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Civil-Society-Organization Approaches to Social and Community Development in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable development calls for extending the creative and responsive capacities of civil society to develop and employ social-change approaches that are feasible within the confines of current political and cultural contexts. Enhancing civil society offers a key strategic pathway for advancing the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, there has been a void in research to date that is aimed at identifying specific and promising non-governmental organization (NGO) influence approaches that promote SDGs. With foreign-donor support, Vietnam has experienced a "mushrooming" and strengthening of registered and unregistered civic development organizations. Although progress is being made and procedural equity is advancing, NGO efforts still exert a limited impact in bringing about equitable community and social development in Vietnam. In general, local NGO social-development roles are constrained by "uncertain and unpredictable" operational implementation of Government regulations and by the lack sustainable funding as well as office and administrative support. Based on insights from interviews with the leaders of two Vietnamese NGOs that stand out in terms of the distinctively strategic influence methods they employ, this contribution introduces and conceptually analyzes several promising civil-society-organization approaches to social and community development in Vietnam. The two highlighted culturally, socially, and politically sensitive NGOs offer inspiring influence methods that possess potential for wider application. The study findings suggest that implementation by Vietnamese civil-society organizations (CSOs) of action approaches that employ broad-based equality appeals, strategic communication, collaborative community relation-

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ships, network coordination, and enhanced and sustained multi-level policy advocacy offer promising pathways forward.

Keywords: Vietnam; Civil Society Organizations; International NGOs; Social Development; Policy Advocacy; Networks; Distributive Equity

1. Introduction

We find ourselves at an alarming threshold point for sustainable eco-social development. Prospects for realizing sustainable and equitable pathways and achieving the SDGs by 2030 are remote, and social development confronts daunting challenges[1] (p. 1). Across the globe, we face a disturbing "disconnect between the aspirations of social development and the realities of marginalized populations"[1] (p. 3).

The term sustainable development encompasses an integrated approach to environmental protection and reducing and eliminating poverty that aims to ensure the well-being of "all humanity without negatively impacting the limits of the planet"[2] (pp. 413–414) and without destroying the resources available to future generations[3] (p. 297). Sustainable development encompasses social development, which emphasizes the vital role of cultural and social influences in "improv[ing] human well-being"[4] (pp. 61–63) and entails distributive justice; that is, "various forms of redistribution of opportunities, income, assets and power"[4] (p. 62). Social development also puts emphasis on participation, including means of inclusion and empowerment[4] (p. 62). In sum, sustainable development that does not overlook social development is instrumental if we are to resolve the most daunting current and forthcoming challenges facing humanity.

Similarly, the perspective of the United Nations on social development embraces "improvements in individual and family well-being" through defense of human rights and the "provision of economic opportunities, the reduction of poverty, and access to social security, social protection and social services' "[5] (p. 3). Thus, social-development policies "need to address social exclusion and discrimination, lack of productive employment and decent work, lack of access to quality social services and social protection, gender inequality, conflicts and social polarization…"[1] (pp. 3, 6, 15). In short, the overriding challenge is to introduce long-term and connected social, environmental, and economic solutions. As the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) insightfully points out, "transformative social policy invests in the well-being of people and supports productive, inclusive, just and sustainable development pathways"[1] (p. 15). At the forefront of urgently needed transformative policy are "universal basic income, child benefits, unemployment insurance and affordable health care"[1] (p. 15). Commitment to leaving no one behind underscores the social protection universally required to attain and maintain just societies.

The United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) constitute a universal call for action to end poverty, protect the planet, and improve the lives and prospects of all people[6]. Embedded in the Sustainable Development Goals is the understanding that all 17 objectives are contingent on social, environmental, and economic factors that are needed for their fulfilment. Given the essential natural-resource base for sustainable development, SDG #6 ("ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all") merits special attention. Furthermore, SDG #13 ("take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts"[6]) is directly related to prospects for enjoying sustainable development. In addition, the four top risks that business leaders envision are extreme weather events (#1), critical change to planetary systems (#2), biodiversity demise and ecosystem collapse (#3), and natural-resource shortages (#4); pollution is listed at #10[7]. In response to these threatening risks, Japan has adopted an integrated approach that focuses on transitions to "a 'nature-positive', 'nature-revitalized', decentralized society which co-exists with nature rather than dominating it"[8] (p. 499).

