

# **‘Partnership’ between Northern NGOs and their Vietnamese Counterpart Organisations<sup>1</sup>**

Minna Hakkarainen and Hisayo Katsui<sup>2</sup>

## **Abstract**

This article scrutinises the realm of ‘partnership’ as a form of relationship between Northern non-governmental organisations (NNGOs) and their Vietnamese counterpart organisations. We chose three Finnish NGOs, three Japanese NGOs and their counterpart organisations in Vietnam for our case study. The case study investigates diverging local and global expectations about these relationships and how they are negotiated in concrete aid practices. NNGOs conceptualise partnership as a project agreement, as the process within a project, as the foundation of a project and as equality. Their partners at the same time see partnership as a result-orientated action, as personal interaction and as a source of money. Perception gaps in understanding ‘partnership’ are analysed. Furthermore, our case study reveals that the actions of NNGOs in the South are not free from the impact of their own domestic context. Finnish NGOs believe that they have a say vis-à-vis the state, whereas Japanese NGOs consider themselves powerless vis-à-vis the state. These beliefs reflect in the general status of civil society in Finland and Japan. As a consequence, Finnish NGOs are not afraid of contacts and discussions with Vietnamese authorities. Japanese NGOs, on the other hand, avoid contacts with the authorities if possible.

## **Introduction**

This study scrutinises the realm of partnership as a form of relationship through investigation of development cooperation activities of Northern non-governmental organisations (NNGOs) in Vietnam. We selected the perspective of the NGOs because of the deep and historical relationship between partnership and NGOs. Fowler (1998:137) argues, “Since the 1970s, ‘partnership’ has been an aspiration for relationships amongst non-governmental organisations involved in international development.” Later, he (2000:3) continues, “Today’s rule of thumb in international development is that everybody wants to be a partner with everyone else on everything, everywhere.” Civil society, including NGOs, has increasingly gained visibility and importance in development mainly due to two reasons: firstly because of the increasing recognition of local ownership and committed participation in the process

of development (Hoksbergen 2005; Korten 1990; Chambers 1997; Sen 1999; Fowler 2000) and secondly because of the understanding that development takes place as a result of positive changes of all stakeholders (Hoksbergen 2005; Katsui 2005). In the following, we are cautious about using the word, ‘partnership,’ despite the wide usage of the word in today’s theories and practice of development. This wide usage has blurred the concept of ‘partnership.’ Therefore, in this study, we challenge the concept of ‘partnership’ so that each interviewee can define its meaning on his/her own terms. This paper, therefore, analyses the *relationship* of NNGOs with their Vietnamese counterparts.

This article attempts to investigate the extent to which NGO partners (1) share similar views of what constitutes a partnership in value terms, and (2) view their cooperation as adhering to such values. To attain our objectives, we chose three Finnish NGOs, three Japanese NGOs and their Vietnamese counterpart organisations as the subjects of our case study. The Finnish NGOs will be referred to as F-1, F-2 and F-3 and, the Japanese NGOs as J-1, J-2 and J-3.<sup>3</sup> We define an NGO as a group that works on a non-governmental, non-profitable and voluntary basis for a common interest at local, national or international level. NGOs are part of the concept of civil society which refers to various kinds of voluntary associations working for the public good in a social space outside the state and private sector (Katsui 2005:6). Due to the considerable financial dependency of Finnish NGOs on government funds, Finnish NGO activities reflect the development cooperation policy of the state. All existing Finnish NGOs in Vietnam receive financial support from the government to cover the major part of their expenses. More precisely, up to 85% of project costs in general and 92.5% of costs for disability-specific projects are covered by the Finnish Foreign Ministry when the project proposals have been accepted (Seipäjärvi 2005). Therefore, the policy of the Ministry has a significant importance for Finnish NGO activities in development. When it comes to Japanese NGOs, most of them are independent of the government in terms of both finance and policy. Therefore, direct interaction between NGOs and the government is scarce compared with the Finnish case. However, an indirect impact has been observed in the Japanese NGO sector because they try to implement activities that are difficult for or neglected by the government. In this sense, the Japanese government does have some impact on Japanese NGOs in Vietnam. Finland and Japan have different development aid systems both at national and NGO level. Therefore, studying these two different countries from the perspective of NGO interventions is important in order to deepen our understanding of development in Vietnam - a country experiencing significant social and economical change.

Our *methodology* and the choice of our case studies are not designed to represent the whole variety of actors of civil society because civil society is too diverse to be covered by any single study of this kind. Instead, we concentrate on listening carefully to the descriptions of relationship and experiences of interaction in the development practices of the selected NNGOs. The confidentiality of the interviewees was secured firstly to protect their privacy and secondly to listen to their honest opinions. The interviews of the Vietnamese counterparts were conducted by two Vietnamese research assistants in the Vietnamese language. The interviews were held in 2004 and 2005 with semi-structured questions.

The *structure* of this article is as follows: In the first part of the article we will focus on investigating the self-image of the NGOs. Then we discuss the perception of ‘partnership’ by the NGOs, and continue by looking at the partnership as understood by the Vietnamese partners, thus illustrating the perception gaps in terms of partnership. The latter part of the article concentrates on the Vietnamese context which explains the perception gap. And finally, we shall summarize our findings.

