

Civiness in Question:

The Case of Women’s Activities in Rural Vietnam

Takeko Inuma

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, there has been growing interest in the roles that civil society and civic activities play in social and economic endeavor across the world. Studies with a greater focus on citizens and their initiatives came to cover a wide range of practical and theoretical themes, such as participatory approaches, social/community networks, community involvement and social capital. In the 1990s, such perspectives were extended to the studies of the post-Soviet societies with much attention to how the civic sphere would take shape after the democratization of the one-party regimes. Although democratization is yet to be seen, Vietnam was not an exception in attracting such scholarly interest at the time of these dynamic changes of the former Eastern Bloc. In the period after the introduction of *Doi Moi* (Renovation) in 1986, as a result of the shift from a centrally-planned economy to a market-oriented economy, Vietnam experienced a rapid economic growth with the growth rate of 5.1-7.1 percent between 1990 and 2015 (World Bank Development Indicators). While the economic opening has been the central purpose of *Doi Moi*, new attention has been directed to understanding how and to what extent opportunities for civic activities would emerge in post-*Doi Moi* Vietnam.¹

How much civic space has opened up as a result of the new political environment after the introduction of the *Doi Moi* policy, and to what degree does the Vietnamese society embrace civiness? The existing work on this theme in Vietnam includes aspects on the state-society relations manifested in various new forms (Kerkvliet, 2001; Thomas, 2001) and on the characteristics of its civil society in social and political spheres (Thayer, 2009). To define what is civic is a difficult task, but in the context of pre-*Doi Moi* Vietnam, what was NOT civic was more evident. The political system of Vietnam is typically characterized as composed of three institutions: the party, the government, and the mass organizations (Gray, 1999). If they represent the state all together, what is civic would be the rest of the societal components. In the post-*Doi Moi* period, however, the empirical observations do not necessarily indicate such a clear distinction as there are seemingly mixed actors over mixed boundaries of the civic space and the state. This is especially salient in women’s activities in rural Vietnam, where a mass organization as the state actor intersects with the typically civic domain.

In an effort to understand the characteristics of civiness, or the degree in which civil society emerges in Vietnam, this paper attempts to delineate the characteristics of the grassroots activities of the women’s mass organization in rural communities and to explore the civic quality of such activities. The female leaders at the community level have taken up microfinance activities, which are often

¹ The term, “post-*Doi Moi*,” employed in this paper refers to the period after the launch of the *Doi Moi* policy in 1986.

associated with active civic or NGO engagement, and provide assistance to other women, especially from poor households, in a wide range of activities. This paper is based on an interpretation of the findings from a preliminary study of a comparison of rural communities in the two major delta regions of the north and the south of Vietnam in order to understand the level of civiness of women's activities. Due to the historically different paths they followed in the twentieth century, the communities in the north and the south have different levels of socialist legacy. The community in the north is expected to show closer ties to the state and the party, and the southern community is expected to show greater civiness. The following section reviews the existing discussions on civic arenas in Vietnam, with an emphasis on mass organizations. The third section portrays the situations of the two communes, Hai Van Commune in the Red River Delta, and Than Cuu Nghia Commune in the Mekong River Delta, and of the women's organizations in these communities. In the fourth section, empirical cases relating to women's activities in microfinance are examined. The analyses were conducted based on interviews carried out in the studied communes in collaboration with the Institute of Sociology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, and also based on commune-level data from 2008 to 2013 collected by the Institute of Sociology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

2. Civiness in Post-Doi Moi Vietnam

What makes activities civic in the context of post-*Doi Moi* Vietnam? The existing discussions on civil society in Vietnam provide diverse views on how to understand civiness in this rapidly transforming society.

Certain scholars consider the proliferation of organizations as a sign of a widening civil society in Vietnam. Kerkvliet (2003: 16) points to "mutual assistance associations among farming households and organizations among fellow religious devotees to renovate temples and hold particular ceremonies" as representing certain aspects of civil society. The criteria for civil society here is to be "voluntary," working to contribute to certain public deliberations, and also to have "reciprocity," building mutual help and feedback to each other.

There are two possible arenas where civiness could emerge on a voluntary basis: civil society in the private sector, and civil society as citizens' activities. First, the extent to which the private sector has grown as civil society is not substantial. In describing the nature and extent of activities that could be recognized as civil society in Vietnam, Dixon (2004: 22) points out that, despite the emergence of a new economic elite after *Doi Moi*, the extent to which they could form the basis of an "economic civil society" was seriously limited because they were either within or closely allied to the party-state system instead of residing in the domestic private sector. Second, after *Doi Moi*, the number of citizen's associations increased rapidly; an estimation reports that in 2005 there were 140,000 community-based organizations and 3,000 cooperatives, and 1,000 locally registered NGOs and 200 charities (Thayer, 2009: 5). Also as many foreign donors rushed to assist Vietnam, they emphasized the important role that NGOs play in ensuring a bottom-up approach in the authoritarian political system (Ibid.: 4). This may have influenced the government's attitude towards civiness. Due to the great interest in development policy to promote civic engagement in wide activities of the public domain, top-down

institutions can find it useful to foster a certain range of civic bottom-up activities that could serve for policy agenda.

One perplexing aspect is that the mass organizations function in both top-down and bottom-up manners. As any activities of citizens in the pre-*Doi Moi* period in Vietnam took place within state-led organizations,² mass organizations are intrinsically categorized as the state domain instead of the civic domain. In reality, state-led organizations are of great importance in examining the society in Vietnam. Despite its mobilizing nature, they were at the core of the construction of the independent country before and after the reunification in 1975. Even after *Doi Moi*, however, they have remained intact and continued to grow as organizations, which is a stark difference from other state pillars such as state-owned companies and cooperatives that have been dismantled. It indicates the clear aim of *Doi Moi* to open up strictly the economy and not the society.

