Narratives of Change

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Youth Participation in Vietnamese Development Programs

Yên T. Mai

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Abstract

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In development studies, the definition of what good "development" entails remains a contentious topic. In particular, the "participatory turn" in development practices has faced criticism due to its vague conceptualization, underlying assumptions, and often paradoxical outcomes. Concerns raised by various scholars include the instrumentalization of local beneficiaries to further the interests of the powerful, the co-optation of the process by elites, and the potential imposition of projects that lack relevance to the target community. Consequently, these studies emphasize the need for a more nuanced examination of local motivations within participatory development, and of the diverse meanings individuals associate with this process.

Utilizing in-depth interviews with 31 young individuals and participant observation, this research delves into the experiences of Vietnamese youth involved in participatory development programs. The aim here is to explore and analyze how participation in development programs shapes young people's civic engagement, visions, and aspirations towards the development process. The study features the narratives of Vietnamese post-reform youth, a generation who came of age during a period of rapid development following Vietnam's 1986 economic reform.

The findings shed light on the coexistence of exclusion and inclusion mechanisms within participatory development practices. While access to these programs tends to favor those who align with development practitioners' epistemology and class dispositions, young individuals can strategically negotiate their belonging by framing their motivations in line with neoliberal values and altruistic drives. Development programs are portrayed as a space of freedom, equality, and inclusion by those who successfully enter them. Their narratives highlight the profound impact of participatory development on transforming individuals from passivity and ignorance to self-efficacy and self-awareness. In addition, the narratives illustrate how development programs offer youth shared frames to interpret Vietnam's development challenges and future strategies, shaping their civic engagement.

By examining four core dimensions related to participatory development practices—motivations, outcomes, challenges, and potential of participation—this study makes significant contributions to development studies and social movement scholarship. Theoretically, it sheds light on the intricate interplay between meaning-making, civic engagement, and civil society. Empirically, it uncovers the diverse and contextually embedded pathways through which youth can contribute to societal change within a Global South authoritarian regime. In this context, participatory development serves as a realm where assisting the state can simultaneously lay the groundwork for potential resistance against its hegemonic control.

Keywords: participation, development, capacity-building, civil society, Vietnam, civic engagement, public sphere, narratives, frames, boundary, youth, collective action, Confucianism, authoritarianism

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“Cuộc đời là một áng mây và
mỗi chúng ta là hạt nước
Chúng ta rơi, ôi, chúng ta rơi
Chẳng thể nào làm khác được
Và cuối hành trình, ai rồi cũng sẽ vỡ ra
Ta chỉ mơ nơi ta rơi xuống
mặt đất khô cằn kia sẽ nở hoa”

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Abbreviations

CPV	Communist Party of Vietnam
CSO	Civil society organization
CSR	Corporate social responsibility
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam)
GONGO	Government-operated non-governmental organization
INGO	International non-governmental organization
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NPO	Non-profit organization
ODA	Overseas development assistance
PRA	Participatory rural appraisal
RVN	Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)
SDG	Sustainable development goals
VUSTA	The Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations

1. Introduction

Several years ago, I had an opportunity to participate in a development training program for Vietnamese LGBTQ youth. The three-day program—organized by a local Vietnamese advocacy organization with the support of multiple international partners—was intended to provide participants with knowledge and skills to develop their community projects, with the goal of improving inclusion and equality in education for LGBTQ students. It kicked off with excitement and promises, only to end in anguish when a dispute between a trainer and two participants took place in the middle of a lecture. The dispute centered on a comment the trainer had made to these participants when they were working on a group assignment; while the trainer perceived the comment to be a harmless remark, the participants believed they were being mocked and insulted. This argument, while taking up only ten minutes of the final day, was painful enough to disrupt the ease and comfort that had been built up throughout the three days of intense participation and emotional sharing. Angry and hurt, one participant left early, while the other was found crying on the landing of the staircase. In follow-up conversations, these two participants spoke of feeling disillusioned when they were attacked (intellectually) in a space they had previously deemed "safe," and by someone whom they had initially believed would offer them respect.

