balancing R and I**

While the primary aim in this report has been to provide background information for further planning of the Upscaling component’s implementation in Viet Nam, the test of the new interpretation of the Initiative has also produced some preliminary suggestions as to in which direction Good Processes may be found. These will be mentioned briefly here.

1) Spread of interpretative ability by dialogue and practice

Clearly, interpretive ability seems to be spreading from the work of NGOs and other actors who seek to further new forms of organisation amongst ethnic minorities. Whilst the emerging low-R/I selves may loose some self-reference, overall this process may provide inspiration for indigenous selves in adjusting their R/I-ratio. Many pitfalls may however exist and it is not clear what exactly makes such a process ‘good’. For instance the emerging low-R/I selves may compete with existing selves for existence.

Yet, in some cases it seems that clubs and networks created by NGOs can develop own intensions, for example wishing to become more autonomous and independent. Examples are presented below. Nature Care has been assisting in establishing networks and clubs around

Thua Thien Hue in collaboration with the Forest Protection Department's project for extending co-management systems in Phong Dien Nature Reserve<sup>168</sup>. Of the four kinds of clubs and their different branches<sup>169</sup> one Nature for Life Club in Phong My Commune has aspirations for upgrading the Club to an association, i.e. trying to become of equal status to the association by which it originally was founded. This suggests that as well as international NGOs may be seen to stimulate or assist in the formation of local NGOs, local associations may play a role in motivating the formation of new forms of grassroots organisation. The club has 43 members, all above the age of 18 and was set up in 2004 as a Club under Nature Care and within the MacArthur Project in Phong Dien Nature Reserve. The reasons for this wish to upgrade were presented as the benefits arising from having own bank account, stamp and legal status. Especially, this comprises the capacity to apply for funding from non-governmental sources and carry out projects in a much more independent way. It was described that the Clubs in Phong My impact positively on people lives as when organised in Clubs farmers can protect their land and forest and collaborate much more effectively<sup>170</sup>. The club is however not lead by ethnic minorities, although people according to the leader participate across ethnicities. In the view of the Club leader, who is Kinh, this cooperation is natural and necessary as every participant has the same rights, tasks and interests. As ethnic minority farmers spend more time in the forest they can contribute more than Kinh farmers to forest protection. On the other hand Kinh farmers can share knowledge on agricultural technology and market<sup>171</sup>. The 'Nature Care model' is now transferred to Youth Unions around the province with Nature Care as consultants. Also the Green Corridor Project of WWF seems to have interest in applying the model, wishing to replicate the idea of Green Clubs in their project area as a method for raising awareness about biodiversity issues<sup>172</sup>.

Another significant example is the key farmer network of Social Policy Ecology Research Institute (SPERI, see chapter XII) where ethnic minorities are involved. It has been seen to increase in autonomy as key farmers take over the implementation of activities without facilitation and hopes exist that it may become completely independent in the near future<sup>173</sup>. Other attempts to stimulate the formation of autonomous organisations do however face challenges. While Caritas hoped that their work with Village Development Associations, organised in Commune Development Boards, in remote provinces in the NMR could develop into groups of households it has not happened. This was suggested to be due to the remoteness and difficulty in accessing the communities and assist in the development. As mentioned, forces of self-organisation in Viet Nameese society seem to benefit from networking across national political boundaries, e.g. between Lao, Cambodia, and Viet Nam. A SEI researcher also reported emerging networking activity between local NGOs up and down the Mekong River<sup>174</sup>, and local NGO employees from Lao and China have reported of NGO-networks in neighbouring countries to Viet Nam, and the dynamic alliance that these organisations may establish with the media, in China in relation to the protest against dams<sup>175</sup>. It seems difficult at this stage to say what makes some farmers pick up on the new ideas and apparently use them according to own agendas.

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168 Funded by MacArthur Foundation project on Collaborative Forest Management (<http://www.macfound.org/>)

169 The four types comprise: A Nature for Life Club for adults, a Volunteer Club for youth, and Green Clubs and Nature Camp Clubs for children (Informal discussion, Hue City, 8 May 2006).

170 Interviews during field trip to Phong My 19 May 2006

171 Interview with the head of the Nature for Life Club

172 Meeting with WWF Project Coordinator, Hue City, 8 May 2006

173 Meeting with SPERI, Ha Noi.

174 Dr. Fiona Miller, pers. comm. during World Water Week in Stockholm 2006

175 Information emerging from discussions at World Water Week in Stockholm 2006

## 2) Allowing organisation from self-reference and identity

One of the major reasons for the wide discrepancy between interpretation and closure is the constraints imposed by the closure on the self-referential functions of the indigenous selves. State actors seem often to continue to conduct the attempts to further self-organisation within frames of re-invigorating Oneness leading to imposed reconfiguring activity. Consequently, self-referencing functions and the role of identity are ignored. In turn, this seems to seriously degrade the ability of indigenous selves to interpret that closure which for instance state actors expect them to adapt to. The head of a Ha Noi Based international NGO pointed out their experience, that the traditional way of self-organisation in ethnic minority communities is with a departure in common identity and that activities and organisation can take place with the prime purpose of building and strengthening identity, which local government does not encourage<sup>176</sup>. The strategy of facilitating the development of what become low-R/I selves also emerges from the lacking recognition of the self-referencing functions. As pointed out, increasing attention is paid to existing high-R/I selves and it may leave space for working more directly, and maybe seek to jointly develop the existing model structures for low- and high-R/I relations.

