

# How Village-Based Development Can Reduce Conflict in Vietnam

University of Oxford – Center for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity  
Workshop on Decentralisation, Federalism and Conflict  
6-7 October 2006 Oxford U.K.

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## ABSTRACT

Vietnam has experienced unprecedented development and growth in the past 10 years. The GDP grew by 7.7% in 2005 and at the same time, poverty has been dramatically reduced, with only 29% of the population now living beneath the international poverty line (UNDP, 2005b). Much of this success has been attributed to the government's successful market economic reforms known in Vietnamese as *đổi mới*, as well as corresponding reforms in the areas of civil society, decentralisation and grassroots democracy.

Despite solid economic and social development, disparity between rich and poor in Vietnam is still a major problem, particularly for the 54 ethnic minority groups who disproportionately live in poverty. Given this situation of imbalance between rich and poor, and Vietnam's history of conflict, it could be anticipated that conflict would be a major problem at the village level, where poverty is acute, where wealth is not equally shared, and where the government interfaces with the community. It could be expected that conflict would regularly occur at this level between the state, community and community leaders as described in James Scott's *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (Scott, 1976).

However in 1998 the Government of Vietnam issued the historic decree titled *Regulations on the Exercise of Democracy in Communes* (Decree No. 29/1998/ND-CP). For the first time in Vietnam's history, this decree outlined the key functions of the Commune Government in relation to the promotion of democratic principles at village and commune level. It also described how average village people could and should be involved in decision-making and the development cycle. The decree was based on a famous quote from Ho Chi Minh: "the people know, the people discuss, the people do and the people supervise". This decree was an important step in government decentralisation to commune and village, in what has traditionally been labeled a 'top-down' socialist system (GoV, 2003).

Recent research has shown that the words of the decree alone have not been enough to deliver the level of decentralisation that was hoped for. However, when a village-based planning and implementation program is undertaken, attitude change is much more likely and the decree's content can be more effectively realized. This paper explores the issues of implementing grassroots democracy and decentralisation through a village planned and implemented development framework. Although this is not a new approach to development internationally, in Vietnam such approaches have only recently been possible and are proving essential tools in reducing poverty, reducing conflict at the local level and assisting the government to implement key policy change.

The paper also explores the issues of conflict that have occurred at the village and commune level in Vietnam in the past and areas of possible tension today. It explores the ways in which village-based development approaches can potentially alleviate these issues. The paper utilises research that was undertaken in Vietnam between 2003 and 2005 that explores the key elements of the village-based development approach that seeks to build productive working relationships between villagers, village leaders and local government; can effectively decentralise responsibility from the state to the village level; and allow the village and commune to be in control of the development processes that affect them. It is argued that this approach provides a tangible contribution to potentially reduce the likelihood of conflict at the village and commune level.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines findings from research conducted in Vietnam between 2003 and 2005 that focused on the planning and implementation processes undertaken in various village-based development programs operating in Vietnam. During the research period, community planned and implemented projects were investigated in four districts in northern and southern / central Vietnam (Kim Dong, Quan Hoa, Hien and Tra My Districts). The research included: quantitative surveys with local village people (2800 people); focus groups with men, women, boys and girls (48 groups); and semi-formal interviews with key local stakeholders (50 plus). This provided significant insights into past and present village and commune planning and implementation systems in the Vietnamese context. The research indicates that village and commune focused development programs that are operated by the community can practically implement many of the key aims of the Government of Vietnam's Grassroots Democracy Decree, can include meaningful community participation and can deliver effective development outcomes to the local community.

Such approaches were also found to assist alleviate possible conflict between community and State, between community and local leaders, between local leaders and the State, and between individual communities themselves. Given the history of conflict and uprising in Vietnam, as well as the high level of disparity currently existing in Vietnam, the current lack of conflict occurring in such programs is surprising. It indicates that village-based development processes that utilise direct and representative democratic processes, promote decentralisation of decision making, and enable increased involvement of non-governmental civil society can have a positive affect on alleviating conflict. This is very much in line with the *Do No Harm Approach* to development advocated by Mary B. Anderson (Anderson, 1999). This approach aims to improve understanding and cooperation between government, community and local leaders and assist deliver more equitable development outcomes for all.

Throughout the research period, donors, Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and government networks that are involved in village-based planning and development approaches in Vietnam were also consulted. This, combined with reference to key academic works on the links between conflict and community development, provides a current and practical perspective on the links between conflict prevention and village-based development approaches in Vietnam.

## CONTEXT OF VIETNAM

### Country Geography

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam stretches along the China Sea for 1,650 kilometers from north to south. The country is diverse, so it is frequently divided into seven areas that have distinct geographical features, climatic features, natural resources, and environmental and ecological features. These areas are 1) Northern Vietnam, 2) the Red River Delta, 3) North-Central Vietnam, 4) South-Central Vietnam, 5) the Central Highlands, 6) East-Southern Vietnam, and 7) the Mekong River Delta. The country can also be divided into 5 geographical zones moving from west to east. This includes the mountainous zone, the midland zone, the plain zone, the coastal zone, and the sea zone (WVV, 2005). This significant variety of areas affects all aspects of Vietnamese life and produces a diverse set of societies and cultures.

Figure 1: Map of Vietnam



## Development and Conflict in Vietnam

Development can be defined as the way in which individuals, communities, regions and Vietnam as a nation, may grow in economic, social and political terms. As well as the diverse geographical factors mentioned, the effect of the strong Confucianist systems of hierarchy and the communal orientated agrarian way of life in rural Vietnam have particularly shaped the manner in which villages have been structured, have operated and have developed (Mai Huy Bich, 1991). Given this level of diversity and the variety of unique cultures of Vietnam's 54 ethnic minority groups, it is not surprising that significant variance exists between individual villages and communities.