Since social justice serves as a "precondition for SD and the achievement of the SDGs"[9] (pp. 530, 534), it is not surprising that Agenda 2030 incorporates the equity and social-justice objectives of social development intertwined with sustainability. The Agenda offers clear targets for social development. Specifically, the Global North-Global South and inner-nation equity and justice dimensions are

incorporated in SDGs #1 (end poverty in all its forms everywhere")[6]; #2 (end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture")[6]; #5 ("achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls")[6]; #8 ("promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all")[6]; #10 ("reduce inequality within and among countries")[6]; #13 ("promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels")[6]; and #15 ("ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages")[6]. The pressing challenge is to motivate actions and collaborations that progressively address connections among the social and ecological dimensions of sustainable development. Although the SDGs are universally applicable, their implementation must be mobilized and effectuated nationally and locally.

Enhancing civil society offers a key strategic pathway for advancing the SDGs. However, there has been a void in research to date that is aimed at identifying specific and promising NGO influence approaches that promote SDGs. This contribution highlights the innovative strategic roles played by two non-governmental civil-society organizations in social and community development in Vietnam. In the field of development studies, civil society is commonly understood as "the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, self-supporting, that is autonomous from the state and bound by a legal order or a set of shared rules"[10] (p. 5). Consistent with common practice, we also treat most local and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) as a proxy for civil-society organizations[11] (p. S92). The UN's Civil Society Unit distinguishes an NGO as 'a not-for-profit voluntary citizens' group that is organized on a local, national or international level (as cited by Pickering-Saqqa[12], p. 2). Studies of Vietnamese NGOs are especially important because "some of the major political and operational issues concerning the evolution of NGOs in developing countries, especially their relationship with the state and, more broadly, the evolution of civil society, are magnified in one-party states"[13] (p. 173).

Community and social development in Southeast Asia have been altered in critical and differential ways by the expansion of civil-society organizations and by their increasing civic engagement. In the dynamic development context of Vietnam[14] (pp. 13–14), linkages among local NGOs and international NGOs and impactful local NGO efforts that offer promising lessons learned merit special attention. In this contribution, we draw on prior research studies and documentary analysis for context setting, particularly regarding NGO linkages, and on selective case-study analysis for specific and detailed insights regarding effective influence pathways.

1.1. Contributions of Civil Society Organizations to Social and Community Development

Civil society organizations (CSOs) range from large INGOs such as Oxfam, local NGOs created and managed by in-country professional workers, to local community-based associations run by members of that community. In Vietnam, CSOs often fill gaps in critical local-service provision, particularly health, education, water and sanitation[15] (p. 132). Some Vietnamese NGOs have become involved in macro development projects involving land and forest governance[16], as well as societal and community-level initiatives such as empowerment of disadvantaged populations, including ethnic minorities, women, LGBDQ communities, and people with disabilities. Mass Government-organized NGOs (GONGOs), such as the Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA), Vietnam Women's Union, and the Vietnam Youth Union[15, 17–19], also make valuable contributions in some situations.

Civil society organizations in pursuit of social-development transformational possibilities emphasize promoting sustainable, civic-driven change. They call upon community strengths and network collaborations[20]. Institutional alliances and working groups allow CSOs to "contest state power and thus have the potential to help build more democratic governance processes"[21] (p. 1342). CSOs can help offset power imbalances by engaging in multi-organizational alliances that link actions by grassroots, national, and international bodies (including governments, businesses, and donors)[16, 22, 23] and by filling gaps in social and community development[24] (p. 106).

At the same time, "geopolitical tensions and democratic backsliding have further complicated international cooperation, straining multilateral institutions and weakening collective action on global challenges"[1] (p. 1). Across the

world, Southern CSOs are assuming an increasingly critical role in in domestic development work in light of widespread government failures to "scale-up investments in social policy" and to enable all, particularly excluded, populations to realize economic security, while recent staffing/program disruptions and funding constrictions have retarded the work of international-development organizations such as the U.S. Agency for International Development. Can Vietnam's CSOs fill the gap and lead the needed "decisive pivot toward a more inclusive and equitable development approach"[1] (p. 1)? Can they "mobilize grassroots advocacy for economic, environmental and social justice"[1] (p. 31)?