## 3) Appreciating the local negotiation process

As mentioned, the closure experienced by indigenous selves is generated by self-organising processes of other selves. The diverging intensions of these selves, e.g. between local government officials and policy makers in Ha Noi, lead to conflicting types of closure imposition. This makes it difficult for the indigenous selves, e.g. the community, to adapt and develop its interpretive ability. One major source of such ‘closure-incoherence’ seems to be the lacking appreciation of the local negotiation process and its role in shaping *de facto* natural resource management at local level. The preference for consensus-based decisions in the state apparatus naturally may contribute to inhibiting open acceptance of diverging perspectives.

Nowhere seems the divergence of views and a need for increased local level dialogue more pervasive than in relation to the land allocation process. Resistance to the land reform is faced where people refuse to give up older concepts of landed property which may have worked and been adapted from even before the collectivisation. According to Sikor (2004a, p. 77), it highlights the existence of what Gluckman describes as ‘a hierarchy of overlapping rights’, where each person’s land right derive from his/her socio-political status. One consequence is a discrepancy between legal acts and actual powers (Thanh and Sikor, 2005). Forest devolution has therefore led to very different outcomes in different locations (Sikor, 2004b), spurred by the diversity in land relations and conflicting perspectives on the concept of property. Phuc (2006) consequently argues that actual property relationships are ‘fuzzy’ and largely derive from negotiation between and among villagers and various state agencies. The implementation of the land reform can thus be seen as a force shaping perceptions of land rights at local level and it has many places challenged existing land distributions which were possibly highly ‘illegal’ but which in local context may have reached some kind of acceptance. It is today the actual process of decentralisation and devolution that can create conflicts. In Phong My it is said that some ethnic minority farmers are very discontent with the land reform as prior to the re-allocation of land they lived by their garden with some distance from each other, and now they had to give up the garden and move houses together. Locally, the devolution process may therefore actually be experienced as bringing to people what they do not want, in a form they do not like or do not understand. Assessment of timber

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176 Meeting, Ha Noi, 6 June 2006



value and titling and certification are evidently sometimes quite difficult to relate to for rural ethnic minority farmers. Further, benefit sharing in a new mode of landed property also challenges the existing order and social dynamics. In Dak Lak, local Èdè villagers who now were responsible for the management of 1800 ha forest were yet unsure of when they could harvest from the forest they protect, and the GTZ project in the province recognises benefit sharing as the next major step in their work for forest allocation<sup>177</sup>. Another dimension of this negotiation, perhaps of more formal character, is the dispute over facts and numbers regarding forest cover. Whilst GoV claims that at least a quarter of the land surface is forested, environmental activists set the figure to 6% (Chatterjee, 1993). It adds to the complexity of the debate that 58% of land area has been classified as forest land, but only around half of this is actually forested (EC-FAO, 2002), and of course that the inventory measures have changed since 1980 (FAO, 1997). On a preliminary basis it can be concluded that a widespread understanding is that this process of negotiating user rights within the Oneness of the State is especially halted by lack of appropriate institutions and the top-down implementation of reform (see also Akram-Lodhi, 2002). Superficially, this appears to generate a mismatch between Government expectations and execution, a mismatch that manifests as mentioned in the disharmony between legal rights and actual powers, i.e. between policy and practice. Negotiation amongst a multitude of actors presents the key process whereby decentralisation is enacted in reality.

### **SARD in the uplands depends on self-organisation amongst ethnic minorities**

As should be clear from the discussion, the sustainability of upland agro-forestry is compromised partly as a consequence of the little constructive interplay between indigenous selves and hierarchical closure. Due to the causal feedback loop between upland agriculture and ethnic minorities' self-organisation SARD cannot be achieved without a joint strengthening of the interpretive ability and self-reference, i.e. obtaining a suitable process of civil indigeneity. It suggests that self-organisation can not only be a vital process for SARD, SARD can also play a role in enabling self-organisation, thus contributing to a reframing of the original project formulation of the Consortium (SLU/SEI, 2006). Naturally, different processes of self-organisation can further or inhibit the sustainability of the agriculture and rural development activities, and the work with Good Processes must take into consideration the non-linear relationship that emerges from the huge variation in indigenous selves and in factors determining the sustainability of an upland agro-system.