I left the program pondering the promise of a safe and equal space for participation—a promise that in this case was destroyed as soon as symbolic domination came into the picture. I wondered whether the incident was an exception, or if the breach was a sign of something more systemic—a problem that has always existed in participatory development but is seldom discussed. Eventually, and after much trial and error, my reflections led me to explore and examine the field of development, particularly its participatory aspect. My curiosity concerns the perspective of local participants, specifically in terms of how they experience and make sense of their participation in these development programs. Do they perceive them as fruitful and enlightening, as most studies on capacity-building have suggested (e.g., Swidler & Watkins, 2009)? Or do they find them problematic and reeking of exclusionary tendencies, as development scholars such as Cornwall (2003) have warned us? As a participant-observer at the above training program, I found that there were no simple answers to these questions. Rather, one must take into consideration the

nuanced cultural and political context within which such experiences take place to make sense of what happens.

This study is motivated by my curiosity about these issues. To emerge with a satisfactory answer, I believe an investigation must begin with the context. This means to find out where this type of training program comes from, and who is responsible for its organization and content. Another dimension to address is whether there was anything particularly novel taught to the young participants, and whether these programs fulfil their expectations. Equally important is to consider how such programs are situated within the larger socio-political context of Vietnam, and to ask why it is important to learn about them.

In this introduction, I will lay out the different elements that make up this puzzle of youth participation in development programs. In Section 1.1, I provide an overview of the participatory turn in international development. This is followed by Section 1.2, which introduces an examination of civil society through the lens of small groups and meaning-making. Section 1.3 explains why Vietnam is a fitting context in which to study this phenomenon. The research aim and research questions are covered in Section 1.4, followed by an overview of the manuscript's organization in Section 1.5.

1.1 Participation in international development

The subject of investigation in this study is young people who participate in development training programs organized by different civil society groups in Vietnam. The rationale behind a development training program is the belief that increasing people's capacity can improve their lives and help them reach their goals. This, accordingly, contributes to the overall process of community development.

In international development scholarship, there are various approaches and understandings in terms of what development entails (some of which more or less overlap). By focusing on training programs for young people, this study focuses specifically on both the participatory and the capacity-building approaches to development. These approaches both imply that through participation in such training, the beneficiaries will become self-reliant actors who can improve their lives in a sustainable manner. Thus, these approaches reflect what Hickey and Mohan (2005) have referred to as the "participatory turn" in international development, in which participation—via capacity-building, for instance—is considered a key element for genuine and effective social transformation (Philips & Ilcan, 2004; Brown & Green, 2015). Development, in this perspective, refers to improving self-awareness, self-efficacy, and self-reliance—in other words, the idea that "teaching a man to fish" (Swidler & Watkins, 2009, p. 1182) is the best way to increase quality of life.

Development was not always envisioned in this way. The participatory turn in development practices is a result of a paradigm shift in the late 1980s that stemmed from growing dissatisfaction with the stagnation of growth in developing countries. Prior to this, development was conceptualized primarily in terms of economic growth. This led to negative social and environmental consequences and, accordingly, a loss of confidence in mainstream development practices. Easterly (2001, p. 135) described this period as "the lost decades," when development practitioners and scholars urged an alternative approach to doing development.

In the 1990s, participatory development emerged to counter what many perceived as a crisis caused by neoliberal development and global capitalism. Here, development was re-conceptualized to mean not only growth but also inclusion, sustainability, and human empowerment (Korten, 1990; Chambers, 1994a, 1994b). These changing principles also corresponded to a series of alternative strategies and methodologies, one of which was to incorporate the local beneficiaries themselves into different stages of development projects. The argument was that via participation, local beneficiaries—especially socially and economically marginalized populations—would become central to decision-making processes, entailing a recognition and incorporation of their interests (Chambers, 1994a, 1994b; Mohan, 2001).