CSOs can contribute to social development as mobilisers, catalysts, implementers, activists, and educators[22] (p. 16). While CSOs seek deeper engagement with policy makers, some governments place restrictions on them through legal and regulatory measures and/or actions that undermine the exercise of their rights to association, to speech, to assembly, and/or to education and or training -- rights that are essential for promoting critical individual and public consciousness, which lie at the base of social development[25] (p. 6). In 2024, "Vietnam's government enacted Decree 126, which makes it more difficult to establish an association and gives the government more power to control and monitor the activities and funding sources of associations once they are up and running"[26]. Nevertheless, empowerment through raising awareness, confidence building, capacity strengthening, and mobilizing resources at individual, organizational, and community levels, remains a key goal of social development that CSOs are positioned to facilitate[27–30].

The main agents for sustainable grassroots social and community development are professional-led NGOs, community-based NGOs[17] (pp. 51–52), people's organizations, and local associations and councils[20]. Sustainable social development requires extending the capability of development practitioners to create participatory techniques that build on community-based knowledge, recognizing that "vulnerable people in exposed places with difficult livelihoods are knowledgeable and often far from powerless"[31] (p. 176). Based on participatory methods, CSOs can merge grassroots civil-society initiatives into processes of national/local structural change that build consensus on needed transformative social-development policies and advance sustainable social and community development. Throughout Southeast Asia, however, national, regional, and local gaps between rich and poor are growing. Vietnam is no exception[32]. Evidence is lacking that participative CSOs in the Global South are generating more equitable distributions of wealth and resources and there is an absence of attention to identifying specific and promising influence approaches. In spite of the barriers they confront, committed CSOs approach sustainable-development challenges "as opportunities to make progress"; their members retain "confidence that there are things we can do to make a difference"[33] (pp. 9–10).

1.2. The Vietnam Context

In addition to the majority Kinh (about 86% of the country's population), there are 53 "state-recognized ethnic groups" in Vietnam[34] (p. 13). Minority ethnic groups "face a widening gap," particularly "with regard to access to health care and education"[35] (p. 300). Vulnerable populations in Vietnam, particularly in the Mekong Delta region, face severe adaptive and anticipatory-protective climate-change challenges[31, 36] (pp. 175–176; p. 9). Other disadvantaged groups that have been receiving attention from local and international NGOs include women, LGBTQ populations, children living in poverty, and rural populations.

Foreign direct investment in Vietnam has facilitated "double-digit" economic growth in the Northern region (including Hanoi) and substantial income gains for some people[14, 36] (pp. 12–13, 17; p. 8). The major coastal city of Hai Phong, a favored location for foreign direct investment (FDI), "has attracted billions of dollars through advanced industrial parks, innovative green initiatives, and wide-ranging government policies"[14] (p. 13). This economic boom has been facilitated by "proactive government policies, ranging from tax incentives and streamlined administrative procedures" to a commitment to sustainable-development principles[14, 37].

Historically, however, "social development has been relegated to the back burner amid the prevailing economic discourses"[1] (p. 1). Because economic inequality poses a "fundamental barrier to social justice," social inclusion and equitable development remain elusive in the wake of the rampant expansion of global capitalism[1] (pp. 3, 6). In Southeast Asia generally, market-based development has "disempowered and marginalized" others by undermining their social networks and depriving them of "their access to land, livelihoods, power or independence"[24, 31, 35] (p. 214;

pp. 177–179; pp. 286–292). It is important to bear in mind that "economies are culturally constituted" and "intertwined" and that "markets themselves are situated within a socio-cultural context, which defines the rules, parameters, and possibilities of economic activities"[38] (pp. 13, 145, 167).