### Feedback between self-reference and SARD – starting points for theory development

The circular causal feed back loop necessitates that proper attention is paid to the mechanisms that transcend the social-ecological systems in unexpected ways. A range of approaches exist for working with linkages between what we may call materiality and social processes. For instance, in his recent doctoral thesis on bio-semiotics, Hoffmeyer (2005) highlights the more recent interest in the idea of 'internalism', especially by Salthe and Matsuno, where subjectivity is extended to include the materiality, thus underlining the intentionality and purposefulness of self-organisation also in the biological and physical realms. Rocha (2001) provides a starting point for looking into Pattee's principle of semantic closure, wherein the organisation of living systems requires both symbolic and material description to explain their ability to undertake open-ended evolution (self-organisation). Hoffmeyer and Emmeche (1991) have described the ability of meaning to endure through time by the existence of 'code-duality', i.e. the successive multiplication of digital and analogically coded selves.

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177 Informal talk with GTZ Project Manager, Buon Ma Thuot, 14 June 2006.

Insights from social-ecological systems and resilience theory can also prove useful for developing the integrated understanding of self-organisation and SARD which is necessary for the implementation of the Initiative. For this accomplishment, a transdisciplinary research approach seems necessary, and with regard to the Consortium's planning of tools and methods it seems a wide array is needed. It is also interesting to note the relationship between the framework developed in this study and then the advocacy for self-expansion or transpersonal self-hood found amongst some ecophilosophers (see e.g. Fox, 1990). Whilst some such theories may centre on the negative impact that anthropocentric thinking has on sustainability (still acknowledging the negotiability of this concept) the present study suggests that self-centrism in much wider sense can impact both negatively and positively on SARD.

### **A biased view – and directions for dialogue**

The purpose of this report was to offer some suggestions for the operationalisation of the SARD-Initiative in Viet Nam. This has been pursued via a reinterpretation of the Initiative and the application of the new framework for understanding some of the current dynamics in the country. Rather than attempting to provide any complete overview, it was hoped that the study could suggest some new insights as to what the Initiative may mean in Viet Nam and how operationalisation can further proceed during the Consortium's Planning Phase. Like the process of the Initiative depends on multistakeholder dialogue, also this report is hoped to serve as a minor contribution to debate. Important insights emerging from this pilot study are therefore those that pin-point which directions further dialogue could take. In addition to what has already been discussed, this section will present some key points for consideration.

### Question of self-identification

The pilot study was not able to conduct any detailed work with the people who are assumed to compose its focus, and the terminology in this report has therefore largely been imported from the discourses of other actors. One of the important question to answer in a future action research process may therefore be how people which in this report have been represented by the terms 'ethnic minorities', 'indigenous selves', or 'rural farmer', actually perceive themselves, are perceived by others and how the associated negotiation of meaning affects processes of self-organisation. Not surprisingly, field anthropologists involved in supporting rights of 'indigenous peoples' can have greater use of the concepts embedded in the local language (see e.g. Barnard, 2004), and the any label used for other people must be seen as part of identity politics.. The assimilationist perspective is as mentioned strong in Viet Nam and as was touched upon in relation to the concept of 'ethnic minority' and the re-invigoration of Oneness, the debate on self-identity is radically shaped by discourses of nation building. It should be useful to compare these considerations with the ongoing historical revisionism, both with regard to indigenous people and the Viet Nameese State. It also highlights the need for careful reflection on the efficacy of the usage of ethnicity as a classifying lense. One way of penetrating deeper into this question of self-identification and thus the grassroots existence of selves, is of course to conduct in-depth fieldwork with villagers. However, as it clearly emerged in relation to the Neo-Confucian tradition of governance, Viet Nameese Kinh and ethnic minorities naturally have elaborate conceptual systems for constructing their world view which may much better be used to inform a theoretical understanding of imagined identities and what the SARD-Initiative means in Viet Nameese context. Besides learning from field work, it may therefore be useful to investigate what can be learned from prior research on for instance Viet Nameese religion, ethics and culture in general.