The views on mass organizations in relation to civil society are mainly split in two: some consider mass organizations as part of civil society while others do not consider them so. The former is a minority view while most observations and analyses support the latter view. As an example of the former view, Asian Development Bank (ADB) (2011) considers mass organizations as part of civil society by looking at their public benefits and points out that mass organizations have very strong grassroots links and large memberships, and that they have become increasingly independent since *Doi Moi*, especially in the cases of the Farmers' Association, Women's Union, and Youth Union. Yet, how one can assess the degree of independence is not specified here, and the mere fact of having a large membership is not sufficient to make it civil society. A report edited by Norlund describes that mass organizations "accepted as an integrated part of society," while local NGOs and community-based organizations are "new types of organizations that developed in the 1990s but not fully recognized by society" (Norlund, ed., 2006: 10). The degree of acceptance is a vague criterion unless furnished with certain opinion survey, and what counts is the context of acceptance, for instance, whether perceived as part of the state or as the people's voluntary sphere. The same report points out that, for grassroots organizations in the rural communities or in local areas, central control is much weaker, and many of the mass organizations operate with substantial autonomy (Ibid.: 20). This implies that mass organizations at the local level have more possibilities to gain civic characteristics regardless of its statal origin.

The view that mass organizations do not represent civil society seems to be widely shared among scholars. The organizational structure positions mass organizations under the party, thereby bound to the state control. The mass organizations have a dual function: to implement party and state policies, and to "act as a transmission belt channeling information to the party without which it could not formulate policies to meet changing conditions" (Beresford, 1988). The 2003 Decree on Associations (Decree 88)³ sets forth the rules for the registration of "associations," which seems to be the closest term to civil society. This Decree marks a shift in government's relations with citizens' organizations by allowing them greater freedom in organizing and financing their own activities. Although this

² In the Vietnamese context, "state-led" means "led by the state institutions/organizations including the party" as the party and the government comprise identical authorities.

³ "Decree No. 88/2003/ND-CP, July 30, 2003, Providing for the Organization, Operation and Management of Associations."

Decree does not mention the term “mass organization,” it includes a statement that clearly excludes *de facto* mass organizations from “associations,” thereby exempting mass organizations from the control of the Decree. Those exempted from the stipulations of the Decree are (in the order listed in the Decree): “the Vietnam Fatherland Front, Labor Confederation, Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, Vietnam Peasants Association, Vietnam War Veterans Association and the Vietnam Women’s Union.” On the other hand, the Decree considers “associations” as primarily voluntary and for mutual support.⁴ Even if the voluntary and supportive nature is emphasized, these associations are after all managed by the ministries, and the 2003 Decree retains the “dual management” (Sidel: 2009, 143) of associations, namely, the uniform management of associations nationwide on the one hand, and the management of associations by line ministries on the other.

A perspective of civil society discourse in Vietnam indicates that civil society is equated with developmental and environmental NGOs, which can be both local and international, resulting in misunderstandings between concepts such as civil society and participation (Salemink, 2006: 121-122). There is a tendency that the form of participation, instead of its process, determines whether it is considered civil society. Hirsch points out that many of local NGOs in Thailand shifted from community development work to policy advocacy work especially drawing on social and environmental issues of development, such as dams and forestry, but as far as NGO advocacy is concerned, their roles are significantly circumscribed in Vietnam as well as Laos and China (Hirsch, 2007: 198). Even though the Women’s Union may perform as an NGO and it may advise the authorities in the higher strata on the local situations, it would not hold any advocacy role. Also, certain discussions on NGOs in the context of civil society call attention to a possible problem in promoting service delivery by NGOs or civic groups, instead of by the state, as it might weaken their capacity to maintain a watchdog function and to hold governments accountable (Kabeer and Simeen, 2010: 50).

Apart from the above viewpoints on civic activities, it is important to pay attention to what would be civic in the context of rural areas. Rural areas faced particularly rapid changes after *Doi Moi*. The agricultural sector of Vietnam became increasingly integrated into the regional and global economies, exposing Vietnamese farmers to international competition. At the same time, the reduction in government spending left the rural poor with few resources of alternative protection (Bach and Duong, 2010: 117).

Another issue for civicness in rural Vietnam is migration from rural areas to urban areas. The 1990s marked the beginning of a rapid decline in rural population, and this decline was further accelerated in the 2000s. In 1975, the percentage of the rural population in Vietnam was 81.2 percent; this had declined to 69.6 percent by 2010 (Table 1). The main income earners, often men, work in cities while women remain in the rural area to look after household and community responsibilities.

⁴ The Decree stipulates that “Associations prescribed in this Decree are understood as voluntary organizations of citizens, organizations of the Vietnamese of the same professions, the same hobbies, the same genders for the common purposes of gathering and uniting members, regular activities, non-self-seeking, aiming to protect members’ legitimate rights and interests, to support one another for efficient activities, contribute to the country’s socio-economic development, which are organized and operate according to this Decree and other relevant legal documents.” (Article 2.1.)

Table 1: Rural Population in Vietnam (Thousand Persons) (% of Total Population)

Year	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010
Rural population	39,939	44,331	49,597	54,952	59,154	61,172	61,773	61,983
% of total population	81.2	80.8	80.4	79.7	77.8	75.6	72.7	69.6

Source: Based on World Bank World Development Indicators.

In addition, most of the civil society associations are formed mainly in urban areas, and there are less spaces for civil society associations to be formed in the rural areas. For this reason, the roles women and women's organizations play are relatively significant in the rural areas, and it is important to examine the way in which they engage in civic or non-civic activities within the communities.

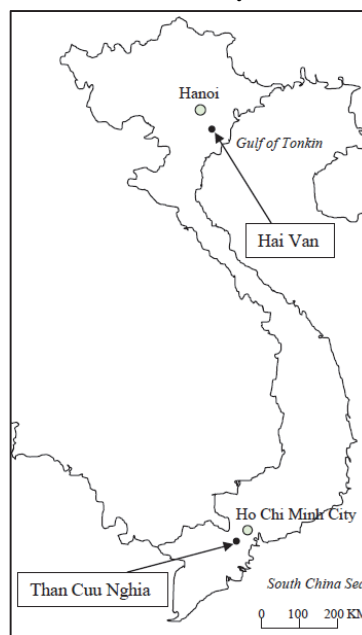
3. Cases of the Two Delta Communes

3-1. Social and Economic Situations of the Study Areas

This study is based on empirical observations of two communes: Hai Van Commune, Hai Hau District, Nam Dinh Province, and Than Cuu Nghia Commune, Chau Thanh District, Tien Giang Province. Hai Van is in the Red River Delta, approximately 100 km southeast of Hanoi. Than Cuu Nghia Commune is in the Mekong River Delta almost 50 km southwest of Ho Chi Minh City. The selection of a study site in Vietnam depends largely on the authorization of the government, thus the cases presented here are not free from a selection bias. They are not necessarily typical or average communities that represent each region. The government usually approves researchers to study communities that are on good terms with the government and that do not have possible sources of conflict. Hai Van Commune has especially close relations with the government over years, which might influence its social and political characteristics.