"Participation" soon became the new keyword in development and was commonly viewed as the main ingredient in development success. Greater efficiency, social cohesion, transparency, accountability, and empowerment were among the many indicators associated with participation (Sen, 1999; Cornwall & Brock, 2005; Cornwall, 2007, 2008). The term quickly became integrated into the mainstream language of different actors involved in development, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments, and financial institutions. Donors were eager to take on development projects that promised to mobilize local capacity through participation (S. White, 1996; Cornwall & Brock, 2005).

At present, the turn toward participation continues to shape mainstream international development practices. In Vietnam, a local manifestation of this participatory turn is the increase in learning opportunities for Vietnamese youth outside of formal education. Development NGOs, nonprofit organizations (NPOs), and citizen networks that crisscross the nation organize and create a number of training programs targeting young people. These programs address different aspects of development, including sustainable development, civic engagement, gender equality, and human rights. Despite their diverse topics, a common thread unites them all: the shared objective of enhancing the capacity, skills, and knowledge of their participants, thus molding them into adept and self-reliant agents of change. In essence, these programs equip young people with a specialized body of knowledge and language that aligns closely with international development paradigms, with the primary goal of inciting social change through building up individual capacities.

An exploration of these development training programs not only sheds light on the contemporary development landscape in Vietnam but also offers deep insights into broader international development practices. Of particular significance is that these programs serve as a venue where "global ideas" are applied and adapted through "local translation" (Schnegg & Linke, 2016, p. 800). These programs, in other words, are the manifestation of the interweaving of global and local dynamics in the realm of development initiatives.

1.2 Vietnam, development context, and civil society

In the same period that international development experiments with the turn towards participation, Vietnam also experienced a significant political shift. After the reunification of North and South Vietnam in 1975, the country was struggling economically due to a number of reasons: the imposition of central planning economy led to a sharp fall in agricultural output, the dispatch of troops to fight the Khmer Rouge led to the drying up of Western aids, and the border conflict with China was followed by the withdrawn of Chinese aid. Vietnam, in the late 1970s, was isolated diplomatically, facing a deep economic and political crisis (London, 2023a).

In 1986, Vietnam underwent a period of reformation, commonly referred to as the Đổi Mới [Renewal] Reform. This reform was an important historical event, whereby the Communist Party of Vietnam decided to abandon socialist planning to adopt a "market economy with socialist orientation," or "market socialism" (Leshkowich 2023, p. 246). Marking the end to state-enterprise subsidies, Đổi Mới was characterized by the lifting of import restrictions, the streamlining of government administration, and the permissions for private actors to engage in economic development (London, 2023a). The introduction of Đổi Mới made the country's economy take off: the rapid economic growth in the wake of reforms saw Vietnam transformed from one of the world's poorest nations into a lower middle income country in just one generation (London & Pincus, 2023), reducing its poverty rate from over 60 percent in the 1980s to below 5 percent in 2019 (Baum, 2020, p. 5). The World Bank (2020, p. 1) regards this transition as "one of the greatest development success stories of our time."

Characterized by rapid integration into the regional and global economy, Đổi Mới also marked the retreat of the Vietnamese state from social services provision (G. Clarke, 2004). Additionally, since the reform, the Vietnamese government has increased willingness to accept international development assistance, which extends beyond communist bloc support (Lux & Straussman, 2004). This transition created an opening for other actors to step in and support Vietnam's development. Consequently, the 1990s witnessed a stream of international NGOs (INGOs) entering Vietnam to assist the country with their own models of development, introducing ideas about civil society, participatory

development, and "bottom-up" approaches into Vietnam's development landscape (Salemink, 2006). This wave of NGOization is described by some as the formation of neo-form of Vietnamese civil society (Waibel, 2014; Reis, 2014).