As well as these influences, it is important to understand the significant changes and events that have affected all areas of Vietnam over the past century. Vietnam has experienced considerable conflict and upheaval that have naturally affected the environment that exists in Vietnam today. As many historians have highlighted including (Marr, 1995), (Karnow, 1991), and (Nguyen Khac Vien, 2004), colonialism, conflict and socialism have in particular shaped what Vietnam is today. These three factors have all affected the social, economic and political climate that led to the creation of the Grassroots democracy decree and the important, potentially conflict reducing principles it contains. It is important at this stage to define the concept of conflict. Conflict is *a state of opposition, disagreement or incompatibility between two or more people or groups of people, which is sometimes characterized by physical violence* (Wikipedia, 2006). The history of Vietnam has seen considerable such conflict which directly relates to village and commune development.

Traditionally (that is, before even French colonial rule started in Vietnam in the late 1800's) development in Vietnam was based primarily on agrarian systems. Villagers worked together as collective units due to the necessity of the agriculture tasks required of each village. A natural hierarchy existed in the village based on the Confucianist hierarchy with mandarins, officials and educated people being respected and positioned as more senior members of society than farmers or workers. In such a system, villagers or peasants as they are often referred to, usually only decided things that affected their individual lives on the smallest levels. Larger community, political or village wide decisions were decided by local leaders and mandarins because of the importance placed on their superior level of education. Villagers were not seen to have the required knowledge to decide important village affairs, only basic household issues (Tran Dinh Huou, 1991). Some conflict did arise between villagers and local leaders under such a system, however most villagers simply abided by the imposed hierarchy.

With the expansion of French colonialism to Indochina in the 1800's, the subordination of the average villager continued but under the new western rule. Vietnam was a rich resource ground for the French in terms of cheap labour, including a large pool of young men suitable for battle duty in World Wars I and II. In addition, Vietnam or Indochina as it was known, had significant natural resources including gold and silver, rice, rubber, tea, coffee, silk and cement (Nguyen Khac Vien, 2004). The French, like many colonial powers in the world at the time, saw Indochina as an area ripe for exploiting resources and labour to pursue colonial progress. The French utilised the existing hierarchy in society to further subordinate the average villager, since they saw themselves as superior to all members of Vietnamese society in terms of trade, technology, governance and moral behaviour (The Gioi, 2002). When the French initially began to exert their control on Indochina, there was naturally some resistance from the mandarins, local leaders and some pockets of the rural population. However, fairly quickly the French administration established a system in which they placed themselves at the top of a structure above the local Vietnamese leaders who acted as a 'puppet administration' and with the villagers again relegated to the bottom, with little control or decision-making ability. This peace was kept with the officials and mandarins who still held positions of power

and the villagers remained largely a source of labour and tax revenue to subsidise the high costs of maintaining a colonial outpost.

With the outbreak of World War II, Vietnam received a new group of colonial masters - the Japanese. The Japanese quickly swept into Vietnam after taking China and they promptly replaced the colonial French rulers with an Asian equivalent (Karnow, 1991). Despite significant differences in the style of their colonial rule, for many at the village level, significant similarities existed between the French and Japanese rule. Both powers used the large rural population to supply cheap goods and labour. Like the French, any production gains were absorbed by the colonial masters, and particularly used to supplement the resource intensive war effort. Despite alignment by some Vietnamese political groups with the Japanese in resistance to the French, many Vietnamese were not content with the Japanese automatic position of authority and superiority over all of Vietnamese society. Protest and resistance to both the French and Japanese rules occurred during this period however many Vietnamese submitted to the stronger colonial masters in much the same way as they had under Confucianist systems. It should be noted however that during the period from the 1920's onwards, more significant and organised opposition began to form in resistance to both French and Japanese rule. This initially started with underground movements and then reached the levels of public, mainstream opposition. In particular, the Viet Minh who ultimately became the Communist Party, began to build up resistance and began working to establish a system that was based on a rejection of colonial rule and putting the rights of the people first (Nguyen Khac Vien, 2004).

In 1945 the Japanese were defeated in World War II. Governments in the north and the south of Vietnam were established but these were not strong enough to suppress the French who again returned to Vietnam to rebuild their presence in the region, as other colonial nations were likewise doing (The Gioi, 2002). The French replaced the Japanese and resumed their overall rule of Vietnam. The communist and nationalist movements also began to build over this period and the important national leader, Ho Chi Minh came to the forefront with his strong Marxist-Leninist policies that promoted a nationalist economy based on the rights of the masses (Karnow, 1991). In the late 1940's and early 1950's a growing number of rural protests and resistance against French rule occurred. The people at the village level began to become more vocal, active and at times violent in their opposition to colonial rule and subordination. Resistance existed across the whole of Vietnam but was less in the south of Vietnam, which was more closely aligned with the French government because of close economic ties.

The battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 saw the defeat and removal of the French colonial government for the last time and the establishment of the Republic of Vietnam. This not only marked a significant step in Vietnam becoming a nation in its own right but also potentially allowed the average Vietnamese citizen to be more involved in the processes that affect them. Like many newly emerging nations of the time, Vietnam was struggling to find an identity after colonial rule. The Communist Party had been instrumental to the defeat of the superior French military at Dien Bien Phu. It was not entirely surprising that communism became the political model of choice for much of Vietnam, especially in the north. The north clearly saw communism as the main alternative to the capitalist ideology contained in both the French and Japanese colonial regimes. The government of South Vietnam, however, sought to maintain a more capitalist model of government but remain a separate nation. This left Vietnam split into two politically different nations (The Gioi, 2000).