Concomitantly, the dismantling of communal safety nets has exacerbated economic and climatic vulnerabilities and widened inequalities[31] (pp. 178–180). In Vietnam, "education and health care in mountainous, highland, and ethnic minority areas are still limited," and the root causes of poverty and inequality remain for vulnerable populations[36, 39] (pp. 140–141; pp. 9–10). In particular, along with greater poverty rates, Vietnam's vulnerable ethnic minority groups face high levels of illiteracy, less access to financial services, an "increasing loss of cultural identity," and basic infrastructure deficiencies[40, 41].

In Vietnam, the Grassroots Democracy Decree 79 institutionalizes the participation of community-based organizations (CBOs) in order to make public services more responsive and accountable[42]. Following the *Doi Moi* replacement of Vietnam's centrally planned economy with a regulated market in 1986, the rate of gross domestic product (GDP) growth accelerated[36] (pp. 6–8) and multiple international NGOs arrived with missions involving poverty-alleviation and sustainable-development projects[43] (p. 563). Population and Development International (PDI) was one of the first INGOs to operate in Vietnam, arriving 2 years after the *Doi Moi* reform[13] (p. 176). PDI's approach emphasized assisting local "partners in the management and implementation of a project while attempting to build capacity within Vietnamese agencies to take increasing levels of project management responsibility over time"[13] (p. 176).

By 2025, there were 379 international NGOs actively operating in Vietnam[44]. According to the Director of the NGO Resource Center, Hanoi, the vast majority of INGO staff are Vietnamese nationals. The Committee for Foreign Non-governmental Organizations Affairs (COMINGO) is responsible for granting, extending, supplementing, amending, and revoking Certificates of Registration for INGOs in Vietnam. The NGO Resource Centre, in participation with VUFO (Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations), supports collaboration among "Vietnamese NGOs, non-member INGOs, United Nations agencies, the donor community, governmental agencies, local partners, and international and national researchers"[45] (p. 3).

In the past two decades, with foreign-donor support, Vietnam has experienced a "mushrooming" and strengthening of registered and unregistered civic development organizations—"voluntary, non-profit, non-Governmental, community-based, grassroots and cooperative"[11, 15, 17] (pp. S93–S94; pp. 131–134, 136; p. 54; p. 1). Along with a shift from total Party and Government domination, there is now recognition that CSOs play a key role in national development[42]. The Government of Vietnam generally accepts local NGO involvement on women's issues and on behalf of the rights of ethnic minorities and LGBTQ persons[46].

Externally, the European Union has taken the lead in supporting the inclusion of CSO insights and perspectives in key decisions and policies in critical areas that affect global well-being and development"[47]. Simultaneously, some INGOs have begun to operate in close coordination with local NGOs, to encourage beneficiary participation in "bottom-up communication"[48] (p. 1458), and to enhance their outreach.

In Vietnam, INGOs never implement anything alone; they must have local partners. The Government allows INGOs and local NGOs to "do quite a bit, but nothing is black and white." The Government often arbitrarily decides what crosses the line[49]. Based on 22 interviews with NGO representatives and high-ranking government officials, Hung Nguyen[49] also found that NGO development roles are constrained by "uncertain and unpredictable" Government regulations and operational implementation[50]. In addition to legal vulnerabilities, local NGOs are constrained by the lack of sustainable funding as well as of office and administrative support[49]. On the other hand, we encountered two local NGOs that have successfully contributed to local social and community development in Vietnam by employing culture-focused approaches that can serve as models for others to adopt in Vietnam and possibly for adaptation in whole or in part by NGOs in other Southeast Asian countries with similar political environments.

2. Materials and Methods

The research reported on here employed in-depth case study analysis[51]. Specifically, the authors collected and analyzed insights obtained from 48 one-on-one interviews and two focus groups with the leaders of 12 Hanoi-area

Vietnamese NGOs in 2019 and 2021. Interview questions centered on NGO approaches and contributions to social development, as well as on challenges faced. The Institutional Review Board at our university approved the research prior to data collection (IRB Protocol No: 28-18).