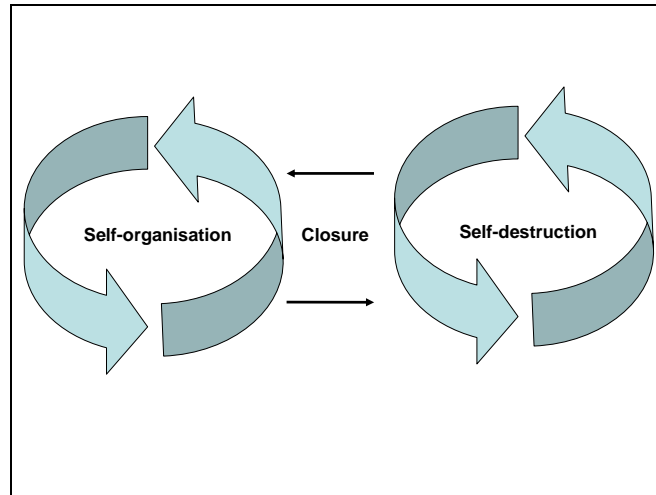
### Developing the framework

The framework for working with self-organisation via attention to self-reference and interpretation was developed to allow the self to organise by own intentionality and avoid the common pitfalls of turning self-organisation into imposed reconfiguration. Whilst this has proven useful in this assessment, it is recognised that the framework can be developed further. For instance, it could be beneficial to develop the understanding of how to distinguish sharply between self-organisation and self-reference, and the imposed reconfiguration and self-organisation *per se*, which are vital for the self – non-self distinction. It may also be a point of further clarification whether self-reference and interpretation should be seen as two always counter-acting forces. If they can coexist, these situations could become of interest for the search for Good Processes. When, as above, taking an eco-philosophical or –psychological approach to SARD it also becomes of interest how ideas of empathy building can inform the development of the framework. These issues have not been discussed in the report but need clarification if the framework shall be used. Certain benefits could naturally also be anticipated from drawing more directly on already developed and tested frameworks for understanding social self-organisation (e.g. Fuchs, 2003) but as was argued it is felt that these often do not observe the autonomy of the self which must be key concern in the Initiative. It is also interesting that the contingency of market economy, which was suggested to inhibit the operationalisation of the Initiative through the disqualification of actors who live by subsistence economy, actually several times seemed to be a key driver in the formation of new low-R/I selves. Naturally, the market does largely depend on private initiatives to re-organise, and it must be deemed necessary to explore further if the spread of market economy in rural Viet Nam can further civil indigeneity. As shown elsewhere, several NGOs work exactly with some issues related here-to.

It has been a main argument in this report to seek to obtain a systemic understanding which appreciates the circular causality of self-organisation. This has been a reason for suggesting that the Initiative do not rely strictly on the Civil Society Programme. Yet, one way in which the linear logic and indeed the instrumentality of the initial formulation of the Initiative has not been challenged is in the rather narrow acknowledgement of ‘indigenous selves’ as the sole observers, and hence subjects of interest. In the preceding pages, it has been pointed out the importance of the self-organising functions of other selves, which the indigenous selves however may perceive (interpret) as closure. To elaborate shortly, a full appreciation of the potentials for constructive interconnection between the two modes of system adaptation does also imply recognition of the self-organising effect of what has in this report been viewed as hierarchy and closure. As the distinction between ‘hierarchy’ and ‘self’ as argued is subject (self) dependent, the expansion of the self-organising view seems to suggest a super-observer discourse. One possible way of incorporating this expansion could be to structure the discussion in terms of complementary and mutually necessitating events of self-organisation (of indigenous selves) and self-destruction<sup>178</sup> (of e.g. observer presumptions). Here, it would seem to be maintained that the self-organising self is the interpreting subject, and the self-destruction only part of the closure. A sketch of what this could mean is shown in figure 12.

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178 Naturally, ‘self-destruction’ is here not intended to convey a meaning of ‘destruction’ in its common sense, but as representing the internal inertia in self-organisation due to the challenge faced when seeking to re-organise habituated processes. This relates to the note on self-organisation and learning in chapter V.



**Figure 12:** Self-organisation and self-destruction as mutual necessities. Closure is here self-dependent, and the key (focal) interpreting self is the one experiencing self-organisation. Self-destruction could be viewed as a painful re-organisation of habituated processes as part of the wider learning event.

### Retrospective adaptation

It is also important to specify that the choice of conducting the re-framing of the Initiative was made retrospectively after the first weeks in Viet Nam. It was continuously experienced that a strict, ‘traditional’, civil society outlook was very difficult or impossible to maintain in the interaction with actors due the very different views on the concept and governance in general. With the proposed framework it should have been shown that the selection of countries for the Upscaling component should not be guided by concern over ‘civil society’ conditions.

### A21 mechanisms need development

It has appeared that the Initiative’s mechanisms are currently not developed in Viet Nam. The Regional Implementation Meetings and Major Group Focal Points need to be established and clarified as part of the planning phase. It seems that the strategy for national A21 implementation should also be scrutinised for collaborative options.

## **Chapter XII: Comments for further project design**

### **Investigated cases**

It was from the outset of this pilot study assumed that the Consortium's contribution would need to centre on a number of case studies. Likewise, it was often recommended by various actors that the Consortium set up tangible projects so as to provide clear show cases for decision makers. However, a suitable balance need be found between 'project orientation' and the enabling of the Initiative's mechanisms which may not need to be linked to specific project activities. This section serves to outline some of the potential cases for such an approach in Viet Nam.

### **Thua Thien Hue**

HUAF has from 1998 till 2002 implemented a relatively large-scale research project on community-based upland natural resource management in A Luoi District, Thua Thien Hue, and an extensive network appears to have been developed (see e.g. HUAF, 2005). Hue University<sup>179</sup> also hosts a Resource Group on Decentralisation, and researchers from Hue University and HUAF work in general with many projects in the upland districts and with ethnic minorities, e.g. in Nam Dong and A Luoi. In both Nam Dong and A Luoi it appears there could be possibility for staying overnight, in District centres, with Centre for Rural Development (CRD) district office, or with research stations. Many researchers choose however to commute daily by motorbike. The transport options vary, and in A Luoi the steep roads are said not to be possible to use by inexperienced drivers. Hue University has a car with driver which may be possible to rent for field trips. The Districts close to Lao border were regarded, for political reasons, to provide slightly difficult conditions for foreign research.