Nevertheless, the communities in the north and the south do have distinctive differences in terms of the historical background and experiences of the communist rule. The north has a longer period of engagement in the communist institutions while the south has been exposed to them for a much shorter time. The economic basis of production in the north was under the influence of the collectivization since the late 1950s whereas the south was affected only after the reunification in 1975 and until the late 1980s. In theory, this would lead to the stronger influence of the state on the society in the north as opposed to the less influence in the south.

Map 1: Vietnam and the Study Areas



The following section describes the social and economic situations of the two communes. Hai Van Commune has a population of 9,464 persons and 2,688 households (as of October 2014). The population of the Than Cuu Nghia Commune is twice as large as that of Hai Van, with 21,035 persons and 5,149 households (as of January-June 2013).⁵ According to the commune data of 2008-2013, collected by the Institute of Sociology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, certain commonalities and differences exist in the social and economic conditions of the two communes. The livelihood of the both communes is based on agriculture and is supplemented by livestock and craft-making. In general, Vietnam has relatively good nationwide infrastructure, and its poverty rate is low in comparison to that of its neighbors in the region. Such national characteristics apply to both of the communes. In 2013, Hai Van's electrification rate was 95.2%, and that of Than Cuu Nghia was 100%. Both have all-weather roads connected to other communes. In Than Cuu Nghia, the province provided 9 billion VND for inter-hamlet road construction, and the population in the district and communes contributed approximately an equal amount.

With regard to the differences between the Hai Van and Than Cuu Nghia communes, their characteristics are distinct from each other in the aspects of religion and economy. Hai Van is unique in the sense that about 80 percent of the Commune population is Catholic as a result of its early French influence.

Economic differences between the two communes are fairly large. With regard to the income level, Hai Van's annual per capita income increased from 20 million VND in 2008 to 29 million VND in 2013. On the other hand, Than Cuu Nghia's annual per capita income is substantially lower, 25.5 million VND in 2014 although it increased from 15.5 million VND in 2010. Hai Van's relatively high per capita income is due to labor out-migration and to furniture/wood industry as well as handicraft production. Concerning labor migration, according to their village committee, the income increased since around 2010, which was facilitated mainly by the road network as the National Route 21 connects Hai Van to the provincial capital, Nam Dinh. Hai Van has construction labor teams that are regularly dispatched to Hanoi and its proximity.

Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the household income quintiles in the both communes. Regarding income poverty at the household level, none of these communes have population classified as "very poor," and both communes have a fairly small proportion of population classified as "poor."⁶ The poverty rate in 2011 for Hai Van was 7.75 percent and that for Than Cuu Nghia was 8.16 percent; the former slightly less than the national average poverty rate, and the latter higher than the national average.⁷ Although Than Cuu Nghia seems to face a more severe problem of poverty, there is much stronger economic equality among households in Than Cuu Nghia, as households classified as "Average"

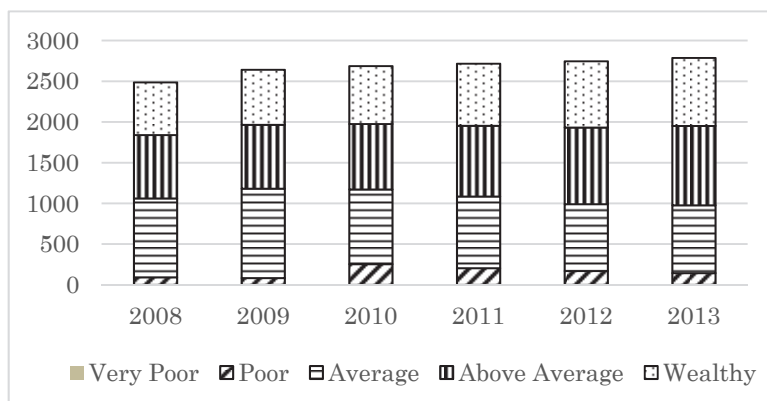
⁵ Than Cuu Nghia is considered a middle-size commune. It was created through the merger of three villages, Than Nhou, Cuu Dieu and Nghia Thanh, which were composed of seven hamlets.

⁶ The communes in Vietnam monitor poverty information at the household level, which is compiled by the MOLISA, to be incorporated into the values for poverty lines and poverty rates (Demombynes and Vu, 2015). Although identification of the "poor" was carried out by Commune authorities using different criteria in different communes and over time, after 2005, the MOLISA implemented a National Census on Poverty (NCP) to produce a complete list of poor households (Ibid.).

⁷ The national average poverty rate in 2013 was 7.8 percent (MOLISA).

and “Above Average” account for 82.2 percent of the total while those of Hai Van account for 64.7 percent in 2013.

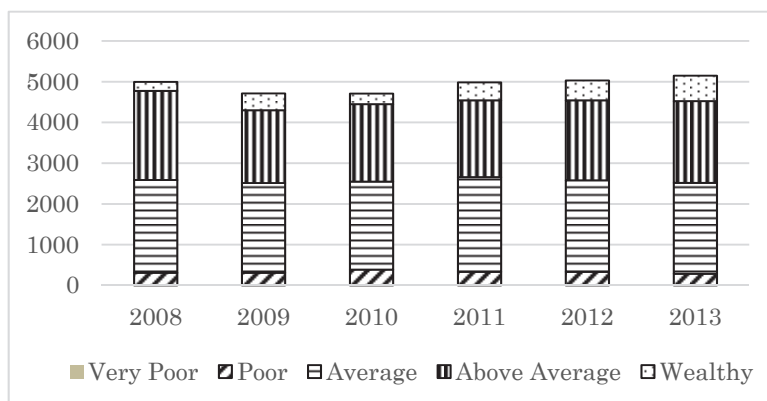
Figure 1: Household Income Quintiles in Hai Van, 2008-2013 (Number of Households)



Source: Based on village information collected by the Institute of Sociology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

N.B. The data for 2013 is for the period from January to June 2013. (The same applies for the data hereafter.)