We conducted interviews in English, a language most participants were comfortable with. Study participants with less-than-fluent English often relied on colleagues who spoke fluent English to translate. Interviews with NGO directors lasted for about 2 h. Focus groups lasted for about an hour. All interviewees and focus group participants provided oral consent before the recording took place. Research assistants transcribed all recordings for analysis. We later carried out thematic analysis based on grounded theory on all interview and focus-group-discussion transcriptions, conducting constant comparison to search for common themes across datasets. Once themes emerged, we drew insights from the literature review to aid critical analysis [52].

In this article, we choose to focus exclusively on interview data obtained from Vietnamese leaders of the two local NGOs in our sample that stood out in terms of the strategic, culturally, socially, and politically sensitive influence methods that they employed and from the director of the NGO Resource Center. The basis for this selective decision is interest in identifying promising approaches that, if shared more widely, promise to enhance the roles of other NGOs in Vietnam and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Insights from other studies also contributed to the analysis presented below. The lack of generalizability of the case study findings in terms of civil society in Vietnam, along with our focus on the accounts of strategically distinctive NGOs and the absence of triangulation with beneficiary perspectives and documentary analysis, are acknowledged as limitations of this presentation.

3. Results

Drawing on the major questions addressed in NGO studies suggested by Brass et al. and Pickering-Saqqa [53, 54] (p. 143; p. 218), this article is concerned with the evolving micro-, mezzo, and macro-level roles played by strategically distinctive local NGOs amidst manifold challenges to advancing social and community development in Vietnam. Included in the conceptual framework that guides our analysis are questions of distributive equity (benefit and cost distributions), procedural equity (access self-determination and decision-making processes), and recognition equity (treatment of diverse "knowledge systems, identities, and rights") [55] (pp. 374–375). The main questions of focal interest are: How can local NGOs contribute to social development? What influence strategies can be employed effectively by local NGOs to achieve these goals in Vietnam? To what extent can NGOs in Vietnam employ advocacy "on behalf of the communities that they serve" [11] (p. S95)?

We encountered two Hanoi-based NGOs that have contributed to social and community development in Vietnam by employing distinctive and innovative culturally, socially, and politically strategic influence pathways. This discovery encouraged us to highlight the seven especially promising approaches that emerged from the author's 2019 interviews with directors and officers of the two active organizations that reported progress in achieving their goals of advancing social development concerning disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. Our study participants' sharings are reported in italics in the sections below.

3.1. Universal-Rights Appeals

By adopting a value-based and not a project-based approach and by emphasizing the basic rights of all people, rather than focusing on special rights of certain groups, these NGOs have discovered a unique Vietnamese path in a society governed by an authoritarian regime. One NGO director shared: "*We started our advocacy with universal values, and after that, we went to talk about other specific issues. For instance, when advocating for women's issues, we communicate to the Government based on the principle of non-discrimination, and substantive equality … not only [for] women, but also men … for girls, for the elderly, for persons with disabilities, or different backgrounds*." A rights-based approach focusing on all people promises to gain wider acceptance in society and will be more difficult for governments to reject.

Initial universalistic strategic appeal constitutes a promising pragmatic adaptation for local NGOs that must first gain access in an authoritarian political context. The approach stands out in that it embraces all three dimensions of the conceptual framework adopted in this article. Specifi-

cally, it embraces distributive equity (universal benefit and cost distributions), procedural equity (enhanced access to decision-making processes), and recognition equity (treatment of diverse identities and rights). However, the broad, virtually unlimited scope of work required for universal human rights must be tracked, which constitutes a serious constraint for individual NGOs. Consequently, their overriding focus is likely to be limited to one group (in this case, women's rights).

3.2. Discourse Approach

"*These NGOs aim to change and add to the [public] discourse*." One NGO director explains that "*What we want to do is make the marginalized discourse ... bigger ... to compete or replace the mainstream discourse*. *We want to change how people talk about* the issues by communicating *in ways acceptable to society*. *We have no control over the mainstream media, which is owned by the Government… What we can do [is through] social media, especially Facebook. Facebook is our communication channel*."

The other part of the local NGO's discourse approach is *to remove linguistic barriers for communities ... [through] building the capacity ... for them to lead their own organizations or have support-group alliances to voice their own needs and propose their own solutions*. Using discourse to unmask negative conceptions of the poor and unfair ethnic-minority stereotypes and to move beyond victimization and assimilation are other critical features of their approach.