## **The Self-Image of NNGOs**

Based on our research findings, we argue that the domestic environment of NGOs has a great impact on their perceived self-image. Therefore, we clarify the domestic factors that explain the current relationship between Finnish and Japanese NGOs on the one hand and their counterpart organisations in Vietnam on the other.

### **The self-image of Finnish NGOs**

The Finnish NGOs believe in their negotiating power<sup>4</sup> with their government despite the difference in their size or background. They believe that the negotiating power of NGOs is a sign of a strong civil society in Finland. This belief forms the basis of their identity:

*The government (of Finland) is not saying what NGOs should do because they know that without close cooperation and partnership with Finnish NGOs, their Finnish cooperation does not work well. (...) Finnish NGOs have created a certain environment for development cooperation for NGOs. It seems to be adapted very much at our Ministries. (F-1)*

This negotiating power enables NGOs to believe that they are independent although they are dependent in terms of finance. F-1 believes that NGOs have created the development policy of the Ministry using their negotiating power. Thus to argue that NGOs are dependent on government policy due to their financial dependency would not actually be correct. The relationship could rather be described as one of mutual dependency as it is equally important for the Ministry to have good cooperation with civil society. F-1 describes this reality as an “egg or chicken” situation, asking, “Which was first?” Finnish NGOs, especially well-established ones, are not afraid of their government when they have a difference of opinion. They rather try to discuss and negotiate, which has resulted in trust and respect between the actors. Particularly in recent years, this trust has been manifested by the fact that the Ministry has employed several civil society activists to work as advisors for the Ministry.<sup>5</sup> That is one of the significant differences in comparison to Japan. Their negotiating power is also exercised by Finnish NGOs in Vietnam and affects the relationship with their Vietnamese counterparts:

*I do think in many ways that we also shouldn't be too shy in suggesting something from outside. (...) I think it's also respecting that other partner so much that you think that other person or that party can say 'no' or can suggest something different. And I think that's why one can also have these debates about what can be done and suggest something new or challenge some of the old ways. (F-2)*

The Finnish domestic environment is also reflected in terms of registration<sup>6</sup> in Vietnam. In Finland, all NGO registration procedures are considered to be extremely easy. Association law stipulates that one can establish an association if there are three persons. And the process of registration is not bureaucratic. On the contrary, local authorities are there to support efficient registration. The authority, therefore, is considered to be a facilitator rather than a trouble maker. Based on their domestic experiences, Finnish NGOs did not have strong preconceptions about Vietnamese authorities being difficult when it came to registration. Registration or any other process in Vietnam was not something to be afraid of. They were always ready to negotiate in any situation unlike the Japanese NGOs.

### **The self-image of Japanese NGOs**

The Japanese interviewees felt that civil society in Japan was relatively new and that NGOs have not gained solid support from the Japanese people, market or government. J-2 explains, “Society does not recognise NGOs well. Thus NGOs are small.” Therefore, they have to rely on donations from different sources, which makes them vulnerable, especially to macro

change in the Japanese economy (J-2). “We are small” is a common feeling among the NGOs. J-2 further explains that the three main reasons for not having a strong civil society are (1) the non-existence of a civic revolution, (2) a long-lasting feudal system in the Japanese history, and (3) the absence of Christianity.

The late development of the legal system is also pointed out as a reason (J-2). It is important to elaborate on this general Japanese context because the Japanese NGOs point out that their smallness is one of the fundamental factors in explaining their current relationship with Vietnamese actors.

J-3’s explanation supports the argument that their activities have been largely influenced by the domestic environment in Japan. J-3 argues that the lack of domestic support leads to small and non-professional activities in Vietnam. This smallness, however, is considered as a positive asset in gaining accountability. The Japanese people do not generally trust NGOs and therefore supporters of NGOs trust the individuals working for NGOs rather than NGOs as organizations. With few human and financial resources, activities are more action-orientated rather than based on careful planning with a long-term vision (Katayama 2004).

In the same vein, the motivations of all the NGOs also highlight the non-government or non-market nature of relationship building with the Vietnamese partners. Relationship building is based more on individual devotion and commitment than organisational professionalism. All NGOs strongly stress clear differences in their sphere with Japanese Official Development Aid (ODA) practices and businessmen. Thus their identity is constructed as a small but positive grassroots actor, which supports Vietnam in better ways than the other two.

Furthermore, their small size is also the reason for not being able to relate with other actors, for J-2 and J-3. J-1, representing a big NGO also agrees that big NGOs can get ODA money much easier than small ones. J-1’s NGO has received ODA money for its activities and wants to use the opportunity of this contact with the government to increase mutual understanding. However, active negotiating is not part of Japanese culture. The NGOs explain that they are too small to negotiate with decision makers.

Instead, all the Japanese interviewees have made an effort to understand their Vietnamese counterparts through discussion with them in recent years. They have all adopted the

principle of “Learning by Doing.” Having lived in Vietnam for more than six years, both J-1 and J-3 started to realise that they finally understood Vietnamese people. Both J-1 and J-3 mastered the Vietnamese language and J-1 has even learned an ethnic minority language. All the Japanese interviewees have a great feeling of attachment to Vietnam. The Japanese interviewees’ approach of respecting the local culture and assimilating themselves to the Vietnamese has succeeded in creating the feeling amongst their counterparts that “they thoroughly understood the manners and customs of (ethnic minority) people,” according to one Vietnamese counterpart of J-1. This personal devotion is the driving force behind the engagement of the Japanese interviewees in development activities in Vietnam. Especially when there has been limited external support, the strong will of the individual Japanese interviewees has been important and has kept the activities going.