The spread of communism in the north of Vietnam particularly after 1954 had a significant effect on village development. The Communist Party installed People's Committees and Revolution Committees at all levels in Vietnam (Marr, 1995). A compartmentalised yet centralised governance system began to spread across the whole of northern Vietnam. The design of this governance system envisaged these committees would represent the people and through a hierarchical series of government levels, ultimately tie grassroots community

involvement to a centralised system at national level. The term 'People's Committee' was deliberately chosen to reflect the organisation's role as a simple conduit for all people's rights.

From these early beginnings, committees frequently started to become intermediaries for centralised decision-making rather than representing the wishes of the masses. During the periods of war and also through the process of nationalisation, the government focussed on ensuring a single voice at all levels. This was seen as essential in maintaining order. This occurred despite the original intention of People's Committees representing all people fairly. Many academics have commented that the communists' governance model of the time simply replaced two masters - the French and Japanese, with another, the communist system. It is important to note however that what the rise of communist rule did do in Vietnam is achieve self-governance and the complete removal of colonial rule for the very first time, an important step in allowing the average Vietnamese to be heard. This coincided with similar nationalist movements around the world that also sought to instate local governance that was based on local traditions. The exact political make-up of emerging post-colonial governments varied across nations. However, like Vietnam, many new nationalist governance models were frequently based on non-western models, especially communism (Fanon, 1967). The alternative rule in the south of Vietnam at this time was largely supported by U.S. government based on western economic principles, rather than Marxist-Leninist principles of the north (Karnow, 1991). The difference between the northern Vietnamese political ideology of the time and the south largely contributed to the Vietnam-American war. McNamara, the US Secretary of State of the time, has subsequently conceded that the Vietnam-America war was actually a war largely about nationalism, not communism, as the U.S. government of the time supposed. (McNamara, 2004).

Following the success of the communist army and the retreat of the American allies in 1975, not surprisingly the doors of Vietnam closed to the outside. Vietnam had suffered significant civil war, losses and hardship. This was on top of the effects of the Japanese and French colonialism and earlier frequent conflict with China. The economy was in ruin, a large percentage of the male population was dead and the nation needed to be rebuilt. However the country did have one unified government for the first time, through the communist party. Due to dissent towards the government that still existed in some parts of the country, particularly in the south, the communist party strictly controlled all elements of governance, especially village development. Government resources were finite, so the government favoured geographical areas and ethnic groups who had supported their cause during the war or were areas that had been significantly affected by war, particularly areas of central Vietnam where a large proportion of fighting had occurred. Very slowly in the years following 1975, a long process of development began to occur across Vietnam.

It was not until the late 1980's that outside donors and nations were invited to return Vietnam to assist with the development process (NGO Resource Centre, 2005). Development had been slow while Vietnam was closed and the rural population had suffered significant hardships in the post-war years. Village development up until this time was completely controlled by the district and province People's Committees. Commune committees had very low capacity and were only involved in planning and development in the most superficial way. All major decision-making was handled by the higher levels of government. Once Vietnam began to open up and the *đổi mới* market reforms began to take place, a slow and steady injection of external assistance began to enter Vietnam and begin to impact development at the village and commune level.

Between 1975 and 1998, all development assistance, particularly that to the village and commune level, was tightly controlled by the relevant People's Committees. All NGO and donor projects had to partner closely with provincial and district People's Committees. Development organisations were closely monitored and all projects were jointly implemented with the government to ensure maximum governmental control. As a result, little opportunity existed to allow the village and communes to participate actively in the project cycle (Nguyen

Ha Kim, 2001). Trend analysis exercises completed with focus groups in four districts in Vietnam generally revealed that all major decisions up until 1998 were made by the district and provincial officials. Villagers explained that they had little or no say in the choice of development activities, their location and the means of implementation. Many focus group participants explained that this frequently resulted in activities that were not successful and were not maintained by the villagers.

The international NGO World Vision began experimenting with an area based program model in Vietnam called an Area Development Program (ADP) in 1997. World Vision staff interviewed explained how difficult it was to encourage community involvement before 1998 in Vietnam. Many reported that local officials found such approaches foreign and threatening and were only comfortable with centralised decision-making. ADP teams experienced great opposition to the use of participatory approaches that actively involved commune and village people. Other NGOs and donors who worked in Vietnam prior to 1998 reported to have similar experiences. At this time, the idea of active community participation was widely acknowledged by most donors and NGOs internationally, but was not applied in Vietnam.

In particular, the failure of many development activities in the 1970's and 1980's had made many question the approaches of many donors, particularly the structural adjustment programs of multilateral donors firmly built on modernization theory. As a result, a ground swell began to build which advocated for greater involvement of average citizens in development activities including women, ethnic minorities and other often marginalized groups (Pretty, 1995). Given the growing support for such participatory approaches world wide, it was not surprising that many agencies wanted to apply such ideas in Vietnam. However, due to the highly controlled environment in Vietnam at the time, only limited application was possible. At this time no agencies were able to attempt village wide planning and development approaches given the provincial, district, commune and village officials did not support such approaches. To enable such broad-based participatory approaches to be possible, the government at the highest level would need to support such an initiative.

As Vietnam began slowly to get back on its feet in the late 1970's, 1980's and 1990's, some dissent began to grow towards the centralised form of governance that was in place across Vietnam that provided limited ability for the average Vietnamese citizen to be involved in processes that affect them. In the 1996 and 1997 significant protests and conflict occurred, especially in Thai Binh province but also elsewhere across Vietnam (Mekong Economics, 2006). This saw mass and at times violent protests by villages in response to local government decisions and development activities that were perceived by those affected to be inappropriate and not transparent. Village people complained about poor decisions that were made by party officials that had resulted in little or no benefit to them as end users. People complained about the lack of understanding of rural issues, a growing mistrust of government officials, poor transparency in decision-making, and poor financial accountability (NCSSH, 2003). It is interesting that these protests occurred mainly in the north of Vietnam, an area usually more easily controlled by the communist party system.