Figure 2: Household Income Quintiles in Than Cuu Nghia, 2008-2013 (Number of Households)

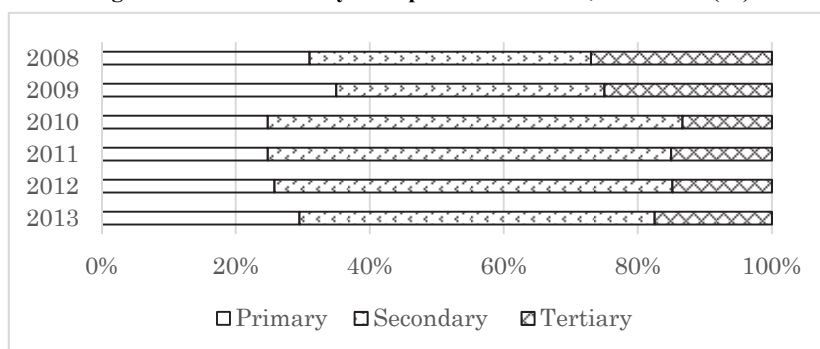


Source: Based on village information collected by the Institute of Sociology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

With regard to the industrial structure, there are distinctive differences between the two communes (Figure 3 and Figure 4). First of all, the proportion of labor engaged in the primary sector is substantially lower in Hai Van, accounting for 26-35 percent in 2008-2013. In contrast, the secondary sector of Hai Van is distinctively large. Many male workers from this commune go to Hanoi and other provinces, and women take up the responsibility of agricultural work in the commune. Most

importantly, this commune also has a strong furniture and wood industry as mentioned earlier as one of the reasons for its higher per capita income. According to Houtart and Lemerminier (1984: 32-34), the restructuring of the workforce and the reversing of the primary and secondary sectors occurred between 1973 and 1978 as a result of the policy for co-operatives.⁸

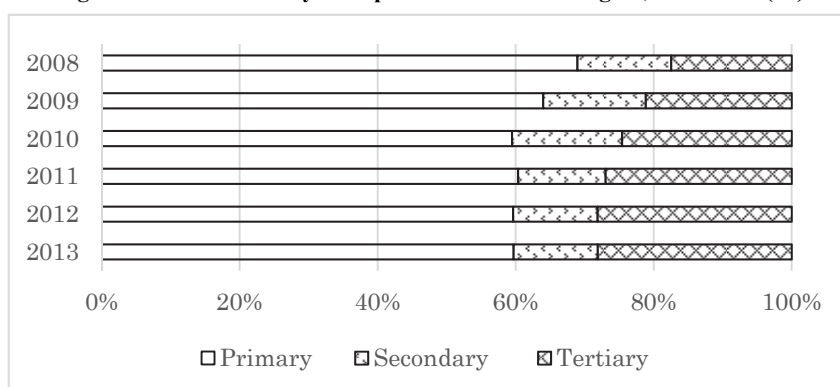
Figure 3: Labor Force by Occupation in Hai Van, 2008-2013 (%)



Source: Based on village information collected by the Institute of Sociology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

Than Cuu Nghia Commune, on the contrary, has a large primary sector. Income sources for the population of Than Cuu Nghia are: 1) vegetable and fruit farming, 2) rice cultivation, and 3) handicraft. Its agricultural production is integrated into the market economy, and is also managed in a large scale: the agricultural land area per capita in 2013 was 221 m² in Hai Van and 474 m² in Than Cuu Nghia.

Figure 4: Labor Force by Occupation in Than Cuu Nghia, 2008-2013 (%)



Source: Based on village information collected by the Institute of Sociology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

⁸ The furniture and wood industry is made up of small-scale enterprises with less than 30 employees. These companies have been established through loans from the Agricultural Policy Bank and the Social Policy Bank. The timber is imported from Laos, and the products are sold to both the foreign and domestic markets. The commune authority mentions that this industry has prospered as a result of the good road networks reaching Nam Dinh City.

One of the reasons for Hai Van to reduce the number of agricultural labor was because agriculture alone could not absorb the young workforce, especially after they come out of the secondary education (Ibid.). Despite its larger agricultural land area, it does not mean that the Than Cuu Nghia Commune does not have any problem regarding job opportunities for young people. Besides, agriculture is mechanized and does not require additional labor. In 2009, a new industrial zone opened in Kon Tan Huong, approximately four kilometers away from this commune,⁹ and young people moved there to seek income. According to the commune authority, this was a welcomed development as young people do not have to leave for distant cities, such as Ho Chi Minh, to look for jobs.

Women are an important labor force in the agricultural sector in both communes. Although there is no gender-disaggregated data for agricultural labor, narratives show that Hai Van's agricultural responsibility depends largely on women, and that both men and women are in charge of agricultural production in Than Cuu Nghia. Historically, women predominantly worked in agriculture due to the exodus of men to the army in times of war, and, traditionally, women had also taken up heavy labor in the fields (Beresford, 1988: 74). In the cases of the two communes, despite significant differences in the industrial structures, both of their agricultural sectors rely very much on women.

In these transitional processes of the Vietnamese society and economy, differences between the two communes is discernible at the level of the influence of the state. Hai Van has been in a close relation with the state since early on. The state introduced industrial co-operatives into Hai Van in the mid-1970s. According to the Central Committee of Hai Van Commune, the government introduced the rural program to this commune in the 1980s one of the earliest in the country. Moreover, Hai Van was one of the early communes in which the government set forth the cultural titling. For instance, if a household meets the cultural criteria, it receives titling of "Cultural Family." The same type of titling applies to the commune, district and province, but the communes are the important bases of such titling. In this sense, Hai Van has served as a model commune for the government policy and plans.

3-2. Women's Status and their Organization in Rural Areas

Vietnam has made striking achievements in the advancement of women's status in the public sphere. Reforms were launched to promote greater participation of women in political and economic activities. Government policies, laws for gender development, and programs to protect women from harassment, as well as to protect mother and children, have been enacted and enforced.