Commonly understood as a realm of social life distinctive from the state, the notion "civil society" can be seen as an autonomous sphere capable of energizing resistance against tyrannical regimes (Seligman, 2002), or a sphere capable of bring citizen together to foster cooperation (Putnam, 2000). The role of non-state associations such as NGOs is believed to be central to civil society movements (Mohan, 2002). However, scholars who have examined civil society in post-reform Vietnam conclude that this sector does not truly fit into any definition of "civil society" that emphasizes independence from the state and resistance to state ideology (Gray, 1999; Hannah, 2007; Wischermann, 2010; Hayton, 2020). This conclusion echoes previous analyses of civil society in other authoritarian regimes (e.g. Lewis, 2013; Dai & Spires, 2018), within which many NGOs "do not fundamentally challenge the state or the political order" (Alagappa, 2004, p. 469). In such settings, the state's restrictions and constraints on activities organized by non-state actors are pervasive (Waibel, 2014; Heng, 2004). Moreover, due to bureaucratic measures, many groups or networks that perform essential civil society functions, such as delivering services to the population in need, are unable to obtain official recognition as an organization, making them ineligible to obtain funding from international donors (Rydstrøm et al., 2023; T. A. Hoàng, 2013).

Recognizing the existence and contributions of these groups, this study proposes that in contexts where the state closely monitors civil society activities, the definition of "civil society" should extend beyond solely legally registered organizations such as NGOs. Rather, this conception should also encompass informal, unconventional, and small-scale groups. In this endeavor, Fine's (2014, 2021) conception of civil society as consisting of small groups, or "tiny publics", proves particularly useful. Linking participation in small groups with civic engagement, Fine (2021, p. 14) explained:

> many groups have an implicit politics and communal face. A tiny public is a group with a recognizable interaction order and culture that strives to play a role within a civic structure, democratic or authoritarian[...] Such communities may be small, but they contribute to a broader politics, embracing values on which shared commitment depends.

Fine developed the concept "tiny public" from the understanding that every group—of whatever size and with whatever instrumental goals—develops its own culture, namely "a bounded set of images and traditions that come to characterize those individuals to themselves and often to outsiders" (Fine, 1995, p. 128). He maintained that members of a group share a common set of recurring and meaningful references that contribute to the formation of a collective identity (see also Taylor & Whittier, 1995). Participation in these

collectives means that members gain access to norms, values, traditions, artifacts, and community expectations, which in turn shapes what these individuals perceive as legitimate actions (Snow & Benford, 1992; Fine, 1995; Johnston & Klandermans, 1995). Fine's view of culture is similar to that of Thörn (2002, p. 57), who has asserted that culture serves a social function of giving "meanings, consistency, and coherence to social life" and highlights the link between cultural practices and the formation of collective identity. This perspective encourages sociological investigations that focus on how members of a collective interpret these shared meanings, and how such interpretations help shape their self-perceptions and inform their actions.

In this study, the role of culture in promoting civil society functions can be seen in the norms, values, and expectations embraced by development programs, which provide the strategies of actions for their members (Swidler, 1986). These strategies are composed of diverse bundles of narratives, symbols, habits, skills, and styles that together influence what young participants define as legitimate and ethical actions in their everyday life (Johnston & Klandermans, 1995; Johnston, 1995). In other words, this investigation illuminates how participation in development programs offers Vietnamese youth the "meaning" and "coherence" that shape how they interact with the world around them, as well as how they position themselves as individuals and as a group (Thörn, 2002). Applying Fine's (1995, 2014, 2021) conception, the study focuses on the shared frames and narratives that young individuals adopt from participation to make sense of their civic engagement and contributions to society. In essence, it seeks to explore civil society actions within an authoritarian context through a focus on meaning-making. This focus stems from the acknowledgment that social change can be accomplished through the negotiation of meanings, and that certain social movements may have instrumental goals aimed at "recoding" the cultural order of the society within which they are embedded (Swidler, 1995, p. 34; Fine, 1995).

1.3 Why Vietnam?

While taking a micro-level approach, this research does not overlook how structural and cultural contexts help shape the motivations and experiences of local actors in participation. If one operates under the presumption that participation is a complex process, it follows that different contexts will affect how this process unfolds. A discussion of the setting of this study is therefore imperative. My decision to select Vietnam as my study site was motivated by political, economic, cultural, and methodological factors, as outlined below.