Changing discourse in this manner promises to lead to long-term societal changes that require governmental response.

On one hand, the discourse approach utilized by the two NGOs constitutes a pragmatic adaptation to the political context of Vietnam. On the other hand, it serves as a creative strategy that pushes the envelope of permitted discourse (a recent government press release indicates some shift to the discourse of people-centered development). Its main intended contribution lies in procedural equity (self-determination processes) and recognition equity (overcoming stereotypes and supporting new appreciation of marginalized persons holding diverse identities). On the limitation side of the NGO discourse approach lie the challenges to assembling evidence of successful distributive equity for the marginalized (increased material and wellness benefits).

3.3. Community-Empowerment Approach

In their community-empowerment work, these local NGOs do not refer to stakeholders as beneficiaries. One local NGO leader notes that "*We call them community partners, because for us, partners are on an equal position… We receive something from them, and they receive something from us*. Indeed, *we exist because of each other*. We do not solely *bring funding or skill training to them, but actually, they're the ones that justify our existence*."

Mutual empowerment is required for long-term, sustained social development. A positive collective focus on socially and culturally supported development objectives also strengthens pressure for government buy-in.

This strategy is simultaneously pragmatic and insightful. By emphasizing the mutual empowerment of NGO and community-based participants, the advocated approach to community partnering advances distributive equity (strength-based contributions by both sides) and procedural equity (joint decision-making processes). The interviews also indicate appreciation for recognition equity ("partners" rather than "beneficiaries") as part of their community-empowerment and discourse approaches. This approach can be time-constrained, however, as imbalances are likely to persist until community empowerment has been effectuated.

3.4. Network Approach

These two local NGOs are network-centered. They participate in working groups with other NGOs, INGOs, and international bodies such as UN agencies and embassies located in Vietnam. Their focus is on *cooperation on an equal footing* that is not donor-driven. They also strive to connect the local with the global by operating as a bridge with foreign entities.

The network approach embraced by the two NGOs incorporates both strategic compliance (transnational bridging) and subtle resistance (not donor-driven) elements. The emphasis of this strategy clearly is on procedural equity (equal participation in linked decision making) and recognition equity (equal footing). Although the potential of their network-centered approach is considerable, given the diverse and influential players involved, one limitation is the lack of compelling evidence of distributive equity (benefit distributions) specifically attributed to their existing networks.

3.5. Transparency and Factual

These NGO leaders affirm that "*We are very transparent in our strategy* [and] *the goal of the organization. We make it clear that we work to protect the rights of disadvantaged groups. We don't try to be strong [with] the government or threaten their power. We talk about … the lives of individuals and the communities*. *In this respect, we are true, very frank, and blunt in our advocacy with Government officials regarding the situations of vulnerable people in Vietnam. In addition, we communicate every single thing that we do on Facebook, and people know about what we're doing. Strategically, this approach facilitates combining efforts to gain public support while avoiding misunderstandings by the Government.*"

Committing to transparency constitutes an interesting two-part strategic approach. Complete openness via Facebook upholds procedural equity in the eyes of the public. Frankness about the situations of vulnerable people with government officials can be described as a subtle resistance strategy that carries risks of goal rejections and uncertainties in terms of distributive equity (benefit and cost distributions). Likewise, openness concerning alignment with the interests of the disadvantaged in Vietnam can promote or hinder recognition equity (treatment of diverse identities and rights) under existing political conditions. This approach would certainly benefit from training in the functional dimensions of the transnational competence framework.

3.6. Boundary Pushing for Change

According to these NGO leaders, "*We test the boundary again and again regularly to see what [would] happen. And we watch the environment very, very closely to see what is possible"*. In further clarification, they add: "*While we say we push the boundary … we don't know the limit… Sometimes we get pushback [from the Government]. Then, we know that's the limit. But, another time we push it, it comes through*."