Village protests, although commonplace in the process of nationalisation, had not been a major occurrence in the post American War Vietnam. Protests in the period just before 1998 were widespread and presented a significant threat to the government. They highlighted that the rural villagers were not happy under the centralised and highly controlled government hierarchy. After being subordinated under French, Japanese, American and now communist rule, they were now strongly vocalising their opposition. The government could see that if it did not respond appropriately, it could risk losing the stable nation for which it had fought so hard (NCSSH, 2003). As a result, the government developed the first decree on grassroots democracy – Decree No. 29/ND-CP dated 15 May 1998. This decree was produced in direct response to the protests and conflict, which in turn was based on a lack of perceived involvement of villager and commune people in grassroots development processes. Significant difference of opinion exists on how centralised or how responsive to the people the

Vietnamese Government is, with many claiming that Vietnam today is still a highly controlled environment (UNDP, 2006). However the widespread dissent, protest and conflict that led to the development of this decree reinforces that Vietnam as a nation cannot be easily pigeonholed. This example illustrates how the will of the people led to a radical shift in government policy, even within a centralised environment. However the high level of centralised decision making and long history of Confucianist hierarchies meant that such committees often just acted as conduits for centralised decision-making

### **Grassroots Democracy in Vietnam**

The development and release of the government's policies on Grassroots Democracy has in particular been an important step for Vietnam to move towards social reforms and to create an environment that more openly promotes community decision-making and involvement. The historic decree titled *Regulations on the Exercise of Democracy in Communes* (Decree No. 29/1998/ND-CP) for the first time in Vietnam's history, outlined the key functions of the Commune People's Committee and People's Council in relation to the promotion of democratic principles at hamlet and commune level, including the requirement for regular, democratic local elections. It also described how average households in each hamlet should be involved in local decision-making and the development cycle. The decree was set out based on a famous quote from Ho Chi Minh: "the people know, the people discuss, the people implement and the people supervise". The decree also outlined the government's position on what is needed to build effective hamlet and commune communities, particularly outlining the tasks required of village heads and community decision-making (GoV, 1998).

In 2003 a further decree was released (Decree No. 79/2003/ND-CP) also focusing on the *Regulations of the Exercise of Democracy in Communes* (GoV, 2003). This decree elaborated on the earlier decree and the expectations for community building. It detailed the activities required of Commune People's Committees, People's Councils, the Fatherland Front, Hamlet Heads and communities, to achieve effective community involvement and grassroots democracy, again following the same words of Ho Chi Minh. The decree contents aim to confirm that people at hamlet and commune level are entitled to relevant information from the local administration on key planning, implementation and management decisions (including budgets); that the people have the right to be involved in discussion and decision on local issues; that the people should be consulted in advance on all major decisions; and that once any activity is underway, the people have the right to supervise and inspect activities including public works, administrative activities and public financial resources (GoV, 1998).

The grassroots democracy decree (GRDD) represents a significant shift in how decisions and in many ways power is handled at the hamlet and commune level. In the past, as many survey respondents testified, the government, particularly at district and province level would directly decide and direct activities at the hamlet and commune level. The communities at these levels were given few if any opportunities to be involved actively in planning, decision-making processes, implementation and supervision. In fact, prior to the release of the GRDD, the district and province level thought this was how things should be done given there was no law or direction to the contrary. Also by minimizing the community involvement they were very much following the usual Government of Vietnam's protocols of top-down delivery. The decree in essence is concerned about issues of control and in particular the government handing over important tasks such as budget management, land management and project management to the people at the commune and hamlet level. Participatory theory clearly links the concepts of grassroots development; empowerment; fiscal, administrative and political decentralisation; and power (Jutting, 2004, Crook, 2001, Manor, 1999, Von Braun, 2002). Participation as described by Chambers is a process of "handing over the stick" or, if you like, handing over the power to the people (Chambers, 1997).

It should be noted that the above account is a very generalised account of the situation that existed in Vietnam pre-1998. Vietnam is a large and varied country with many exceptions to

any particular rule. As a result, although generally commune and village decision-making was limited over this period, the level of centralisation did vary from area to area. For instance in Tra My, Hien and Kim Dong Districts the trend analysis results clearly indicated significant differences in people's level of participation in the development cycle after the GRDD was released. Most focus groups indicated significant positive changes in how they were informed of programs, involved in key decision-making, and involved in supervision and management. However, interestingly, the Thai ethnic minority villages in Quan Hoa District noted very little change in their level of involvement after the GRDD and ADP were implemented. It was discovered that the Thai culture has a long history of village-based decision-making. Most major decisions have been put to the village for discussion and consensus for many, many years. All major village decisions must have approval from one representative from each household in the village providing a strong example of direct democracy. This system was reported to have been undertaken in the villages throughout the Japanese, French and communist periods. On occasions decisions were made by senior government officials and didn't receive community input but many local decisions were made by the Thai community themselves. In addition, the community was actively involved in all other stages of the development cycle including implementation and monitoring. It was reported that frequently senior government officials were aware of this situation in Thai villages and treated these villages differently, thus allowing the village processes to continue.

In contrast, the Katu ethnic minority group in Hien District operated quite differently. They explained that prior to 1998, nearly all decisions were made by the district and province officials and sometimes the commune. They felt they made no major decisions themselves during this period as a village. They reported a marked difference in how they were involved in development once the GRDD and ADP processes began. They explained it as a dramatic shift, with much more information being available, the ability to be involved in important village decisions, and to be involved in implementation, monitoring and management.