First, Vietnam is one of the few nations left in the world whose political system is ruled by the Communist Party; the one-party model adopted by the nation not only legitimizes the domination of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), but also makes Vietnam an authoritarian regime. Thayer (1995, p. 39)

used the term "mono-organizational socialism" to describe this political system, in which state institutions, the armed forces, and other societal organizations are all under the hegemonic control of the CPV. Studying Vietnam, therefore, helps reveal how local participation takes place in a context where any signs of contention or dissident voices are rendered politically problematic. To a lesser degree, the study also contributes to the ongoing discussion on the relationship between state and civil society in authoritarian settings.

Second, as previously discussed, Vietnam has experienced a rapid economic development process. Recently, this rapid development has posed new challenges for the country's civil society sector: as Pincus (2017) pointed out in a United Nations Development Programme report, the transition to middle-income country status means that Vietnam is now facing a trend of decreasing overseas development assistance (ODA). For Vietnamese civil society groups that are used to relying on international funding for their development programs, the changing context of assistance calls for new strategies to increase financial independence, which may potentially change their approaches to participatory development. Studying Vietnam in this context, therefore, contributes to the understanding of how local actors navigate the rising challenges in the development landscape via their participation.

Third, Vietnam's extensive history of colonial contact with both the Global North and former post-socialist nations makes the country itself an exceptional case for studying cultural meaning-making processes. Raffin (2008) characterized modern Vietnam as a nation with a hybrid identity shaped by both Western imperialism and communist ideals, while Blanc (2005, p. 671) described the Vietnamese culture as a "tradition influenced by colonial contact and revitalized by the effects of globalization." These accounts suggest that the long and complex history of colonialism may make modern Vietnam more susceptible to cultural ideas imported from abroad, paving the way for the development of a national culture and economy deeply entrenched in globalization. This provides an intriguing context for a study that investigates the motivations and experiences in participatory development of young people. Growing up in Vietnam during the rapid economic development following the Đổi Mới reform, this post-reform generation has developed a distinct way of expressing and understanding the world that significantly differs from that of previous generations (H. Nguyễn, 2015). This generational shift offers an interesting site to observe meaning-making processes associated with participatory development.

Last but not least, this choice is informed by my own interest in and continued observation of the country, with my positionality as both an insider and an outsider. While my upbringing in Vietnam provides me with the insider advantage of speaking the language and understanding its cultural norms, my education and training abroad since 2008 has allowed me to observe the nation from a distance and with an outsider's eyes. This "stranger" positioning as a diasporic Vietnamese serves as the compass that helps guide the development

of this research, offering critical reflections on subtle forms of symbolic domination taking place in the space of development. My research topic, in fact, stems from one of those reflections, as addressed in the opening lines of this chapter.

1.4 Research aim and research questions

The aim of this research is to explore and analyze how practices in Vietnamese participatory development shape young people's civic engagement, visions, and aspirations toward the development process. This study focuses on youth experiences in development programs organized by local NGOs as well as those implemented by informal, unregistered networks that are unable to gain legal standing in this political context. The overarching goal is to provide a nuanced understanding of the intricate interactions between youth participation, civic engagement, and the broader context of development practices.

In pursuit of this aim, I pose three central research questions:

1) How are the motivations and aspirations of young people integrated into the construction and negotiation of access to development programs?
2) How do the experiences of young people in development programs contribute to their civic engagement?
3) How does participation in development programs inform young people's visions and practices in the realm of development?

A point of clarification is that in this study, the category of "young people" or "youth" refers to those born after Vietnam's economic reform in 1986. By referring to them in this way, this study moves beyond the traditional conception of youth that is generalized based on a strict set of criteria, such as age. Rather, it recognizes the ambivalence and complexity of the "youth" category (Suurpää et al., 2015; Jabberi & Laine, 2015; Feixa et al., 2016). This approach takes into account how youth is a "context-sensitive category that reflects social, economic, political, moral and emotional predicaments and embodied processes" (Oinas et al., 2018, p. 4). In the context of this study, "youth" refers to the post-reform generation of Vietnam, a "distinct social-developmental group" (H. Nguyễn, 2015, p. 4), with perspectives and ideological values that differ greatly from those of former generations. A more detailed explanation of this will be provided in Chapter 3 when Vietnam's history of development is examined.