Traditionally, women have had a lower status in the family, and had very few decision-making opportunities. After the revolution, socialist ideology propounded the principle of equality between men and women. However, the inquiries carried out in Hai Van by Houtart and Lemercinier (1984: 119) in the pre-*Doi Moi* period indicated that, at the household level, male domination in decision-making in family finance and management has remained persistent, especially among the younger generation. With regard to the social and cultural activities of the family members, both

⁹ The industrial zone has garment factories from Taiwan, Korea and China. The total number of workers is approximately 40,000 persons, and 70 percent of them are women. In 2014, the average salary of the workers in the industrial zone was 4.5 million VND per month.

women and men partake in decision-making, which seemingly reflects the social changes in the socialist period.¹⁰

The Vietnam Women’s Union, founded in 1930, is the oldest mass organization in Vietnam. The main activities of the Women’s Union are carried out in accordance with the National Five-Year Plans and the National Women’s Union Congress, which take place every five years. It operates nationwide under the Party’s guidance, hence the organizational structure and management are in principle the same in both communes. Although the overall organizational framework is the same for the both communes, the Women’s Union in Hai Van has a much higher unionization rate (Table 2). According to the Women’s Unions of the both communes, there are six main areas of work (Table 3). In Hai Van Commune, activity 4) is not limited to informing the higher strata about the administration of commune affairs, but also includes giving feedback on social policies from the viewpoint of the

Table 2: Women’s Unions in Hai Van Commune and in Than Cuu Nghia Commune

	Hai Van	Than Cuu Nghia
Number of members (persons)	1,558	998
Unionization rate (% of the total number of adult women)	73.9%	18.9% *
Membership age	18-60 years old	18-60 years old

Source: Based on interviews, November 2014.

* Estimation based on the commune population data, 2013.

**Table 3: Main Activities of the Women’s Unions,
Hai Van Commune and Than Cuu Nghia Commune**

	Hai Van	Than Cuu Nghia
1	Training (child care, family knowledge, business management)	Training (livestock, agriculture such as vegetable growing)
2	“Happy Family Movement”	“Happy Family Movement”
3	Microfinance	Microfinance
4	Providing recommendations to the district and the province regarding conditions in the commune	Providing advice to local authority about issues pertaining to people’s lives
5	Expansion of the Women’s Union	Capacity building of the Women’s Union members
6	Support for women in poverty	External relations and cooperation for collaboration with other organizations and foreign organizations

Source: Based on interviews, November 2014.

¹⁰ For instance, the authors point to equal decision-making on the type of newspapers to read, and to female initiatives in going to visit friends or attending women’s meetings (Ibid.: 121).

commune. For instance, the Women's Union could suggest support for people with special needs such as handicapped children. Even in cases where certain measures taken by the government is not appropriate for the commune, the Women's Union of the commune can still make recommendations to bureaus at a higher level of decision-making. Their contact is not limited to the public bureaus, as they can also demand enterprises to provide appropriate salaries and health insurance.

In Than Cuu Nghia Commune, under activity 3), women are mobilized in environment and sanitation issues. For instance, every household is required to build a new toilet. If someone needs to prolong his or her credit terms, the Women's Union brings this request to the local authority. Under activity 4), the Women's Union follows up on community health conditions; for instance, it verifies if children under the age of six have received free medical cards. There is great need for activity 5), capacity building of new members, because approximately one hundred women take up membership in the Women's Union every year.

The types of technical training are different in the two communes, reflecting the need of the two local areas: family care and business management in Hai Van, and agriculture and livestock skills in Than Cuu Nghia. The rest of the activities are generally the same for the both communes, except the one activity in Hai Van to support women in poverty and the one in Than Cuu Nghia for external relations and cooperation, directly dealing with outside organizations and foreign organizations, in particular, the provider of the microfinance assistance. In both communes, the Women's Union plays a crucial role connecting between the communities and the authorities. In the sense that its service delivery is substituting for the local authority's work in many administrative themes in the communities, it is a very statal organization.

In sum, the organizational aspect of the Women's Union indicates that of Hai Van being highly unionized, which is understandable from the historical background of northern Vietnam. In terms of their activities, most of their main work areas overlap with each other while they reflect certain specific characteristics and concerns of the local areas.

4. Women's Microfinance Activities and Civicness in the Communes

Microfinance has become a widespread development tool in the developing world. These activities are often carried out by community development groups and self-help groups. They are highly appreciated because they can reach out to the poor, and especially poor women, who are often excluded from credit opportunities. Microfinance is also believed to be cost-effective as it handles small amounts of loans, and because the repayment rate is very high. In Vietnam, microfinance was quickly adopted in the 1990s at the time of the full reduction of the state sector. Rankin (2008: 1217) claims that the introduction of microfinance into Vietnam took place through ad hoc negotiations between individual donors, provincial and district governments and the mass organizations, rather than through regulatory reform and institutional diversification. At the same time, behind the introduction and further promotion of microfinance activities in Vietnam, there were policies to emphasize rural development. The National Target Program on New Rural Development (hereafter NTP-NRD) is the main rural policy framework started in 2010 for improving income, livelihood, and living standards

through the development of modern infrastructure, an improved economic structure, and production bases for agriculture, industry and services.¹¹

Nghiem (2012: 621) categorized microfinance in Vietnam into two types: formal and semi-formal. The providers of formal microfinance are the Vietnam Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (VBARD), the Vietnam Bank for Social Policy (VBSP) and the People's Credit Fund (PCF). The semi-formal providers of microfinance are non-bank institutions of NGO microfinance activities. In the two communes in this study, both types are present: the VBARD, the VBSP, and the Women's Union as a non-bank institution although it is not an NGO. The former PCF, which used to be a government-owned bank, had a higher interest rate (11%) than the VBARD (10%). In the case of Than Cuu Nghia, the VBSP provides credit for the poor with an interest rate of 0.65%. Borrowers invest in agricultural activities such as fruit planting, livestock such as poultry, and fishery, or small businesses and other forms of commerce. The poor may repair houses using this loan, and the limit of the loan was raised from 5 million VND to 10 million VND in 2010. A household that wishes to start a family business would be eligible to apply, and a typical loan would be provided in the areas of fish farming and coconut tree growing in Than Cuu Nghia. The VBSP also provides loans to organizations such as the Women's Union, the Farmers' Union, the Youth Union, and the Vietnam War Veterans Association.¹²

One of the main semi-formal operators of microfinance is the Women's Union although, as Nghiem described, their finance providers are usually NGOs. Microfinance, especially the one operated by women, has been classified into two groups of approaches: the "financial systems" approach and the "poverty lending" approach. The former offers a commercially-oriented, minimalist package of financial services for the economically-active poor, while the latter offers loans to the poorer, subsidized by donors, and often coupled with training, as well as social and other support services (Kabeer, 2005: 261). To examine the cases in these two communes, it is not so much whom microfinance is targeted at because "very poor" people do not exist according to the commune data. More of importance is the second point, whether micro finance comes with or without schemes. Kabeer draws attention to: 1) the philosophy that governs their delivery, 2) the extent to which they are tailored to the needs and interest of those they are intended to reach, 3) the nature of the relationships which govern their delivery, and 4) the caliber and commitment of the people who are responsible for delivery (Ibid.).