It should also be remembered that the Vietnamese Government implemented this decree at the same time it was undertaking its successful *đổi mới* economic reforms. The GRDD is part of a set of complementary reforms in the areas of civil society, decentralisation and grassroots democracy to assist support economic liberalisation. Relevant development research, including (Haynes, 2001), (Whitehead, 2002), (Ritzer, 2001), (Held, 1995), (Lipset, 1994) and others, argue that uninhibited democracy, decentralisation and civil society are important elements in achieving what has been popularly termed by development practitioners as community 'participation' in development programs.

### **Limitations of Grassroots Democracy**

Despite the importance of the GRDD and the potential for it to influence the way Vietnam operates, it has become apparent that the decree has not delivered the impact that was expected. Since its release in 1998 and its promotion by government, donors, NGOs and other actors, there have been shortcomings. The four case study sites, as well as recent studies into the effectiveness of the GRDD conducted by the UNDP, Oxfam and Mekong Economics have highlighted the weaknesses of the decree's implementation (UNDP, 2005a, NCSSH, 2003, Mekong Economics, 2006). This research supported this with many people at the hamlet level reporting to having not heard of the decree or not having understood its full meaning, despite it being relayed over the loud speaker system. Many villagers reported not hearing the decree in their native language, not understanding the words used or not being bothered to listen. As one farmer said, "we are told too many laws over the loud speaker system, so I didn't listen to that one (the GRDD)". Others knew the words of Ho Chi Minh outlined in the decree – "the people know, discuss, manage and supervise," however they did not fully understand what this meant for them or their community.

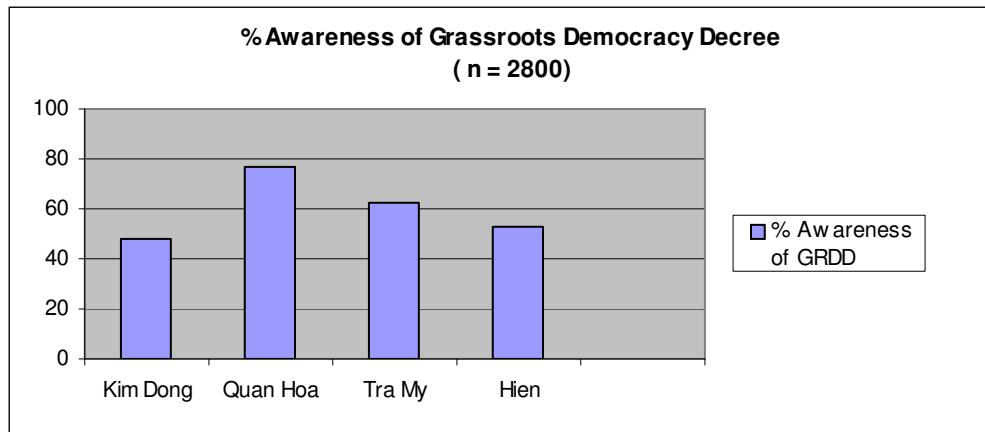


Figure 2: Awareness of Villagers in Four Districts (Kim Dong, Quan Hoa, Tra My and Hien) of the Existence of the Grassroots Democracy Decree.

The survey revealed that awareness of the decree’s overall meanings was generally quite high given the remote and scattered location of many people surveyed. However many villagers had quite different understandings of the central meaning of the decree. It was also revealed that the local government often does not have enough financial resources and skills to put the various elements of the decree into place.

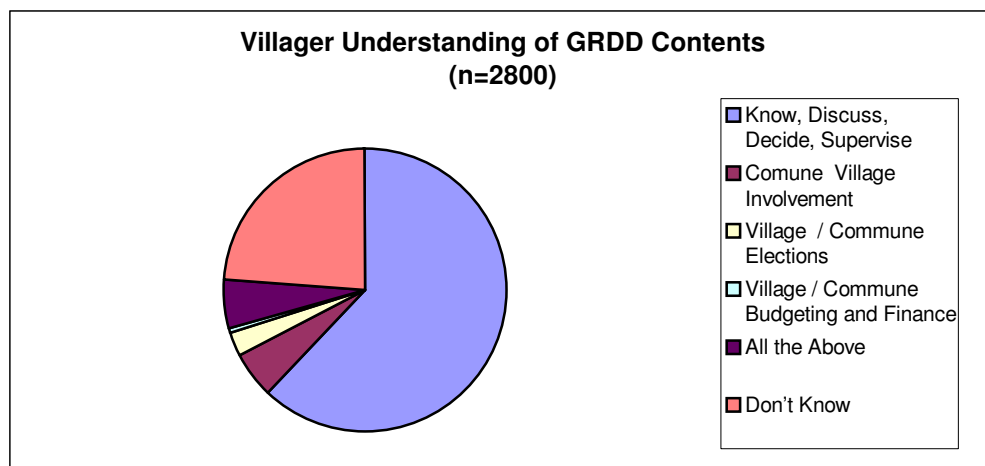


Figure 3: Villager Understanding of the Contents of the Grassroots Democracy Decree (Aggregated Total Across Four Districts – Kim Dong, Quan Hoa Tra My and Hien)

This is especially important to note because it is the Commune People’s Committee, as the last level of government before the community and village, is given significant new responsibilities under the decree. This level of government, usually made up of senior village leaders rather than trained government officials is required under the decree to be the central body for implementation of the decree’s contents. This is in stark contrast to most other laws and decrees that see higher levels of government such as district and province taking on such important responsibilities. The commune as the lowest and arguably weakest level of government therefore needs significant support and capacity if they are to implement the decree effectively. Focus groups with commune officials and village groups revealed that commune governments need particular support to: improve their planning processes and how these tie into both hamlet and district planning processes; improve commune and village skills in decision-making and group consensus making; improve project management and financial management skills; and lastly, develop their overall supervisory skills.