1.5 Organization of the manuscript

This dissertation consists of nine chapters. Following the Introduction, Chapter 2 reviews the previous literature on participatory development. The review shows that while participatory development has been problematized for its underlying assumptions and paradoxical outcomes, the agency and motivations of local actors are rarely addressed. This leaves a space for further investigation in which local participants are acknowledged as active meaning-making actors who shape the participation process with their own interests and strategies. In light of this study's focus on youth participation, the literature review also provides an overview of previous investigations of young people in participatory development—namely, the challenges that hinder their participation as well as their strategies and maneuvers to take ownership of the process.

Chapter 3 serves to contextualize the study by tracing the trajectory of Vietnam's civil society in relation to the nation's history of development. This engagement with historical context allows for the tracking of different cultural elements and significant events in Vietnam's history that lay the foundation for civil society. The chapter also provides a picture of present-day Vietnamese civil society, revealing its complex relations with the authoritarian state.

Chapter 4 offers the theoretical framework for this study in three steps. First, it engages with previous scholarship on civil society conceptions, highlighting existing assumptions and the problems they pose for investigating civil society in an authoritarian setting. Second, it proposes a micro-sociological approach to studying civil society utilizing Fine's (2014, 2021) concept "tiny public." This step demonstrates how the integration of Fine's theory on "tiny public" can shed light on the intricate connections between development programs and the larger context of civic engagement in civil society, particularly by zooming in on the shared meanings that individuals in these small group settings adopt. Finally, the chapter introduces important conceptual tools for the study of meaning-making that are used throughout the empirical analysis: frame, narrative, and boundary.

Chapter 5 presents the methods and data for this study. It lays out the research design and explains the choice of methods—qualitative interviews and participant observation—utilized in this investigation. A detailed record of the data collection process is also provided and the data analysis process is clarified, including a detailed description of the coding process and the use of analytic memos. The chapter concludes with a discussion of research ethics and methodological reflections, addressing issues of internal confidentiality, informed consent, and positionality.

Chapter 6 is the first of three empirical chapters. To set the stage for the study, it answers the first research question: "How are the motivations and aspirations of young people integrated into the construction and negotiation of access to development programs?" The analysis explores the extent to

which development programs are accessible to local communities, acknowledging that young people must undergo a competitive application process in order to gain access to these programs. In engaging with issues of access, the chapter determines whether the boundaries for entry into these collectives are permeable or impermeable. Furthermore, recognizing that young people have their own motivations and strategies for engaging with this process, the chapter also analyses how these youth negotiate membership and construct their belonging in development programs.

After following the informants' narratives through the entry process, the study continues with Chapter 7, which explores the complex web of practices, norms, and values cultivated through youth participation. This chapter answers the second research question: "How do the experiences of young people in development programs contribute to their civic engagement?" It offers narratives that show how young people frame their participation experiences, as well as the link they establish between participation and their civic engagement. These narratives not only present young people's journey of participation, but also how they perceive themselves and their roles in society as an outcome of their participation.

Moving beyond the context of development programs, the final empirical analysis in Chapter 8 establishes the connection between young people's participation in development programs and their vision of societal development. It answers the third research questions: "How does participation in development programs inform young people's visions and practices in the realm of development?" Their perspectives on the development process are unraveled using two concepts: "diagnostic framing" and "prognostic framing". The former explores how these young people make sense of hindrances and barriers in the current Vietnamese development landscape, and the latter reveals how they envision the path to achieving development objectives. This chapter then brings to light how participation in development programs offers these young people a framework for navigating the complexities of the development landscape.