For the purpose of this study, I modify these parameters to portray the characteristics of civicness

¹¹ This policy replaced the earlier Poverty Reduction Policy (PRP). The main difference between the PRP and the NTP-NRD are the target areas. The PRP focused on credit for the poor to improve only the economic aspect whereas the NTP-NRD has 19 criteria and encourages cooperation with other organizations, for example, collaboration with the Vietnam Fatherland Front for the building of cement houses to replace poor simple houses. To promote livestock and vegetables or health programs, it is considered necessary to cooperate with all these related organizations.

¹² As of November 2014, the total number of borrowers of small loans from the VBSP in Than Cuu Nghia was 488 persons. These loans were issued for the following purposes: 1) for building houses, 2) to extend work activities (20 households utilized this scheme in November 2014), 3) a poor family with a university student can receive 10-11 million VND per year per person, 4) a household near the poverty line can receive a loan for economic development in the range of 5-20 million VND a year, and 5) for installation of clean water facilities, new toilets, and sanitation measures.

manifested in microfinance activities: 1) the civic philosophy of microfinance delivery, 2) the civic need responsiveness of the operation, 3) the civic nature of relationships in microfinance delivery, and 4) the civic caliber and commitment of those involved. Using this as the frame of analysis, the following section explores the microfinance activities carried out by state-led organizations at the commune level. It is assumed to show the different levels of civicness in the two communities in accordance with the different influence of the state.

The following are cases of similar microfinance activities in the Hai Van and Than Cuu Nghia Communes. Both have received foreign assistance to initiate microfinance projects. Hai Van received aid through a Belgian scholar team that was visiting the Commune, and Than Cuu Nghia received aid from a Norwegian NGO. Such direct contact and cooperation, although reported to and authorized by the authorities, would not have been possible in the pre-*Doi Moi* period.

With regard to microfinance in Hai Van, the reasons why the Women's Union manages the fund, according to them, are: most agricultural workers are women; and the husbands have moved to large cities for work. Approximately, 80 percent of the Women's Union members have husbands working in large cities and who return home six to seven times a year. Due to these reasons, the providers of the microfinance fund decided to leave the management responsibility with the Women's Union. A fund committee was established, in which the committee president supervises overall management, and a treasurer serves regularly. The president of the Women's Union also partakes in the management. In the first two years, three to four Vietnamese experts were brought in to train the staff of the Women's Union in management skills. As Table 4 shows, each loan is 2 million VND, and the loan is issued in four installations of 500,000 VND every six months. The repayment is also made in four installations of 500,000 VND every six months. Only Women's Union members can vote on whom to assist through the microfinance system, and the Women's Union submits a report on the fund capital annually to the Commune president, who then submits it to the cooperation office in Hanoi to be sent on to Belgium.

In the case of Than Cuu Nghia Commune, a Norwegian NGO, the Norwegian Mission Alliance (NMA),¹³ has been in cooperation with the Tien Giang Province's Women's Union since 2002. In 2010, the project's status was changed to the "Tien Giang Capital Aid Fund for Women's Economic Development (Tien Giang CWED)," a non-profit organization for poverty eradication, job creation, and assistance to poor women in remote areas. The credit is used only for production and business activities because its aim is to increase income for the poor.

CWED requires borrowers to make mandatory and voluntary savings monthly and to complete a training program on business management, followed up by local consultants throughout the process.¹⁴

¹³ The NMA provides small-scale credit assistance with the aim of improving the lives of the poor so that they can establish their own businesses, develop existing production, or improve their living conditions. <http://www.misjonsalliansen.no/english/a46553> (Viewed on May 21, 2015). In 2005, the fund's accounting, which took place at the commune level, became integrated with the accounting system of the province. See Mekong Organization of Microfinance. <http://mom.com.vn/> (Viewed on May 21, 2015).

¹⁴ The program eventually changed its status to be a licensed microfinance institution (MFI). <http://www.norad.no/om-bistand/publikasjon/ngo-evaluations/2011/evaluation-of-capital-aid-fund-for-womens-economic-development/>

In the case of Vietnam, the program provided assistance to 12 communes out of the total 22 communes of Chau Thanh District. The borrowers enroll in technical courses mainly in the areas of agriculture and fishery, and staff from the Women’s Union follow up on all borrowers and their activities. The funds of CWED are managed by the province, and the province pays the Women’s Union 1.5 million VND quarterly per year as administration and management fees.

NMA started operating in Than Cuu Nghia Commune in 2009, providing 1.2 billion VND (Table 4). An eligible woman can borrow 5 million VND for 12 months with a monthly repayment of 50,000 VND. For the second loan, a person can borrow 6-7 million VND. In November 2014, 378 members had utilized this credit scheme for the purposes of rearing chickens/pigs/cows, vegetable farming, or fishery. At the time of the credit issuance, their activities are examined, and two or three months later, the credit staff visit each borrower to see if they are actually engaged in the activities. For the loan borrowers, the Women’s Union organizes training courses two or three times a year on rearing chicken, fishery and other activities. These training courses receive budgetary and technical support from the province’s extension office.