## **Perception of ‘Partnership’ by NNGOs**

‘Partnership’ turned out to be a key word when our NNGOs discussed their relationship with their Vietnamese counterparts. ‘Partnership’ is understood in many different ways even among these NGOs. We identified four different perceptions of ‘partnership’ based on the experience, knowledge and values of these NGOs: (1) Partnership as a project agreement, (2) Partnership as the process within a project, (3) Partnership as the foundation of a project, and (4) Partnership as equality. They are not necessarily mutually exclusive but they do indicate different priorities in their values. The differences clarify and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of their concepts of ‘partnership.’

### **Partnership as a project agreement**

F-3 and J-2 understand ‘partnership’ as a practical agreement and division of responsibilities for a project. This definition is based on the project cycle<sup>8</sup> and highlights their shared goal, rigid roles and a resource-based agreement. The following excerpt explains how F-3 understands ‘partnership’ and how it was put into practice:

*As for the goal, both parties signed [up to it]. This came from the Vietnamese first. They gave us their wish list [as to] what they wanted from us. It was far too over-expected to be able to make it come true. But we exchanged opinions and discussed that we cannot offer all what they wanted. We have a strict timetable, but we promised and actually implemented in the way how we agreed in the [project] timeframe. And it was also important that we advice*

*[local counterpart staffs]. Not only materials but also we gave advices and training so that the support will be useful. And we monitored well, and also an external evaluation was conducted. (F-3)*

This example clearly proves that the development cooperation system is reflected in their activities in terms of the project cycle, the high expectation of the Vietnamese of receiving aid and the unequal status of the Finnish and Vietnamese actors. The existence of discussion space distinguishes the NGOs from ‘donors’ or ‘sponsors’ in terms of their understanding, although crucial decision-making power remains with the NGO. F-3’s project improved the material condition of the counterpart in a very significant way (VF-3a). With this definition, however, the relationship is rigid and fixed from the beginning and remains so throughout the project.

### **Partnership as the process within a project**

‘Partnership’ is also defined as something that develops during the project. F-1 states, “very often projects create partnership.” Here, the period or duration of the project is understood as a continuous space where mutual understanding is constructed. That is itself an achievement but it is also a process during which they can achieve their common goals. The roles are negotiated and change over time. This definition and practice is reality-orientated with some flexibility in the relationship.

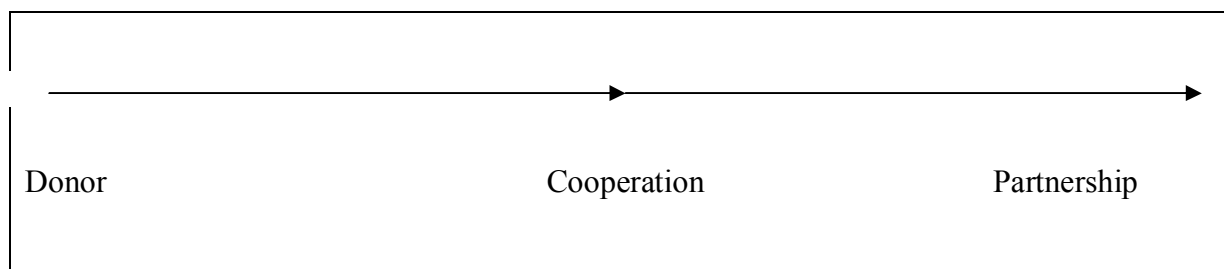
*I feel that it [partnership] is going in the right direction. It’s developing all the time especially in the project that we are doing because we are not pumping money in there. And actually, all these ideas of partnership and participation in the process, I feel that they are important parts of the project. That is an achievement if we can find common understanding of what we are supposed to do. (F-1)*

Some NGOs are critical of this definition because projects can start without enough mutual understanding. Mutual understanding is considered to grow only in the process rather than being the foundation of any action (F-1). Foreign NGOs are too hasty in implementing projects before the preconditions of mutual understanding are ready. Another criticism is the isomorphism of Western NGO culture to Vietnam in the process. The NGOs and their counterpart organisations start emphasising similar values and working methods. Moreover, as long as the project cycle is the framework of relationship, the responsibility for follow up activities rests with the Vietnamese people (F-3). This sudden “ownership transfer” does not often lead to sustainability. The former Vietnamese project officer of F-2 argues the need of a “transition step”:

*I think we need some follow up because we also need to change and to assist the local authority, I mean the commune and district level, to apply it [working methods of the project]. We cannot just make a pilot and an example and say, 'Oh, it's a success' and leave it like that with the expectation that others will apply it. They may apply it, but they may not, because they may argue that it was a success because [the Finnish NGO] were there and assisted them along the way. And so I think we need a transition step here, so that we will assist them to implement something that could convince them that they could actually do. (FV-2)*

### **Partnership as the foundation of a project**

'Partnership' is also understood as the foundation of development cooperation activities. This is a goal for F-1. In this future-orientated vision, partnership means sharing fundamental values between partners prior to any action. This definition goes beyond the boundary of the project cycle in terms of its timeframe because the values are shared even before any action or projects take place and because the relationship remains even after the project activities. F-1 drew the following arrow and explained how the relationship between Northern and Southern partners within the development cooperation system has developed over time:



*In the old setting of development aid, we were the **donor** and they were the target group. I think we have come a long way to the cooperation stage. When we have the [development] **cooperation**, you are the one who still have the words to say (...). But in a **partnership**, the idea is that you are partners and so you agree together what you do. If you cannot agree, you don't work, like sometimes it happened to us. As a **donor**, you can start today. You can give one million dollars. [With] **Cooperation**, you need some little more time to cooperate. But [with] **partnership**, you cannot start immediately. You cannot. It takes time. You must have time to find out what your partners are thinking about the community where they work, what they are interested in. And then, we as Finns, we try to find out with them if there is something that we could be a part, if there is some common understanding. It means that in a **partnership**, we are not the ones to go and tell them what they should do. But on the other hand, they are not the ones to tell us what we should do. We should find together that an agreement what we want to do together and agree, for example, they are the owners and they do this, this and this. We will do this, this and this for the partnership. This is the ideal situation. We should get here (by pointing the partnership end of the picture). (F-1, emphasis added)*



This idea is thoroughly shared by the non-Vietnamese counterpart of F-1 (FF-1) in Vietnam. They use the identical expression to describe their future vision of partnership. Asymmetrical interdependence is justified as a division of labour, that is doing “what you are good at” (FF-1). One interesting aspect is that F-1 mentions the possibility that partnership building fails at some point, which means that there will be no further joint action. Thus, partnership does not always develop and this might hinder further concrete action. Thus this understanding of ‘partnership’ is not action-orientated in theory. This definition is more future-orientated, emphasizing important values, while the previous ones are reality-orientated, putting more stress on project implementation. Among the NGOs, F-2 and J-1 have aimed at this definition and type of practice on the basis of their shared religious background with their counterparts. Both NGOs emphasised their open policy toward those who do not share the same religion. However, F-1 and FF-1 in particular stressed that religion played a more important role than the actual development cooperation activities. Their view is also supported by their Vietnamese counterpart (VF-1a). In this sense, a development cooperation system can hide the real agenda of NGOs, which can be sensitive topic for open discussion.

### **Partnership as equality**

‘Partnership’ as equality was a common interpretation particularly among Japanese NGOs. J-1 states:

*Partnership means like an equal stance. (...) But in the context of international relations one side brings funds to give to another side maybe, I think it's never being, never being equal. (...) We use the word partnership. But actually it's not partnership. (J-1)*

This contradiction between the idea of partnership as equality and the reality of development cooperation is so profound that neither J-1 nor J-3 are willing to describe their relationship with their local partners as a partnership. Instead of partnership, both use the expression to “support them” as the most descriptive word to illustrate how they see their own development activities (J-1).

That is, equality is represented as 50-50 a share of all the aspects in the relationship. Symmetrical interdependency, therefore, is ‘equality’ and thus ‘partnership,’ according to the Japanese NGOs (J-1 and J-3). However, ‘equality’ is another concept that creates sufficient room for a totally different interpretation. FF-1 claims, unlike the Japanese, that partnership

is not about a 50-50 relationship. F-2 and FF-1 consider ‘equality’ in terms of an equal right to raise their voices heard and thus influence decisions. Along the same vein F-2 argues:

*But the discussions have been quite heated at sometime, but I consider ourselves as an equal partner. So we do have a say also. (F-2)*

This definition allows NNGOs to own development cooperation activities although they assert that the Vietnamese counterpart organisations and the final beneficiaries are the owners. On the other hand, the Japanese way of understanding only allows them to become ‘supporters’ rather than ‘partners.’

As we have shown, the relationship of our NNGOs with their Vietnamese counterparts is often described as a ‘partnership.’ However, the interpretation of the term partnership varies depending on the actor. Each interpretation allows each actor to justify their methods in development cooperation practices.

## **Perception of ‘Partnership’ by Vietnamese Partners**

When looking at how the Vietnamese partners of the NNGOs understood partnership in the context of development cooperation, we identified three different perceptions of ‘partnership’: (1) partnership as a result-orientated action, (2) partnership as personal interaction, and (3) partnership as a source of money.

### **Partnership as a result-orientated action**

The Vietnamese interviewees seem to consider the existence of development cooperation as more important than how the cooperation is implemented. That is, discussing partnership on theoretical level was not the most relevant topic for the Vietnamese interviewees. Their understanding of partnership as a theoretical concept is even very unclear.

The Vietnamese interviewees see their relationship with NNGOs as a straightforward matter of practices and emphasise the core content of partnership as being collaboration and “working together” in order to reach the results intended (VJ-1a, VF-2a). A Vietnamese beneficiary in a rural area explains her view:

*If I want to make a glass like this, with my skills it would take ten years. If I cooperate, for example with Mr. Bowl, with his help and my strength, it will take me five years or less to do it. This is how I understand it, or perhaps I understand it incorrectly?* (VF-2b)

Here, the result is seen as an essential part of partnership (VF-3a, VF-3b). The most important thing in order to maintain a relationship with a partner is the “result of work” and “understanding each other and each others working style” (VF-3a). The result can also materialise as new connections and new knowledge, which can also be used after the project phase. When that happens, the partnership also positively affects the final beneficiaries of the project (VF-2b, VF-3b).