Chapter 9 expands the empirical findings of this study by highlighting their relevance and implications for future investigations of participatory development practices. This chapter discusses the study's findings and clarifies their insights regarding four dimensions of participation, namely the motivations, the outcomes, the challenges, and the potential of participation. Drawing from this discussion, the chapter also highlights the contributions made by this research.

2. Literature review: participation in development practices

As outlined in the Introduction chapter, the aim of this dissertation is to explore and analyze how practices in Vietnamese participatory development shape young people's civic engagement, visions, and aspirations toward the development process. Achieving this aim requires an examination of the meanings young people attach to their participation in Vietnamese development programs. This study seeks to address a facet of participation that has frequently been overlooked in research: the motivations and experiences of local actors in participatory development. This aspect is essential to unraveling the multifaceted nature of local participation experiences. Given this specific focus, the purpose of this literature review is to position this study within the broader context of prior research on participatory development, highlighting the lack of attention given to how local participants actively contribute to the development process.

The organization of this chapter unfolds as follows: Section 2.1 focuses on previous research within the domain of development to illustrate how the subject of participation has been approached within this expansive field. The realm of development literature is home to extensive discourse, marked by ongoing debates regarding effective and meaningful development practices. The shift toward participation in development practices can be viewed as a response to these uncertainties and disputes. However, this transition toward participatory practices has also spawned its own set of discussions and criticisms. These issues are addressed in Section 2.2, where the conceptual ambiguity surrounding the term "participation" is scrutinized. Section 2.3 casts light on several assumptions and paradoxes that underlie participatory practices.

Next, Sections 2.4 and 2.5, respectively, examine how this literature has dealt with local agency and the motivations of local participants. Given the backdrop of this study in an authoritarian setting, Section 2.6 is reserved for a review of how participation has been discussed in similar political contexts. Finally, Section 2.7 concentrates on young people's approaches to participation, offering an overview of related studies with a specific focus on the experiences of young individuals. The review closes with the conclusion that recognizing the gap within this body of literature opens up opportunities for

studying the outcome of participation practices through the lens of local motivations, perspectives, and expectations.

2.1 Participation in development aid context

The debate over what good "development" entails remains lively in the literature. Since the Second World War, development—as an international process—has taken on multiple forms of meanings, discourses, and practices (Matthews, 2004; Blaser, 2009). While the aim of transforming developing nations remains the same, what is defined as effective and meaningful transformation has certainly shifted over time. Accordingly, this has led to fundamental changes in mainstream development practices and methodologies.

One such change is reflected in a paradigm shift that took place in the 1980s. Before this shift, development was merely defined as economic growth, and development practitioners relied on economic models such as the Washington consensus to pursue what is now referred to as neoliberal development (Storey, 2000; Easterly, 2001; Matthews, 2004; Fong, 2008). Criticism and discontent surrounding this model of development began to grow, as it failed to address issues of poverty and inequality in sustainable ways, as well as sidelining local beneficiaries in the process (Mikkelsen, 2005; Blaser, 2009). In the 1970s and 1980s, the stagnation of growth in developing countries combined with negative social and environmental consequences led to a loss of confidence in mainstream development practices, a period described by Easterly (2001, p. 135) as "the lost decade" of development.

Stemming from this growing dissatisfaction, a paradigm shift was conceived in the late 1980s to counter what many perceived as a crisis caused by neoliberal development and global capitalism. Development, as a result, was reconceptualized by several scholars (e.g., Korten, 1990; Hettne, 1990; Chambers, 1994a, 1994b; Brohman, 1996) to mean not only economic growth, but also inclusion, sustainability, and human empowerment. These changing principles also corresponded to a series of alternative strategies and methodologies in which the traditional top-down approach to development was replaced by bottom-up, people-centered practices. This alternative approach called for a change in the role of state institutions and external experts in development projects, with a focus on acknowledging the gender bias in development (e.g., Elson, 1991), as well as giving local beneficiaries more power to shape the process.