In these two communities, although the institutional arrangements are the same, in other words, both based on collaboration between the Women’s Union and a foreign donor, their funding scales and delivery details are quite different. The interest rate of Than Cuu Nghia microfinance is as high as that of the commercial institutions. As the total fund is larger in Than Cuu Nghia, the first credit amount is

Table 4: Comparison of Microfinance Activities in Hai Van and Than Cuu Nghia

	Hai Van	Than Cuu Nghia
Year established	2008	2009
Original fund sources	Foreign aid	Foreign aid
Purpose	For the poor	For the poor
Rate (%)	0.5% per year	1.2% per month
Terms	N.A.	12 months
Total amount of funds (VND) (original)	100 million	1.26 billion
Total amount of funds (VND) (current)	110 million	1.2 billion
Borrowers (persons)	49	378
Cumulative number of borrowers (persons)	400	19,959
First loan (VND)	2 million	5 million
Repayment (VND)	500,000 per 6 months	50,000 per month
Repayment Rate (%)	100%	More than 99%
Second loan (VND)	N.A.	6-7 million
Types of activities	Poultry, pig husbandry, vegetable farming, and retailing.	Poultry, pig husbandry, vegetable farming, fishery.

Source: Based on interviews, November 2014.

more than twice of that in Hai Van, and Than Cuu Nghia microfinance provides a second loan.

With regard to the four aspects of microfinance, the following observations were made, which did not necessarily correspond to the original assumptions. First, the philosophy of microfinance in both communes is to provide assistance to poor women. According to the Hai Van Women's Union, the provision of a small amount such as 2 million VND is extremely important to a poor woman, because she could purchase 10 chickens or one pig with this amount of money. They can breed as many as 100 chickens, and above all, there has not been any delay in repayment in Hai Van. However, the actual loan policies are fairly different between the two communes, and for Than Cuu Nghia microfinance, it is doubtful whether reaching for the poor was actually possible with such a high interest rate. Their loans are also restricted for income-generating activities such as cash crop production, livestock and business, which would not anticipate the needs of the landless or the very poor. Furthermore, the mutual support is institutionalized in its operation, as seen in the case of Than Cuu Nghia in the form of the mandatory savings, but there is no reciprocal mechanism in placing the members' feedback or evolving this program for further activities beyond individual delivery.

Second, whether microfinance in the two communes has responded to the needs of the people, it is an advantage that the Women's Union staff serve as the managers of microfinance activities because they are very much aware and informed of the issues of the locality. Identification of the project's targets was also made in consultation with the donors, followed by technical training of the managers as well as of the borrowers in both cases. Moreover, in the case of Hai Van, the absence of men due to their labor migration leaves much responsibility for women in securing livelihood. In this sense, the female managers of microfinance are the best fit for dealing with the female borrowers.

The third question on the nature of the relationships in microfinance delivery is closely related to civicness. As those who are involved in its management are doing so as part of their duties in the Women's Union, it is not of voluntary civic engagement. Yet, their remunerations are rather symbolic, and one needs to acknowledge that these female managers are working, especially so dutifully, out of certain voluntarism and dedication. While the characteristics of microfinance activities are often associated with civic relations, the operation of microfinance is very administrative, which could be done either in a public bureau or a private financial institution. In the case of microfinance in Hai Van, a female manager of the Women's Union took part in a training course in Thailand, visiting model farms and exchanging views in a conference with Thai farmers. The entire operation and management, as well as building of staff capacity in the Women's Union, strongly resemble that of a development project. After all, microfinance operated by the Women's Union leads to the reduction of the administrative cost, and it utilizes peer pressure for repayment (Rankin, 2002). In its multiple capacities, the Women's Union has grown to act as an administratively inexpensive implementer of a financial development project at the community level, which can be easily misinterpreted as the representation of civic activities. Another path could have been to build upon the essence of civicness in microfinance a "practical basis" for women to meet regularly and to promote new ideas eventually leading to address their interests (Kabeer, 2005).

This point overlaps with the question on the caliber and commitment of those involved in

microfinance. The female managers and staff of microfinance have much experience in dealing with the social and economic issues of the communes. They have been well trained in the management of the fund, as well as supervision and reporting. Nevertheless, the privilege that members of the Women's Union have in the form of sole decision-making rights for the selection of the borrowers may create room for unequal opportunities if the managers turned out to be less committed to social justice and equality.

5. Conclusions

This study explored the situations of civiness by comparing women's activities in the north and the south of Vietnam. Against the assumption that the state intervention, by the form of the more firmly organized mass organization, would be stronger in the north, there were no significant differences of the work frame in the north and south with regard to the civiness of women's activities, regardless of the longer and deeper state control in the north and the less state-influence in the south. Certain differences exist with regard to the organizational aspect; Hai Van's Women's Union in the north has a much higher unionization rate, and that of Than Cuu Nghia is low but rapidly growing. Also, in terms of actual activities, a more institutionalized and more strictly organized microfinance program was found in the south. According to the microfinance typology made by Kabeer, the north had the "poverty lending" approach while the south had the "financial systems" approach. This does not imply any inherent nature of the north or the south, yet it suggests that the actual characteristics of the microfinance program could be differently experienced by the borrowers, and the implication for the civic spaces in the communities is large as the spread of the "financial systems" approach could be misunderstood as the enhancement of civic engagement. This awaits further studies with a greater sample size, but the re-examination of what seems and claims to be civic would be instrumental for the analyses of the transitional societies.

In the pre-*Doi Moi* period, social protection in the forms of secure employment (albeit remuneration in kind instead of salaries) and the provision of health and education services was an important part of the socialist state operation. After *Doi Moi*, the diminished state sector meant that there was no stable provision of employment or subsidies. The emphasis on civic activities came about at a convenient time and provided an opportunity for the state to reduce the statal responsibilities by leaving them for citizens' self-help or mutual help. In addition, the poverty reduction policies were being implemented and becoming the overarching framework in social engineering. There was a greater need to make a difference at the commune level, and in particular to target at the poor households, which was expected to be more effective and efficient in reducing poverty. In the pre-*Doi Moi* period, the party mobilized mass organizations for political outputs, whereas in the post-*Doi Moi* period there were less needs for socialist ideological dissemination and greater needs for incorporation into the national development strategies. Mass organizations came to serve increasingly as development partners operating poverty reduction activities, with their leaders and members working (with voluntary dedication) as if they were development workers.