### **Partnership as personal interaction**

Secondly, ‘partnership’ is personal interaction. For the Vietnamese, the highlight of their experiences during a project’s implementation is the personal interaction with some NNGO staff rather than development cooperation with a foreign organisation as such. This is manifested when they explain the nature of the relationship with the foreign partner. It is not the ‘organisation’ as such that they describe, but the person with whom they closely work with. “[J-1] is a very cheerful and nice person and knows her responsibilities” (VJ-1b). This assessment is supported by the fact that J-1 “speaks the (ethnic minority) language” and “drinks [traditional] jar wine.” “People highly esteem [J-1] when she visits the hamlet.” VJ-1a states that “all people respect [J-1].” Other Vietnamese interviewees expressed similar views about their NNGOs. That is to say that when constructing and maintaining a partnership in Vietnam, it is crucial to choose the right person in order to gain the trust of the people. Showing respect for the cultural habits is one way to gain such trust especially in rural areas. Vietnamese people have different sets of priorities in their ‘partnership’ compared with the NNGOs.

### **Partnership as a source of money**

The practice-orientated positive view is not the only perspective from the Vietnamese side. The NGOs faced a strongly developed Vietnamese understanding that NNGOs were a source of money (F-1, F-3 and J-3). Our Vietnamese counterpart interviewees did not articulate this understanding of partnership. However, the NNGOs have strongly felt that this is a common perception among their counterparts. This concept has become “so deep in the people’s mind” that “you cannot change it because many of the (developing) countries have been

receiving so much development aid funding” (F-1). Given this underpinning idea that associates foreigners with money, the Vietnamese started to behave in a certain way: “He has money and we should respect that.” F-1 found that it has been “really hard” to get rid of this attitude. Problems over money also illustrate the problematic relationship between foreign and Vietnamese organisations. As for the Vietnamese, money is seen as a key for more activities, yet foreigners would rather like to see changes in attitude. Foreign NGOs hope that their Vietnamese counterparts will have sufficient vision beyond the project and understand that acquiring decision-making power is part of the ultimate goal of a project, so that Vietnamese people can influence their own policy makers and change the decision-making structures. This gap of perception between NNGOs and the Vietnamese leads to a situation where foreign NGOs expect too much from their ‘partners’ (VF-2, F-1). In other words, the Vietnamese people are under pressure from this development cooperation system.

As has become clear from the above, the ‘partnership’ perception of Vietnamese partners is more consequence-orientated compared with that of NNGOs. That is, the Vietnamese are less concerned with the values emphasised by the Northerners.

## **The Vietnamese Context and Perception Gaps**

Specific factors about Vietnam affect the relationship between the actors. Government control and people’s participation in development activities play an important role in the whole issue of partnership in Vietnam and in many cases explain the perception gaps between NNGOs and the Vietnamese partners.

### **Government control**

*Working with government sometime takes time and is not comfortable. You know, there are some sensitive aspects for the Vietnamese authorities. (VF-1a)*

As a one-party state with a high level of centralized government control, Vietnam, like other former and current socialist states has a limited space for civic activism (see e.g. Katsui 2005 for Central Asia; Ma 2002 for China). This government control both explicitly and implicitly affects the relationships between NNGOs and the Vietnamese counterparts. Despite the association law<sup>8</sup>, which allows the Vietnamese to establish NGOs, the implementation of the

law favours those who have close connections with the authorities. This leaves very little space for non-political actors that try to distance themselves from government policy. In order to survive, independent organisations tend to maintain a low profile and try not to attract the unnecessary attention of government officials. One strategy to cope with the situation is to belong to a bigger registered organisation. Individual leaders of such big organisations can support the goals of a non-registered organisation and thereby protect it from unnecessary government interference. (Hannah 2007).

The Vietnamese government expects that foreign NGOs work with the government or organisations close to the government such as the Women's Union or Farmers' Association (FF-1). Even within those offices, NGOs are supposed to favour higher administrative levels instead of local levels. Project agreements can be signed at the district (*huyen*) level, but not directly with the commune (*xa*). This rule leads to the situation where foreign NGOs have de facto two kinds of partners: administrative partners and project implementation partners<sup>9</sup> (Inami 1998). More precisely, the former are governmental actors at a higher level and the latter are usually local offices or people's groups at a lower level.

This hierarchy leads to bureaucracy which in practice complicates the situation for many NGOs. First of all, this bureaucracy means that a project has to involve more actors for its implementation. FV-2 describes the situation as follows:

*I have to liaise with different organisations, meaning the authorities at different levels, to make sure that the project gets the necessary papers to be implemented in the areas. And I have to keep the donors and our programme coordinator, who is based in Helsinki, informed through the bi-monthly report.*

Foreign NGOs often need to create some additional relationships with the Vietnamese government. Otherwise the relationship with their project implementation partner and final beneficiaries can be jeopardised (FF-1).

In Vietnam, therefore, foreign NGOs make adjustments or even to a small extent compromise their principles for the sake of their ultimate goal if by doing so there is more space for a participatory approach for the final beneficiaries. When it comes to the essential goal, however, NGOs are not willing to compromise. This bureaucracy is a frustrating factor for the NGOs in relationship building with their project implementation partners.