Careful and flexible boundary pushing can be classified as enlightened and determined resistance, even if necessarily holding compliance in reserve as a risk-aversion strategy. The boundary pushing for change approach places priority on procedural equity (NGO access to decision-making processes) in the interest of advancing distributive- and recognition-equity objectives. Its limitation as a change method lies in ultimate reliance on (likely slim) chances that the Vietnamese Government will be moved by its pushing. On the other hand, prospects for change can be improved by linking this strategy with the network approach (3.4) and with multi-level advocacy (3.7).

3.7. Multi-Level Advocacy

The two NGOs advocate among the national and local governments, with INGOs, with UN agencies, and with embassies located in Vietnam. For example, to advocate against Decree 126, *"we send letters to every single ambassador saying that here is our key point. Can you support us?"*

These progressive local NGOs engage in evidence-based, research-based policy advocacy with Government agencies and the National Assembly. "*The results have been slow change from the government side … because we cannot reach the highest level of leadership, where decisions are made … we [strategically] work at the middle tiers, or working level; they understand … but they have to convince their leaders*."

Nevertheless, they also engage in online campaigns about specific issues such as gender equality … that the public is concerned about and they monitor Government officials' responses to our policy-advocacy efforts. Pushing for accountability and actively monitoring outcomes to ascertain the extent of Government compliance with commitments are crucial CSO functions[1, 11] (p. 31; pp. S98–S99) that utilize subtle resistance strategies.

The multi-level advocacy approaches engaged in by these NGOs are partially effective in terms of procedural equity (gaining access to decision makers) and recognition equity (identifying the needs and interests of diverse stakeholders), but of limited distributive equity impact (altered benefit and cost distributions) to date. Once again, prospects for change in distributive equity can be improved by linking this strategy with the network approach (3.4), with boundary pushing (3.6), and with transnational competence training.

4. Discussion

Progress in social development is contingent on interactions among local and international NGOs, national

governments, and additional stakeholders. Apart from some local NGOs that experienced success in advancing social change, including the two studied organizations, other researchers have concluded that Vietnamese "CSOs active in policy advocacy remain few in number," lack independent and sustained influence[11] (p. S101), and possess limited "advocacy skills"[16, 17]. The ability of most Vietnamese NGOs to "engage with government agencies to change government procedure or to advise new techniques to improve the implementation of policies" remains limited[11] (p. S95). This situation underscores the importance of devoting special attention to any promising approaches that are emerging among NGOs in the Vietnamese context.

What are the lessons learned from the progress that two more influential local NGOs in Vietnam have been able to achieve in spite of existing constraints? By adopting a universalistic value-based approach that incorporated attention to discourse, a community-empowerment approach, network collaboration, transparency, boundary pushing, accountability, actively monitoring outcomes, and multi-level advocacy, these NGOs discovered a promising path under an authoritarian regime. Rather than becoming deeply involved in specific economic-development projects, the studied NGOs emphasized self-determination and ethnic-minority-led participatory development. They primarily employed a culture-empowering strategy that involved language and identity maintenance as protective factors for health and well-being. In this way, the rationale behind their methods is consistent with research findings that "economic theories and development initiatives are incomplete, absent a consideration of culture" and that cultural-development work is "doable"[38] (pp. 1, 62). Enhancing human capital at the grassroots level through a "sustained reckoning [with] subjectivities, discourses, symbols, rituals, norms, and values[38] (p. 2) along with attention to trust, equality, and solidarity[38] (pp. 107, 137) lies at the core of social development.

As demonstrated in this discussion, the seven-fold approach launched by the two influential NGOs featured here (attention to universal rights, discourse, community empowerment, network collaboration, transparency, and boundary pushing) promises to advance distributive equity, procedural equity, and recognition equity in Vietnam. Given the limitations inherent in each method when pursued singularly, the impact is likely to be greatest when all seven approaches are pursued simultaneously, when additional NGOs adopt these strategies, and when the NGO sector collectively activates these seven approaches.