## VILLAGE-BASED DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES

### Community Participation

A large volume of development literature exists on participation and community-based development approaches. Following the 1970's, a period where many development actors became dissatisfied with the lack of tangible results obtained from development activities, criticism was particularly directed towards multilateral, bilateral and government programs which were largely delivered in a top-down manner (Drake, 2003). As a result, a ground swell began to conceptualise development more fully within individual environments and country contexts and particularly to attempt to make development more responsive to community needs and allow the community to participate more fully. Soon momentum built and by the 1980's the concept of participation, empowerment and putting people in the centre of development were widely accepted as development principles. Since this time, participation as a development program-operating principle has become widely accepted by NGOs, multilateral and bilateral donors and government alike (Guijt, 1996).

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) defines participation as “*a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them*” (ADB, 2003). In general, participation can be understood as a process through which stakeholders, by adopting social and political action, can influence decisions that direct resources to the issues that affect them, as perceived by them. In addition, by using a self-help approach in activities, the community ultimately seeks to share control of the development process rather than being recipients. Accordingly, the term ‘community participation’ refers to the involvement or participation of a community of households, a village or individuals, in social and political action to influence the formal decision-making processes on issues that relate to them. In the Vietnam context, like most countries, communities can mean many things. It can mean ethnic groups, social groups, geographical locations or many other categories. For the Vietnam context, the main application of the term community is used to describe the geographical division below commune government. Since the official government system terminates at the commune level, it makes sense to term all groups below this level ‘community’. This includes villages, households and individuals.

### Village Based-Development Approaches

Village-based development has emerged as an application of participatory processes, as well as democratic principles. It usually involves the facilitation of communities to develop annual village plans based on their needs and priorities, to allocate local project and program funding (government, donor and NGO sources) and to address community identified needs through appropriate programs. The community uses collective effort to plan, implement, monitor and manage development activities, with or without external assistance. If undertaken properly such approaches can be effective vehicles to deliver decentralisation of responsibility to the grassroots level; utilize democratic and representative decision-making processes; empower communities to develop and decide community priorities; ensure marginalized people such as women, ethnic minority people and the disabled are involved; and to cultivate and utilize civil society and community based organizations.

In Vietnam NGOs, donors and government began experimenting with this style of program from the mid 1990's. This has included multilateral donors such as ADB and World Bank who have focused on large scale village-development programs that compliment existing loan programs. In addition, bi-lateral donors including Finland, Sweden, Australia and others have piloted programs to establish village-based planning systems that are integrated into commune planning processes and with official government socio-economic plans. These see

village generated needs and priorities directly linked into overall government planning. Such programs also at times support the implementation of the resulting activities in one particular sector. In addition, around 10 NGOs have also begun experimenting with village-based program approaches. Like the donors, these approaches also prioritize community needs into annual and periodic plans. Most NGOs, however, take longer to create the plan and utilise more detailed community decision-making and discussion. In addition, many NGOs also support the implementation and monitoring of the resulting plans to ensure the principles of grassroots democracy and participation are included in all stages. These approaches are usually conducted on a limited scale of villages or communes due to funding limitations.

### HOW VILLAGE-BASED DEVELOPMENT ASSISTS REDUCE INEQUALITIES AND CONFLICT

The research conducted across the four districts revealed some distinct benefits that village-based development programs had on reducing potential conflict. The four districts were chosen to include the main area types in Vietnam, that is: mountainous and plain; rural and semi-urban; ethnic minority and kinh Vietnamese; and poor and moderately poor. As well as the large sample survey (2,800 people), focus groups were conducted in each of the districts (48 in total). In particular, the trend analysis activity was used to determine the different conditions in the village before the grassroots democracy decree and the ADP model was in place and afterwards. Groups of 6-10 villagers were asked to score the different involvement of local stakeholders in the two periods. Then they were encouraged to elaborate on their responses. This combined with other key informant interviews provided a depth of information on the change that had occurred in the village. The villager survey confirmed the following benefits of village-based development processes over government processes.