Meetings were held with officials in DARD and MoNRE, but in general little contact was established with Provincial Government in Thua Thien Hue. The Ethnic Minority Committee in DARD recognises five ethnic groups in the Province, including Ka Tu, Ta Oi, and Van Kiew, and the Director of the Committee was very welcoming and invited for participation in field trips. It was suggested by a Viet Nameese anthropologist in Ha Noi that Thua Thien Hue was a good place for working with ethnic minority projects. Specifically he recommended talking to the Ka Tu in Nam Dong. In his opinion the local authorities here were also much more welcoming to foreign projects than just across the Provincial border to Quang Nam, and the many foreign projects in Thua Thien Hue also made a conducive environment for introducing new and different ideas<sup>180</sup>.

Many NGOs and development agencies work in Thua Thien Hue, and also FAO has a project site in the Province. TBI seek to coordinate some of these efforts, and the TBI Institutional Landscape over projects in the province is a good starting point for further planning. TBI suggested that the Initiative could play a role in contributing to increased coordination amongst NGOs and development agencies. The Green Corridor Project<sup>181</sup> is being implemented jointly by WWF Viet Nam and the Forest Protection Department of Thua Thien Hue. It works with stakeholders on an *ad hoc* basis when the need arises and with no explicit stakeholder strategy<sup>182</sup>. 90 % of the people in the area are ethnic minorities and are treated as

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179 <http://www.hueuni.edu.vn/>

180 Informal discussion, Ha Noi, 3 June 2006

181 <http://www.huegreencorridor.org/>

182 Meeting with Green Corridor Technical Advisor, Hue City, 23 May 2006.

land managers. A small grant scheme is in place and it is attempted to make some showcases for Ta Oi and Ka Tu management of forest. LUPLA is facilitated primarily by Helvetas and SNV, but other projects and organisations also assist, e.g. WWF.



**Figure 13:** View from the Citadel in Hue City towards the uplands and Lao border.

#### Land tenure in Central Highlands

In the Central highlands questions of ethnic minorities appear to be more sensitive than many other places in Viet Nam. Local government may nonetheless be much more progressive in seeking new means for resource management, and especially land tenure. A Chairman from a District People's Committee in one of Dak Lak's Districts said that he was very interested in projects which could help in reconciling customary laws with state laws and in furthering of Grassroots Democracy<sup>183</sup>. This attitude was also found with one provincial official in DARD. As a local development expert explained, Dak Lak is more progressive than other provinces because of the importance of creating stable conditions for the coffee production: '*they have to control land tenure and allocation to prevent conflict!*'. However, as he saw it, in this process some people get very rich, others do not. Villagers in remote areas belong to the latter category, and corruption is deemed to be very high, with subsidies going into the pockets of authorities<sup>184</sup>.

A research group from Humboldt University in Berlin has over several years conducted research on land tenure in collaboration with local government, and very good relationship seems to have been built (see presentation of relevant research p. 89). A research group from University of Copenhagen, Institute of Geography, is finalising a research project on world market integration and urban–rural interactions, with Dak Lak as one case study<sup>185</sup>. One of the researchers showed interest in the Initiative<sup>186</sup>.

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183 Informal talk, Buon Ma Thuot, 17 June 2006

184 Informal talk, Buon Ma Thuot, 16 June 2006

185 <http://www.geogr.ku.dk/>

186 Telephone communication, Hue City, 25 May 2006



**Figure 14:** Cham Village. Kids watching as the villagers welcome the guests from the workshop in Buon Ma Thuot for a discussion on communal land tenure.

### Participatory land slide management in Van Chan

Located in the Northern Mountain Region, Yen Bai and Van Chan appears to be significantly less influenced by NGOs and development agencies. The Sida funded Chia Se (vn: ‘to share’) project is promoted as a different approach to poverty alleviation and is the biggest Sida project in Viet Nam (Chia Se, 2005)<sup>187</sup>. It is distinguished, besides its multi-sectoral approach, in the explicit reliance on decentralisation and ‘good governance’ mechanisms in shaping the bottom-up approach to poverty alleviation. Local Development Funds and Local Planning and Management for Development have been established to involve the poor households in making budgeting decisions. Despite the attempts to make the financial mechanisms rooted in the village and commune demands, it remains however quite top-down as all decision have to be approved in the Provincial Project Secretariat. As the village has no legal status it can not contract activities or manage a bank account. It was described how Provincial and District Governments have high interest in infrastructure, and relatively little in attempts to further sustainable agriculture. It was suggested that the initiative for long term sustainable thinking had to be introduced<sup>188</sup>.