These impactful and strategic approaches reflect skills that are captured in the comprehensive transnational-competence (TC) framework. The five interconnected core dimensions of TC are comprehension, analysis, and the ability to discern misinformation and obstruction, or *analytic* competence; empathy and self-confidence, key components of *emotional* competence; innovation, or *creative* competence; verbal (including discourse sensitivities) and nonverbal *communicative* skills; and implementation and advocacy, or *functional* competence[56] (chapter 1). Functional competence involves the capability to *apply analytic insights, empathy, imagination, and skillful communication* in collaborative transboundary interactions. Foremost among the functional skills is the *ability to advocate* by employing methods that promote transformative changes in economic, social, institutional, and legal/policy conditions that produce systematic disparities.

Transnational competence is fundamentally transactional and available to all people. Aggregated individual TC facilitates the mobilization and execution of collective competence on an organizational scale in both proximate (domestic) and distant (foreign) contexts. Transnational capability is expressed (or not expressed) in face-to-face and virtual interpersonal encounters, interactions, and collaborations. Transnationally competent persons actively and effectively contribute to and shape operations and outcomes across multiple and multi-level boundaries and contexts.

Going forward, needed capacity building for many local NGO workers in Vietnam, including the two organizations featured in this article, could benefit from tailored TC training[57] that serves to enhance the types of contextual and evidence-based sustainable-development equity-driven service and advocacy challenges to which CSOs in Vietnam can fruitfully contribute. In addition, valuable lessons also can be drawn from the skills learned by youthful Vietnamese participating on community-development projects on behalf of international NGOs[43] (pp. 534, 568, 573) and through training in identity formation, rhetoric, and discourse analysis[38] (pp. 146, 148).

5. Conclusions

Social and community development are shaped by politics at international organizations, national government, local government, and civil-society levels. The direction of decision making and the shape of change can be top-down, bottom-up, or some combination of both influences [31] (pp. 199, 202, 222–223). Realizing social- and community-development objectives requires the integration by CSOs of reciprocal engagement with the perspectives and expressed needs of disadvantaged communities in combination with resources and expertise supplied by national governments, international NGOs, and influential donor agencies. Although local NGO efforts in advocating for the marginalized populations can fill an important domestic influence gap, there has been a void in research to date that is aimed at identifying specific and promising approaches. While the study findings reported here are not considered representative of civil society in Vietnam, they still promise to contribute in valuable ways by filling gaps in the broader structure and dynamics of NGO representation and action.

In Vietnam, economic liberalization has not been accompanied by a parallel enhancement of political rights. Although still basically missing with regard to civil-society organizations, a proactive Government policy framework that supports rewarding citizen participation in sustainable social and community development simultaneously enhances Vietnam's long-term prospects for sustained economic growth [14] (p. 20).

Although respondents in Nguyen's study [49] affirmed that Vietnam's NGOs "should be more active in sharing participatory approaches to development, including staff capacity building," our studied organizations' discourse approach, which aimed to change the attitude of the public and government officers from victimization to empowerment, constitutes a key first step toward embracing participatory development. Internal accountability, which is "crucial to effective policy implementation," also is a common NGO drawback due to a "lack of basic management competencies," including financial and human-resources management [13] (p. 180). In the accountability connection, the emphasis on transparency employed by our studied NGOs is promising.

While progress is being made and procedural equity is advancing among some local NGOs, grassroots CSO efforts still have limited impact in bringing about nationwide equitable community and comprehensive social development in Vietnam [11, 49]. Links among NGOs and with government agencies remain insufficient [35] (p. 298). Further steps that local NGOs can take involve increasing efforts to educate government departments about their operations and objectives, and to learn effective ways of influencing Government decisions through advocacy skill training [49].

In sum, CSO distributive and recognition equity are to a large extent formative, although "the NGO sector moves on" [58] (p. 205) in terms of new and potentially progressive developments. Although limited to findings attributable to two NGOs that are not representative of civil society in Vietnam, our study revealed potential strengths and equity commitments of grassroots CSOs that can provide the basis of agile, responsive [59], and shared values-based development and can assist in overcoming negative trends related to shrinking civic space and declining foreign-donor assistance. CSO approaches that employ broad-based-equality appeals, strategic communication, collaborative community relationships, network coordination, and enhanced and sustained multi-level policy advocacy offer promising pathways forward.

Author Contributions

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

Relevant data from the interviews selected for analysis are presented in this work.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AI use statement

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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