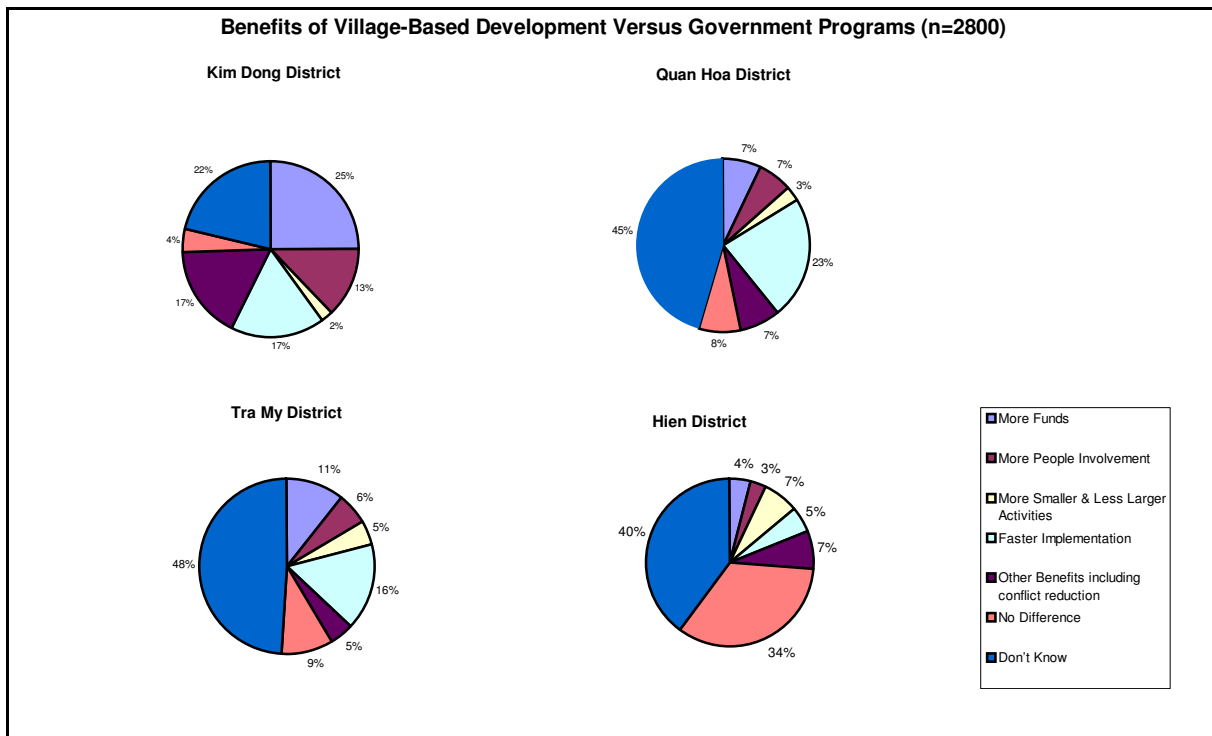


Figure 4: Survey Results on Villager Perceived Differences Between Village-Based Development Approaches and Government Programs in Four Districts – Kim Dong, Quan Hoa Tra My and Hien)

In the 'other benefits' category but also amongst the other major survey responses, the benefits and changes that occurred at the village often directly related to the issue of conflict. These included the following:

### **Democratic Processes for Equality of Decision-making**

Most village-based planning process required the whole community to be involved in deciding needs, priorities and plans. In all cases, not just the households perceived to be most vulnerable were involved, but the whole community. In most cases, one member from all households was required to attend these meetings. Many respondents commented that this ensured everyone in the community was involved and that people understood the decisions made, even if they were not to be included in the program that resulted due to their relatively higher income. Many respondents commented that this reduced conflict and division in the village, which usually would have occurred in such processes in the past.

### **Reduced Power Differential (State and Community)**

The focus group discussions and the large sample survey all confirmed that power had been effectively transferred from district and province level, to commune and village level through the village-based approach. All focus groups scored this change as very significant. Many villagers explained that the GRDD and the ADP model enabled them to be far more active in development. As one villager from Tra My explained:

*'In the past we would just wait for the government to come and help us. Sometimes they came sometimes they didn't. Now we have a plan for the village and the village people do it themselves. Now we no longer need to wait for the government.'*

When prompted, some respondents explained that this change in government-community dynamic would definitely reduce the likelihood of them protesting against the government as many had in the past. They now felt that the government had a much greater understanding of the issues they face as villagers since the plans and activities were now largely coming from the villagers themselves.

### **Democratic Systems of Election**

The GRDD and to a lesser extent the ADP model, promoted democratic elections for Commune People's Committees, People's Councils and also Village Heads. In addition some villages elected Village Maintenance Committees and Village Supervision Committees. In nearly all cases, a majority of households voted on such positions. These positions also have a much greater mandate with the new decentralised responsibilities. This has resulted in a system of local governance far different from that which had existed under French, Japanese and early communist rule. For the first time many villages commented that they can now elect local people to have overall responsibility for village affairs rather than relying on outside supervision and control. Many felt this has created a much greater level of content at the village level.

In addition, the ADP structure has set up a system of Hamlet Facilitators. These people are chosen from each village and trained in community mobilisation, needs analysis and community development. These people are non-government and voted in by village majorities and become the key development workers or facilitators of the program. Many villagers explained that this was a very positive step since villages were now able to elect democratically important non-government or civil society roles.

### **Transparency and Accountability of Finances**

The GRDD and ADP program have encouraged commune governments to take a greater role in ensuring budgets, socio-economic plans, fees and taxes and other financial issues are more transparent. This has meant advertising such items on public notice boards and discussing them in public meetings. Many villages commented that this has allowed them to

have much greater confidence in local commune leaders and financial accountability. In the past many villagers reported not trusting the district and provincial officials because they were never told what money was being spent on. Now the system is more transparent, many villagers commented that they feel more confident in local government. When probed many felt the protests like those of 1996-1997 in Thai Binh would not occur under the current system. As one villager from Hien commented:

*'Before the decree and the development program (ADP) we did not trust the commune government people. We never knew how they spent the money. Now we know many things (about local finances and budgets).'*

### **More Equitable Resources Distribution**

The use of democratic village decision processes has meant that resource allocation at a commune and village level is more equitable. Villagers explained that resource distribution had been a key area of conflict in the past. For example, in some cases Kinh villagers explained that they felt the ethnic minority people were getting disproportionately too many resources and did not understand why this occurred. Alternatively, some ethnic minority people explained that the people closest to the commune towns (usually Kinh) seemed to get all the assistance. Once the system of mass commune wide meetings occurred, all people had the ability to hear, discuss and understand how resources were being distributed. This was reported to build much greater trust between different community groups and reduce possible misunderstandings and tension.

### **Long-Term Approach**

A comment frequently raised was that changing the system to involve the villages was more time consuming. The World Vision ADP approach has the ability to work with individual communes for 5-15 years. This provides a considerable timeframe to influence government and community processes. The changes outlined in the GRDD and contained in the village-based development approaches are largely about attitude change and power transfer. Such approaches to conflict resolution do not occur quickly and require time building up trust and understanding (Lederach, 2001). The long program duration of the village-based approaches was essential in its success in reducing possible conflict.

### **Ability to Address All Needs**

An important element of the ADP approach is that unlike some other village-based development approaches, it has the ability to respond to all types of needs that may be raised by a community. Unlike many donor programs that are focused on one or more sectors only, the ADP approach is able to consider all needs that underpin poverty, regardless of the sector. This means there is far greater ability to respond to the root causes of poverty and also keep different elements in a community happy and reduce possible tension between community groups. Many villagers reported that this was the only program that had the ability to do this.