The 3-day exploration field trip in Van Chan was consequently conducted with the impression that there is a lack of long-term thinking in the use of project funds. The landslides and floods which recently have caused loss of human lives, and damage on houses, fields, and other infrastructure were from the outset perceived to be caused partly by the use of mal-adapted agricultural practices of the sloping hillsides - a problem widespread in Viet Nam. It was found that stakeholders are still burdened by the relief efforts and have not yet engaged, at least officially, in a wider dialogue to clarify the reasons for the slides and floods and the options for their prevention. Any consensus as to why floods and slides happen in Van Chan is absent, which makes concerted and collective action difficult. Some stakeholders insisted that the deforestation and a generally un-sustainable mode of agricultural production on the slopes were the main reasons, while others held that it was all caused by natural forces (e.g. a thin soil layer) and that people can do nothing but move their village, houses, and fields, i.e. respond by infrastructure change. Meanwhile, the environmental crises motivates farmers to

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187 In many ways it is seen to follow the pattern of Sida’s Upland Programmes from 1986 and 1996 (Meeting with Chia Se advisor, Ha Noi, 3 June 2006)

188 Meeting with Chia Se advisor, Ha Noi, 3 June 2006



engage in more short-sighted planning for agriculture, and the Government seem to prefer costly mitigation as movement of villages or infrastructure developments over a consideration of whether anything can be done to counteract the development. A debriefing report over the field trip was forwarded to people who had been involved<sup>189</sup>.



**Figure 15:** Nam Puoi Village which is planned re-settled due to the risk of landslide.

#### The FAO-VN project on rice production in the uplands

FAO-VN Office was during the time of the field work developing a project with ethnic minorities on rice production in the uplands<sup>190</sup>, scheduled to start September 2006. The project will have a planned life time of two years and a budget of app. 300.000 USD. The project concept is based on an understanding that farmer self-sufficiency need be improved, and that the agricultural extension service's strategy of introducing high yield hybrids as replacement for upland rice varieties kill traditions amongst the minority groups, and is not suited for the upland agro-climate. This should be especially so as the quality is lower, the taste worse, and consumer prices consequently lower too. As an example it was mentioned that ethnic minority farmers must walk one day with 40 kg hybrid rice to the nearest market, and that the same income could be generated by carrying 20 kg upland rice.

The aim of the project is to establish a showcase for the efficacy of retaining and developing upland rice varieties. This shall be accomplished by securing seed production by quality and quantity, upgrading good agricultural practices, and linking farmers to the market via marketing efforts. Sustainability, it was stated, can only be achieved if agriculture produces enough income for farmers, and this has to depend on marketing and market chains. It was appreciated that changing agricultural practices includes a strong component of changing decision making practices, and the Consortium was invited to establish dialogue about collaboration. It was suggested that this could begin at any stage during the FAO project. FAO-VN aims at continuing the activities after the termination of this project, and the Consortium could also play a role here. The project was presented as a 'pure' FAO project, but NOMAFSI appears to be the executing agency, and it will be implemented in collaboration with government partners. It appears that the Terms of Reference are written and that the overall frames cannot now be significantly changed to accommodate any other

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189 See 'Van Chan field trip debriefing report' of 27 June 2006. For a copy please contact the author.

190 Field visits should during August/September have been carried out at four sites in the NMR, and one in Quang Nam.



ideas of the Consortium<sup>191</sup>. It was agreed to stay in touch and to inform the FAO-VN Office of the developments regarding the planning of the Initiative's implementation in Viet Nam. FAO-VN has after the writing of this report kindly shared the programme proposal.

#### Other notes on project sites

A Viet Namese researcher suggested that project sites be found outside the Northwest of the NMR, as this often is more sensitive areas due to the proximity of the Lao border. Instead he recommended from his experience what he called 'open' Provinces (Lao Cai, Cao Bang, and Bac Can) where it was easier to work with local governments. Yen Bai and Thai Nguyen Provinces were, he said, also good places to work in, but still difficult sometimes as local authorities could be sceptical to new ideas<sup>192</sup>. The Consultative Institute for Socio-Economic Development of Rural and Mountainous Areas (see p. 92) recommended Ha Giang and Cao Bang, both bordering China in the North and North-East, as suitable provinces for site selection due to historical and geographical reasons, including the need for local government to push for development in order not to stand back for the nearby Chinese districts<sup>193</sup>. Further, Tuyen Quang was suggested as a good place to work with governance issues due to strong leadership<sup>194</sup>, and Nghe An, where both Centre for Environment and Community Asset Development conducts research and SPERI has projects (see p. 92), were said to be very supportive of co-management issues<sup>195</sup>.