In addition, the People's Aid Coordination Committee (PACCOM), which was established in 1996, is another governmental actor that plays an important role in partnership discussions in Vietnam. The Vietnamese government has enacted a law to require foreign NGOs to register officially with PACCOM. The benefits of registration are two-fold: (1) registered NGOs can easily find a local partner through PACCOM and (2) they can use either local or foreign employees to implement their programmes in Vietnam. On the other hand those NGOs who have good connections with local people and do not need any employees find registration unnecessary. In more practical terms the main role of PACCOM is to issue permits for operations to foreign NGOs. In order to extend the permit, NGOs are required to make project reports to PACCOM. This has given PACCOM the power to interfere with or criticize project activities. Thus PACCOM can be seen as a facilitator and a troublemaker at the same time. Among the NGOs, only F-2 and J-1 registered themselves with PACCOM. Owing to the lack of a negotiating culture, Japanese NGOs tend to avoid PACCOM for fear of interference (Inami 1998). In some cases, the local partners may not even know about the registration requirements, particularly in Southern Vietnam. In other cases, NGOs assume that PACCOM might interfere in already existing project activities which have been started without formal approval from the authorities, or that the local partners themselves may not qualify as partners for foreign NGOs, according to the official criteria.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, even though cooperation with PACCOM has improved (J-1), its bad reputation has not changed much (F-1).

### **Challenges for people's participation**

This reality in which decision-making power is highly centralised amongst government officials leads to the second practical result: the lack of experience of counterpart organisations and final beneficiaries in making independent decisions. Thus, the status of counterpart organisations particularly at the commune level, but also at the district level is 'poor' within Vietnamese politics (F-1). More precisely, people are passive because the Vietnamese government has not applied a bottom-up approach in its decision-making practice. The government enacted a decree on the grassroots democracy<sup>11</sup> which became famous because of a slogan of former President Ho Chi Minh: "People know, people discuss, people decide and people monitor." However, as "practice is different from theory" the people "got tired listening to that one" (FV-2). And as a consequence, people do not believe in their ability to affect the situation. People tend to believe that a participatory methodology for a project is "impossible" (F-2, J-1). In Vietnam, "they (people) were given the plans by

their superior levels and they just implement them without knowing why they have to do this and what it is for” (FV-2). This hierarchical social system is reflected well in NGO structures because Vietnamese NGOs and people’s organisations are often included in the government structure. Thus, equality as such among different actors has been uncommon within the framework of NGOs. Thus ‘participation’ is understood as “anything forced, almost half forced labour you have to contribute to some government project or whatever (F-2).” In this context, Vietnamese partners are more interested in something practical (FV-2) rather than how and why certain things are done because people of higher rank make decisions on those things in Vietnam. Thus before starting a project, NNGOs face this reality:

*We actually spent a lot of time doing awareness raising and changing the attitudes of the people before we can start the project. The idea (of the project) was initiated some time like June or July 1997. But we could only start to set up that project some time in 1998, I do not remember. But it’s very time-consuming. We convinced the people that it’s worthwhile trying because people are more interested in something practical. (FV-2)*

F-1, F-2 and J-1 think it is important for Vietnamese people to understand the principle of participation before starting anything, while the change in attitude takes place along with the process of implementing the project. F-2 argues that participation is also a challenge due to Asian groupism in comparison with Western individualism:

*A Participatory way of doing things is not a very common attitude, in my experience, in Vietnam. People are not readily speaking up their mind. For example, ‘This is how I see this should be done’ or ‘We should do it.’ [In a] Much more complex or much more subtle way people express themselves. And of course loyalties are very different and affect people’s behaviour and also participation. You know, you belong much more to your family, and to your extended family and to your history of your family and to a village and to certain other existing groups than for example how we do in our society. (F-2)*

According to our NNGOs, the perception gap with the Vietnamese partners is a common experience with which they have struggled. Understanding the Vietnamese context is a crucial factor for better partnership.

### **The perceived positive role of ‘partnership’ in a changing Vietnamese context**

Foreign NGOs tend to believe that their work has an important role in changing society, particularly in setting an example regarding participatory methods for local authorities. It is difficult, if not impossible, to measure the effects of the participatory approach in development cooperation without a comprehensive research. The change can be sustainable

or temporal, subjective or objective, concrete or cognitive, and so forth. Therefore, this section explores the subjective experiences of our interviewees.

The change does not take place automatically even in the small framework of NGO projects. Vietnamese reality is especially resistant to change due to government control which is pervasive even in the most peripheral parts of the country. The NGOs (F-1, F-2, and J-1) have been playing the role of ‘mediator’ between the authorities and the people. First of all, NGOs frequently negotiate with local authorities and/or administrative partners to arrange an “officially certified and allowed” space so that they can deal directly with their project implementation partners and the final beneficiaries. The interviewed Vietnamese actors admit that they have started to recognise civil society ideology. For instance, FV-2 has seen that Vietnamese local authorities and organisations have started to be more responsive to the needs of the people.