*'Usually when programs come to help us they only come and work with healthy clinics or agriculture. This program (the ADP) helps us with whatever is the problem. It can help with many different problems at once which keeps the whole village happy - the families, the old people, and the children'* Villager from Quan Hoa.

### **Clear Economic Outcomes**

The last important element to highlight in any village-based development approach or development approach generally, is that by producing solid economic and other development outcomes this provides an important stabilizing affect that reduces local conflict. As Eshete and O'Reilly-Calthorp explain in their important book – *Silent Revolution: The Role of Community Development in Reducing the Demand for Small Arms*, programs that succeed in achieving tangible development outcomes, even if they have no particular focus on conflict

prevention, will often reduce conflict (Eshete, 2000). This results purely because by achieving development results, communities whose lifestyle is improving are frequently less likely to be involved in conflict. Therefore poverty reduction programs and development itself can provide a calming effect to conflict situations if it is undertaken sensitively and does not aggravate existing tensions (Stewart, 2000). Use of village-based planning and development approaches can provide the ability to do just that.

## CHALLENGES OF VILLAGE-BASED APPROACHES

Despite the many benefits, village-based approaches do have their pitfalls. Particularly large-scale donor projects often illustrate the need to balance state control and grassroots participation, rather than relying on just one or the other approach. The IDS report on multi-lateral projects clearly highlighted the need not just to rely on direct democratic processes, grassroots democracy or participation alone. Certainly, approaches like village-based development are important and should be promoted but they do need to be complimented with national level policy and support or else development will not continue to be effective and problems may well arise. (McGee, 2004). Commune and district officials confirmed this importance, explaining that greater involvement of the community certainly has benefits, however, it is still imperative for community processes to take into account commune and district priorities if plans are to be effective and conflict to be reduced. In the past, participation has frequently hit a ceiling, particularly when attempting to aggregate needs and responses above community level and interface with government decisions. As pointed out by (Chambers, 1992) and (Guijt, 1996) the role of government and the balance between top-down and bottom-up processes must be carefully considered. Village-based development approaches that integrate village and commune planning with higher level planning, have the ability to avoid this problem.

As participatory theory also points out, for example in (Thompson, 2003), there is no blue print response to achieving successful participation. As we have seen, village-based development approaches in Vietnam differ considerably and have their strengths and weaknesses. Often there are two broad approaches to participation, one that advocates standardised methods where possible, and the other a more flexible approach based on the people's needs and the individual context (DWC, 2004). Bi-lateral and multi-lateral donors are keen to develop a standardized approach to village-based development so that it can be scaled-up and replicated. This can prove problematic since high levels of standardisation can make community processes inflexible and restrictive, especially across a country as ethnically and geographically diverse as Vietnam. When attempting to up-scale participation and village-based development approaches, care needs to be taken to balance the level of standardisation with a level of flexibility.

Participatory processes including village-based development approaches have also at times been naive about power relations and on many occasions have exacerbated negative relationships and conflict in communities. Participatory processes can easily perpetuate issues of exclusion and inequality in communities if not undertaken carefully, with enough time and taking into account the individual culture. Any community is complex. It is dangerous to enter one area quickly and develop proposed responses without enough information. Care needs to be taken to ensure that increased levels of community participation in processes build a sense of community rather than fuelling existing inequalities or conflict (Guijt, 1998). Skilled and careful facilitation that involves the whole community and democratic processes can assist reduce the likelihood of this occurring.

It is also important to highlight that participation has to operate in a more and more globalised environment, which at times reduces or even reverses its effectiveness (Cook, 2001). Factors well outside the community can more easily affect what the community hopes to achieve. It is important that the community is fully aware of this local-global relationship and that it

understands that a higher level of participation does not always bring guaranteed results. Communities can become disillusioned in development results especially if economic benefits do not occur. This can at times create tension and conflict between the community and government or facilitators. Therefore a process of openness, discussion and reflection should be undertaken throughout such processes to enable more effective participation but minimise any negative effects.

## **CONCLUSION**

Vietnam has a long history of conflict and dissent through French, Japanese and American occupation. The communist structure that was put in place across Vietnam in 1975 was designed to enable the people at the grassroots level to be actively involved in the processes that affect their lives, a concept that is at the heart of participation. A clear political mandate to support this change, did not come until 1998 when the GRDD was released and, as we have seen, this too had limitations.

Village-based development programs which rely heavily on the principles of democratic processes, decentralisation of decision-making, incorporation of non-government interventions, and participatory processes, can be an effective method of implementing grassroots democracy and reducing the likelihood of conflict. For the first time in the history of Vietnam and through such programs that actively support grassroots democracy, the people at the village and commune level now have a clear mandate and a framework to be involved in all elements of village planning and development. This process is equally available to all people regardless of education level, gender, ethnicity, age or level of income. This provides a significant opportunity to reduce possible conflict between government, community and community leaders as is already being seen in such approaches. Such processes provide an important method of ensuring peace and stability at the grassroots level in Vietnam.

It should be noted however that despite the initial success, significant challenges remain. The process of replicating, institutionalising and up-scaling village-based development has only just begun and is not straightforward in a country as large and diverse as Vietnam. Continuing government reforms in the areas of decentralisation, civil society and grassroots democracy are providing additional support for more effective village-based development approaches. With ongoing support at both the national and community level, it is hoped that village-based development approaches will continue to expand in popularity and continue to tackle development issues effectively in Vietnam. By breaking down the long standing barriers between government, community and local leaders it is hoped these approaches will improve development outcomes and reduce possible conflict. As Ho Chi Minh said, “even the smallest of problems cannot be solved without participation of the people, but no matter how big the problem might be, it can be solved together with the people.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Saying of Ho-Chi-Minh (8.1.1967)

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