#### **Research of potential relevance for the SARD-Initiative**

The SAM (French acronym for Mountain Agrarian Systems) project ran, as a branch of the Ecoregional Initiative of the CGIAR<sup>196</sup>, from 1998 to 2002 and aimed at increasing agricultural productivity, natural resource management, and living standards for ethnic minorities. The program used a holistic multi-disciplinary research approach diagnosing at various scales, and a scaling up process to generalise site specific findings to the highly heterogeneous mountain environment (see Castella and Quang, 2002)<sup>197</sup>. One of the recommendations described here and arising from the SAM program of potential interest for the Initiative's planning is the need for building on social capital toward community-based resource management in the NMR. The Programme was implemented in partnership between Viet Nam Agricultural Science Institute (VASI), L'Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD), International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), and Centre de Coopération Internationale en Recherche Agronomique pour le Développement (CIRAD). Now, VASI has gone through an organisational restructuring, and NOMAFSI is one of the 10 new institutes under Viet Nam Academy of Agricultural Sciences (VAAS). It is recommended that the findings from the SAM program and the efforts preceding and following be properly reviewed. Dr. Castella has been contacted and showed interest in the Initiative<sup>198</sup>. Coordinators at NOMAFSI described how the FAO rice project (p. 88) is emerging from understanding accumulated during the SAM-1 programme. IRRI and CIRAD appear also to be involved in these upscaling efforts.

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191 Meeting with NOMAFSI, Ha Noi, 6 June 2006

192 Informal discussion, Ha Noi, 3 June 2006

193 Meeting with local NGO, Ha Noi, 7 June 2006

194 Meeting with Project Manager, Ha Noi, 28 June 2006

195 Informal talk with local NGO, Buon Ma Thuot, 16 June 2006

196 [http://www.inrm.cgiar.org/documents/CDC/cdc\\_ecoregional\\_init.htm](http://www.inrm.cgiar.org/documents/CDC/cdc_ecoregional_init.htm)

197 See also [http://www.canal.ird.fr/canal.php?url=/sommaries/thema8\\_en.htm](http://www.canal.ird.fr/canal.php?url=/sommaries/thema8_en.htm) and

[http://www.knowledgebank.irri.org/sam/home\\_en.html](http://www.knowledgebank.irri.org/sam/home_en.html)

198 Dr. Jean-Christophe Castella, email communication, 29 May 2006

The Global Forest Governance Project: Strengthening Voices for Better Choices is the IUCN's response to the European Commission's call for proposals to support the Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan. Viet Nam represents one of six target countries at global level<sup>199</sup>. The IUCN-VN research group has been in Thua Thien Hue to pilot for setting up one pilot site, where stakeholder identifications have been conducted by researchers in the FLEG team. Background documents have kindly been shared.

A Junior Research Group on Post-socialist Land Relations at Humboldt University in Berlin<sup>200</sup> has worked for some years with land tenure issues and local governance in Viet Nam involving Viet Nameese scholars. World Agro-Forestry Centre in Viet Nam (ICRAF-VN) works amongst other projects with market integration of smallholders in a project on commercialisation and information processes. This is in collaboration with RDViet and SLU, and is part of a larger regional effort<sup>201</sup>. Finally, it appears that action research has been applied a few times before in Viet Nam in relation to the civil sector and natural resource management. It has been suggested that Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) tried to work with an action research project in Thua Thien Hue and that it perhaps this did not prove successful<sup>202</sup>.

### **Potential partners and collaboration**

A case study approach with action research could benefit from a simultaneous development of the regional and national mechanisms for 'civil society leadership'. It seems that the combined efforts of developing the Initiative's mechanisms and seeking to facilitate processes towards civil indigeneity would be the best choice for the implementation of the Initiative in Viet Nam. This could draw on the insights presented here. It is recommended to seek to achieve the right balance between case study approach and local partnership, and the network structure of the Initiative's mechanisms. Success or failure is often determined by the network and local contacts, and it must therefore be recommended that the choice of partner organisation(s) is prioritised very high. Here are mentioned some of the actors who were engaged during the field work and expressed interest in collaboration. It is highly positive that so many actors showed interest in the Initiative as the needs for collaboration may take on many forms, and the need may exist for a range of partnership-types. In addition, a number of people expressed an interest in acting as resource persons if need should arise.

#### RDViet and Hue University

The RDViet Administration Office is situated at Hue University of Agriculture and Forestry. Six universities are members of the network, with eight more loosely connected institutions. Hue was chosen as core in the RDViet collaboration as the agricultural university in both Ho Chi Minh and Ha Noi host the oldest and most capable universities and much foreign support go to these. Hue is also perceived as being more progressive and, together with its surrounding North-central Viet Nameese provinces, in more need of support. A major component of the capacity building work is the provision of network courses, where collaborating universities and institutions can send their staff for training, and training of staff for doctoral and master degrees. Small research grants are provided to support members conduct pilot studies to submit to Ministry of Science and Technology (MoST) for further

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199 <http://www.iucn.org/places/vietnam/>

200 <http://www.agrar.hu-berlin.de/wisola/ipw/plr/>

201 Meeting with ICRAF-VN, Ha Noi, 3 June 2006.

202 Meeting with international NGO, Hue City, 23 May 2006. It was recommended to talk with Dr. Edward Webb at AIT.

support<sup>203</sup>. A potential cooperation between RDViet and the Consortium must necessarily consider how the Initiative's implementation can both employ and support the network of RDViet. Already, RDViet and Hue University staff carries a heavy work load. Perhaps it can be possible to work more directly with specific members of the RDViet network.