J-1 also admits that the relationship with the Vietnamese government, especially with PACCOM, has become increasingly easier over time. The Vietnamese government seems to have started to show more tolerance toward NGOs and their activities, especially in city areas where foreign NGO offices are concentrated. The actual impact of NGO interventions, however, is not known yet. Nevertheless, interviewees feel that they have played a big role in this change:

*[The context of development interventions in Vietnam is] Changing a lot. A lot of debates, much more than five years ago. And I think, foreign NGOs have had a big influence through employing so many local staff, who then get used to maybe more open debating and discussions than in many of the government structures, for example. They have been now working for many years in an environment where even junior staff are expected to have something to say in writing and in speaking. So, I think that kind of culture has been spreading but that's maybe mainly at Hanoi level. (F-2)*

The counterpart organisations also agree that foreign NGOs have had a big impact. For instance, VJ-1b emphasises that the transparency in finance has helped local people to understand how a participatory relationship can be established. Counterparts are happy when they have seen the result of participatory methodology (VJ-1, VF-2a, and VF-1). However, there is a consensus among the NGOs that it takes time to change the mentality. On the one hand, government officials are still resistant to change (F-1). On the other hand, it is also difficult to change the people:



*Even though the government promote that (the participatory or bottom-up) approach, they (the Vietnamese people) face difficulties when it is applied, because they have too few examples of and experiences with implementing that kind of activity. I mentioned you before that people have been subsidised and guided and managed from the central level for a long time. So they are very inactive and dependent. (FV-2)*

In summary, the Vietnamese context also has a great influence on the way in which the relationship between NNGOs and their counterpart organisations is established. The context itself has been gradually changing. Our NGOs and their partners strongly believe that they are making positive changes. Despite the different perceptions of ‘partnership’ and thus different modalities of the NGOs, their Vietnamese partners have experienced positive results. The Vietnam-specific context explains the fact that Vietnamese people are more concerned about the results than the modalities because the government customarily controls modalities. This typical scenery, however, has begun to change. The Vietnamese partners, if not Vietnamese people in general, have started to understand that the process is as important as the results. Our case NGOs and their partners believe that they are the ones who are making the change on the local level. Today, the Vietnamese partners face a similar struggle to that of foreign NGOs, namely to convince their people to believe that the process is as important as the results. Visible change in society will take a long time.

## **Concluding Remarks**

This study has explored the realm of ‘partnership’ through interviews of NGOs and their counterparts. There is no doubt that all the NNGOs are devoted to their work and are determined that their objectives will be achieved in Vietnam. Individual devotion is the driving force especially for Japanese NGOs in a situation where civil society has not gained enough support within Japan. The domestic environment has affected the way the NGOs negotiate and implement their activities in Vietnam. Japanese NGOs stress their identity as non-governmental and non-profit organisations to differentiate themselves from the government and the market. They see themselves as ‘grassroots’ actors who can reach those Vietnamese people that the other two cannot reach. Their smallness is considered an asset to achieve their goals, although it restricts their scope of activity at the same time. They try to avoid confrontation with the Vietnamese authorities whenever possible because they are

‘weak’ as negotiators and “too small to deal with authority.” Their smallness is the key characteristic which explains how the Japanese NGOs operate in Vietnam regardless of their actual size. In contrast, Finnish NGOs, even when small in size, have a strong sense of identity as important actors in development cooperation. They stress a rights-orientated development, where participatory methodology is used as the means to achieve empowerment. At the same time, when dealing with different Vietnamese actors, they exercise the negotiating powers that they have developed in Finland. Therefore, the characteristics of Finnish and Japanese civil society in general are reflected in their relationship building with Vietnamese actors.

The second finding of this study is that there is no universal or even country specific understanding of ‘partnership.’ In fact, even within our limited number of cases, four different interpretations of ‘partnership’ based on their own values and experiences can be identified: (1) partnership as a project agreement, (2) partnership as a process within a project, (3) partnership as a value-based foundation for a project, and finally (4) partnership as equality. Different interpretations of ‘partnership’ justify the different modalities in the relationship building practices of each NNGO. When it comes to the Vietnamese perspective, ‘partnership’ is more result-orientated in three ways: (1) actual result, (2) actual personal relationship with individuals of NNGOs, and (3) source of money. Vietnamese people look at partnership mainly through the concrete activities and consequences of the project implementation process. Vietnamese partners experience actual results as important in their relationship with NNGOs. In other words, the way of perceiving ‘partnership’ is very different between the NNGOs and their Vietnamese partners and is different among them.

The third finding on the Vietnam-specific context explains the perception gap. The Vietnam-specific context, namely government control, affects relationship building to a great extent. The NGOs are often forced to engage with Vietnamese governmental actors due to the pressure of the government, although initially they were not actors that the NGOs wanted to involve. The NGOs make small compromises if by doing so their final goal is easier to achieve. The main actors for the NGOs are those who de facto implement their project activities. In this relationship, mutual understanding of the goal, role and responsibility is important. NNGOs have the decisive power over decision-making regarding money, whereas their Vietnamese counterparts usually have room to affect various other decisions throughout the projects. For both Finnish and Japanese NGOs, securing the participation of the

Vietnamese is a challenge due to the history and current practice of Vietnamese government control. The NNGOs make a great effort to realise the idea of participation even before any project starts. Their Vietnamese counterparts and beneficiaries gradually started to understand that participation is possible when implementing projects. The government of Vietnam has also shown more tolerance to NGO activities. The Vietnamese context has been and is changing. The NGOs and their partners believe that they are playing an important role in making this positive change in the country, even though they still face challenges in helping the Vietnamese people to introduce further changes.