Despite the call for reaching out to the poor women, the actual operation and management of

microfinance do not correspond fully to the civic principles of voluntariness or reciprocity. Voluntariness has been always a part of women's activities traditionally and historically, which obscures the discussions of civicness. Although the mass organization's remunerations are very humble and their staff are usually very dedicated and hard-working, it is difficult to consider them as a form of voluntary contribution on the side of the women leaders of the Women's Union and of the fund committee. Reciprocity in terms of finance is somewhat embedded into the system of microfinance. As a revolving loan, the mere usage of the fund and the repayment would automatically reciprocate the benefits to other users. However, the "services" that female leaders and staff provide in microfinance activities are delivered unidirectionally, and there is no space for the reciprocal feedback from the borrowers on how to manage the program.

The philosophy, needs identification, the types of relations created, and the quality of the personnel involved in the microfinance activities, all contribute to creating a new role and image of women's activities in development. Regardless of its civicness or non-civicness, development work can take place in both the private and public fields. Examining the case of civic relations in Laos, a country with a very similar political structure as in Vietnam, Inuma (2013: 138) points out that in the context of a one-party state, the boundary between "voluntary" and "being mobilized" is blurred, and the two areas can even overlap with each other, and that under such a regime, it is important to look at what social relations are tolerated or promoted by the government. In the case of rural Vietnam, development activities provide an arena for such an overlap to take place. The Women's Union has become a well-trained and well-experienced institution to operate most of such grassroots activities that could contribute to reducing poverty and to supporting the livelihood of women who are in a more precarious position in the post-*Doi Moi* period. The state-led organization is acquiring multiple characteristics in a flexible manner to function as both a civic and statal organization. The risk of incorporating the mass organization into these major development activities may include legitimatization of its roles in both of the civic domain and the state domain.

Acknowledgements

This research is funded by the Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED) under Grant Number I3.3-2012-01. The author is deeply grateful for the sponsorship of the Institute of Sociology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, under the research project "A Study on Civil Linkages and Their Roles in Rural Area Development (the Red River Delta in Comparison with the Mekong Delta)."

References

Adan, Ahmed, et al. 2002. "Who is Listening? The Impact of Participatory Poverty Research on Policy." In *Knowing Poverty: Critical Reflections on Participatory Research and Policy*, ed. Karen Brock and Rosemary McGee. London: Earthscan. Pp. 99-134.

- Asian Development Bank (ADB). 2011. "Civil Society Brief: Vietnam." September. <http://www.adb.org/publications/civil-society-briefs-viet-nam> (Accessed on May15, 2015.)
- Bach, Robert L. and Le Bach Duong. 2010. "Social Protection and Market Reforms in Vietnam." In *Social Protection as Development Policy: Asian Perspectives*, ed. Sarah Cook and Naila Kabeer. London: Routledge. Pp. 114-141.
- Beresford, Melanie. 1988. *Vietnam: Politics, Economics and Society*. London: Pinter Publishers.
- Dixon, Chris. 2004. "Politics: State, party and political change in Vietnam. In *Rethinking Vietnam*, ed. Duncan McCargo. New York: Routledge Curzon. Pp. 15-26.
- Government of Vietnam. "Decree No. 88/2003/ND-CP, July 30, 2003, Providing for the Organization, Operation and Management of Associations."
- Gray, Michael L. 1999. "Creating Civil Society? The Emergence of NGOs in Vietnam." *Development and Change*. Volume 30, Issue 4, pp. 693–713.
- Hirsch, Philip. 2007. "Advocacy, Civil Society and the State in the Mekong Region." In *NGOs as Advocates for Development in a Globalizing World*, edited by Barbara Rugendyke, (London: Routledge), pp. 185-199.
- Houtart, Francois and Genevieve Lemercinier. 1984. *Hai Van: Life in a Vietnamese Commune*. London: Zed Books.
- Iinuma, Takeko. 2013. "Government-Initiated Social Capital in Urban and Rural Areas of Laos." *The Senshu Social Capital Review*. No. 4, pp. 111-142.
- Kabeer, Naila. 2005. "Is Microfinance a 'Magic Bullet' for Women's Empowerment?: Analysis of Findings from South Asia." *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 29, pp. 4709-4718.
- Kabeer, Naila and Mahmud Simeen. 2010. "Microfinance and Social Mobilisation: Alternative Pathways to Grassroots Democracy?" In Vera Schatten Coelho and Bettina Von Lieres, eds. *Mobilizing for Democracy: Citizen Action and the Politics of Public Participation*. London: Zed Books, pp. 48-71.
- Kerkvliet, Benedict J. Tria. 2001. "An Approach for Analysing State-Society Relations in Vietnam." *Sojourn*, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 238-278.
- _____. 2003. "Introduction: Grappling with Organizations and the State in Contemporary Vietnam," in *Getting Organized in Vietnam: Moving in and around the Socialist State*, ed. Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, Russell H.K. Heng, and David W.H. Koh. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. Pp. 1-24.
- Nghiem, Son, Tim Coelli and Prasada Rao. 2012. "Assessing the Welfare Effects of Microfinance in Vietnam: Empirical Results from a Quasi-Experimental Survey." *Journal of Development Studies*. Vol. 48, No. 5, pp. 619-632.
- Norlund, Irene, ed. 2006. "The Emerging Civil Society: An Initial Assessment of Civil Society in Vietnam." Vietnam Institute of Development Studies (VIDS), March.
- Rankin, Katharine N. 2002. "Social Capital, Microfinance, and the Politics of Development." *Feminist Economics*. Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 1–24.
- _____. 2008. "The Politics of Subversion in Development Practice: An Exploration of

- Microfinance in Nepal and Vietnam.” *Journal of Development Studies*. Vol. 44, No. 8, pp. 1214-1235.
- Salemink, Oscar. 2006. “Translating, Interpreting, and Practicing Civil Society in Vietnam: A Tale of Calculated Misunderstandings.” In *Development Brokers and Translators: The Ethnography of Aid and Agencies*, ed. David Lewis and David Mosse. Bloomfield, Connecticut: Kumarian Press. pp. 101-126.
- Sidel, Mark. 2009. *The Constitution of Vietnam: A Contextual Analysis*. Oxford: Hart Publishing.
- Thayer, Carlyle, A. 2009. “Vietnam and the Challenge of Political Civil Society.” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*. Vol. 31, No. 1, pp. 1-27.
- Thomas, Mandy. 2001. “Public Spaces/Public Disgraces: Crowds and the State in Contemporary Vietnam.” *Sojourn*. Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 306-330.