#### Potential Government partner and cooperation

If the project is not hosted by a local partner organisation with contacts to Government, then a government partner must be identified. Local NGOs have good experiences with involving authorities closely in their projects by appointing them certain tasks and discussing project ideas and philosophy in detail. It may also be important to seek contact to people that from the outset are convinced about the project ideas. When approaching the Government it is important this is done formally and to the appropriate level. In the Province, the Provincial People's Committee should be informed so they can make a decision as to how to establish a potential collaboration.

#### Other possible options for collaboration

Whilst a range of interesting and influential stakeholders and actors contribute to the shaping of the options for self-organisation for indigenous selves, the following actors expressed an explicit interest in collaboration for the implementation of the Initiative.

- **SPERI** (Social Policy Ecology Research Institute) is the result of a merger this year between three organisations: Towards Ethic Women (TEW), Center for Human Ecology Studies in the Highlands (CHESH), and Center for Indigenous Knowledge Research and Development (CIRD). SPERI has a three-fold strategy of strengthening farmer's network, conducting research for scaling up of lessons learned, and lobbying for better policies. Within the Mekong Community Network and Ecological Trade (MEKO-ECOTRA) SPERI works with about 4000 key farmers in Viet Nam and Lao to strengthen the ability to engage in the market economy without losing social capital and traditions (see SPERI, 2006). The people from what now is SPERI expressed an interest in discussing further possibilities for collaboration within the Initiative, where SPERI especially would be interested in the Consortium's capacity as a research institution<sup>204</sup>.
- **TBI** (Tropenbos International) Office in Hue was very interested in the Initiative and welcomed further dialogue about collaboration. With the aim of developing better research for policy making, Tropenbos administrates a research grant with an upcoming deadline for submission of proposals<sup>205</sup>.
- **CSDM** (Centre for Sustainable Development in Mountainous Areas) was established in 2000 but have conducted community development since 1998.
- **CISDOMA** (Consultative Institute for Socio-Economic Development of Rural and Mountainous Areas) **and** **CECAD** (Centre for Environment and Community Asset Development) are both local NGOs working at grassroots levels in different provinces.

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203 Informal discussion with RDViet coordinator, Uppsala, 16 August 2006

204 See also the letter from SPERI to the Consortium outlining research possibilities

205 As a corollary, it could also be of interest to explore funding options within the private sector. Direct foreign investment is increasing and private businesses taking increasing interest in Viet Nam may have interest also in promotion in relation to 'civil society' development.

- **NOMAFSI** (Northern Mountainous Agriculture Forestry Science Institute) hosts a range of research activities for sustainable agriculture in the uplands. It is member of the Upland Forum, which is a ‘learning and sharing network’<sup>206</sup> aiming at linking research and development professionals within Viet Nam to promote sustainable development in the uplands. Participatory action research is mentioned as a key approach (HAU, 2005).
- **NISTPASS** (National Institute for Science and Technology Policy and Strategy) conducts research that includes topics of sustainability and civil society. A senior researcher suggested that the Institute would be happy to involve in a project on civil society, whether or not this would be within the RDViet platform<sup>207</sup>.
- **The Agenda 21 Office** has as mentioned oversight over a series of pilot projects for A21 implementation in Viet Nam. It was suggested that it could be of relevance to discuss whether the Initiative could link up to these ongoing efforts.
- **SEI, SLU, and Sida** appear all to have quite elaborate networks in Viet Nam and the Mekong countries in general. SEI seems to have good contacts to civil society organisations<sup>208</sup> and Sida Natur staff may have very useful insights into prior rural development projects in the uplands<sup>209</sup>.

#### Attitudes towards the executing agency

A wide range of actors mentioned that Sida and Sweden in general have very good reputations in Viet Nam. The connection to FAO was also, spontaneously, said to be very positive. It was suggested that where some NGOs may experience that it can take two or three years before local government and communities acknowledge their project idea, good reputation can make the process of acceptance much smoother. I also appeared however that at least one Viet Namese researcher was less enthusiastic about the work of SEI hitherto, as he saw is as having brought about very few direct outcomes. In all cases presumptions like these may rest on very few observations, and of most interest is the fact that so significant attitudes exist towards different foreign organisations, and that people see these attitudes as important for project success.

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206 <http://www.vuf.org.vn/>

207 Informal meeting, Ha Noi, 27 June 2006. See also <http://www.nistpass.gov.vn/>

208 See also [www.cbik.org](http://www.cbik.org) and <http://www.fact.org.kh/english/background.htm>

209 It was recommended to look at the CD-rom ‘Looking at the MRDP’, and suggestions for further contacts in Sida Natur were provided from the Swedish Embassy in Hanoi.

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