## Notes

- 1) The first version of this paper was presented at the European Development Aid and NGOs Conference in London, March 13 – 14, 2008.
- 2) Minna Hakkarainen (minna.hakkarainen@helsinki.fi) is a PhD. candidate at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Helsinki. Her special interests are NGOs, civil society and grassroots democracy in Vietnam. Hisayo Katsui (hisayo.katsui@helsinki.fi) is a researcher, PhD, at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Helsinki. Her specialities are civil society activities, disability, human rights and development.
- 3) In total, nine interviews were conducted in Vietnamese. In some cases more than one beneficiary was interviewed at the same time. The overall coding system for Vietnamese interviewees follows the main codes of the NGOs. Interviews with Vietnamese interviewees are marked with 'V.' Vietnamese interviewees are sub-divided into two groups, 'a' and 'b': 'a' referring to an interviewee from a partner organisation and 'b' referring to beneficiaries/participants. For instance, 'VF-2b' refers to a Vietnamese person who was/is a beneficiary of project F-2. Similarly, the representative of a counterpart organisation of J-1 is coded as 'VJ-1a.' There are two special cases among those interviewed. Firstly, one foreign person who is the direct partner of F-1 is coded as 'FF-1.' Here, 'F' refers to a Foreigner who is a non-Vietnamese person. Secondly, 'FV-2' is a Vietnamese person employed by F-2. Thus 'FV-2' is not a Vietnamese partner as such but is rather close in her way of thinking to F-2 due to her own proximity to F-2. For reasons of confidentiality, none of the names of the organisations or persons interviewed are given in this article.
- 4) Negotiating power here refers to the felt (not necessarily the actual) power of NGOs in their encounters with state authorities. The origin of the negotiating power is rather the joint power of development NGOs and other civil society organizations vis-à-vis the state than that of any individual NGO per se.
- 5) This was publicly noted by a member of the consular staff of Finnish Embassy in Hanoi during a seminar organised in Helsinki for Finnish NGOs in October 2004.
- 6) Foreign NGOs operating in Vietnam are supposed to register their activities by applying for a Permit for Operation from the relevant Vietnamese authorities, most commonly PACCOM (the People's Aid Coordination Committee).
- 7) Project cycle refers to the entire lifespan of a development intervention starting with its identification, going through the implementation, monitoring and evaluation phases and ending with the lessons learned. This is used by various donors in development cooperation (Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2004).
- 8) Decree No. 88/2003/ND-CP and Circular No. 01/2004/TT-BVN.

9) Counterpart organisations are not NGOs, according to Western understanding, because they are part of the government structure. However, they are in many ways interchangeably understood as NGOs in the Vietnamese context (Le et al. 2003). This is why it is said that, “Vietnam is a country where the government-donor partnership (including NGOs) is active” (GRIPS Development Forum 2003:92).

10) Personal communication with Japanese NGOs on 22.4.2004, Hanoi. They are not the NGOs in this study.

11) Decree No. 29/1998/ND-CP of May 11, 1998. Regulation on the Exercise of Democracy in Communes. And the newer version, Decree No. 79/2003/ND-CP of July 7, 2003.

## References

- Chambers, R. 1997. *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last*. London, ITDG Publishing.
- Fowler, A. F. 1998. Authentic NGDO Partnerships in the New Policy Agenda for International Aid: Dead End or Light Ahead? *Development and Change* 29: 137-159.
- GRIPS Development Forum 2003. *Linking Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction: Large-Scale Infrastructure in the Context of Vietnam's CPRGS*. Tokyo, GRIPS Development Forum.
- Fowler, A. F. 2000. Beyond Partnership: Getting Real about NGO Relationships in the Aid System. *IDS Bulletin* 31(3): 1-13.
- Hannah, J. 2007. *Local Non-Governmental Organizations in Vietnam: Development, Civil Society and State-society Relations*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington (Seattle).
- Hoksbergen, R. 2005. Building Civil Society through Partnership: Lessons from a Case Study of the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee. *Development in Practice* 15(1): 16-27.
- Inami, K. 1998. *Vietnam ni okeru NGO no Genjouni Kansuru Chousa Houkokusho* (Report of the Reality of NGOs Working in Vietnam). Hanoi, JVC. (Written in Japanese.)
- Katayama, N. 2004. NGO no Kiban Kyoka. In Imada, K. and Harada, K. (eds.), *Kokusai Kyoryoku NGO* (International Cooperation NGO), pp. 189-210. (Written in Japanese.) Tokyo: Seikoudou.
- Katsui, H. 2005. *Towards Equality: Creation of the Disability Movement in Central Asia*. Helsinki, Helsinki University Press.
- Korten, D. 1990. *Getting to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda*. West Hartford, Kumarian Press.
- Le Bach Duong; Khuat Thu Hong; Bach Tan Sinh, and Nguyen Thanh Tung 2003. Civil Society in Vietnam. In *Voices from the Southern Civil Societies. The Interplay of National and Global Contexts in the Performance of Civil Society Organisations in the South Country Case Studies*, pp. 91 – 119. Policy Papers 6, Institute of Development Studies, University of Helsinki.
- Ma, Q. 2002. Defining Chinese Nongovernmental Organisations. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations* 13(2): 113-130.
- Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2004. *Guidelines for Programme Design, Monitoring and Evaluation*. Helsinki, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland.
- Seipajarvi, I. 2005. Kansalaisjärjestöille lisää tukea kehitysyhteistyöhön. On <<http://global.finland.fi/oikopolku/jarjestoille.php?kieli=1>> [10.5.2005]
- Sen, A. 1999. *Development as Freedom*. New York: Anchor Books.

Vietnamese Government 1998. Decree No. 29/1998/ND-CP of May 11, 1998. Regulation on the Exercise of Democracy in Communes.