One strategy for achieving these principles was to incorporate local beneficiaries themselves into different stages of development projects. The argument was that via participation, local beneficiaries—especially socially and economically marginalized populations—would become central to decision-making processes, and their interests would be recognized and incorporated (Chambers, 1994a, 1994b; Mohan, 2001). As part of this approach, a new

language of development based on local experiences was also emphasized. One of the most influential advocates for this trend was Chambers (1994a, 1994b), whose work on Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) paved the way for participatory development in general (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Chambers (1994a, p. 1253) described PRA as "a family of approaches and methods to enable local (rural or urban) people to express, enhance, share and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act." Participatory development then came about with the aim to "increase the involvement of socially and economically marginalized peoples in decision-making over their own lives" (Guijt & Shah, 1998, p.1).

"Participation" soon became the keyword in development and was often regarded as an essential element in a successful development process and a strong local civil society. Greater efficiency, social cohesion, transparency, accountability, and empowerment were among the many indicators associated with participation (Sen, 1999; Cornwall & Brock, 2005). Incorporating local power into development projects seemed to satisfy the best of both worlds, with advocates praising the methodology for both its means and its end. As Cleaver (1999) noted, the two supporting arguments for participation centered on efficiency (participation as a tool to achieve better project outcomes) and empowerment (participation as a process to help people enhance their capacities and improve their lives). The term quickly became integrated into the mainstream language of various actors involved in development, such as NGOs, governments, and financial institutions. Donors were eager to invest in development projects that involved mobilizing local capacity through participation (Pretty, 1995; S. White, 1996; Mikkelsen, 2005; Cornwall & Brock, 2005).

Eventually, as the excitement wore off, the use of participation in development practices began attracting criticism, as well as theoretical attempts to problematize its conceptualization. Several issues were exposed as the concept was subjected to judgments regarding both its connotations and applicability (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Mikkelsen, 2005). Participation has been scrutinized for its techniques (Mosse, 1994; Goebbel, 1998; Green, 2010); its conceptualization and underlying motivations (Cleaver, 1999; Mohan & Stokke, 2000; Kapoor, 2002; Cornwall, 2003, 2008; Philips & Ilcan, 2004; Hickey & Mohan, 2005; Enns et al., 2015); and its outcomes (Agarwal, 2001; Kelsall & Mercer, 2003; Mohan, 2007; Sahoo, 2013). There is a common concern among these critics about the power behind the use of participatory development practices, which raises the question of whether participatory programs are truly beneficial for local participants and, if not, how to address this. These criticisms are examined in the next two sections, which address ambiguities in the concept of participation and underlying assumptions about the target communities in participatory development practices.

2.2 Meanings of participation: conceptual ambiguity

Despite the large body of literature its study has generated, what "participation" in development truly entails remains conceptually ambiguous. The reason for this discrepancy can be explained by the excessive use of the term in development practices, in which "participation" has conveniently taken on a variety of meanings depending on the context (Pretty, 1995; Wiebe, 2000; Parfitt, 2004; Hayward et al., 2004; Mikkelsen, 2005; Cornwall & Brock, 2005; Basco-Carrera et al., 2017). The term, for instance, can be used to refer to "organized efforts to increase control over resources and regulative institutions in given social situations (Stiefel & Wolfe, 1994, p. 5); "the inclusion of the beneficiaries… in the design, implementation and evaluation of development processes" (Enns et al., 2015, p. 361); or simply "the fostering of dialogue between the local and the project or program preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation staff" (Mikkelsen, 2005, p. 53). In each of these definitions, the degree of involvement of local participants varies. The fact that "participation" is a fluid term means that anything can be claimed to be part of it.

Addressing the plurality of how "participation" is defined, Cornwall and Brock (2005) noted that the term has become a "buzzword" in development aid contexts—a product of framing strategy resulting in meanings constantly transmitted and transformed by different actors and networks (see also Leal, 2007). Consequently, there is a gap between the consensual meaning of the term and the way it is actually applied in practice. As Cornwall and Brock (2005) maintained, while the idea of participation was fundamentally about a redistribution of power through which local beneficiaries would be granted more agency and ownership in the process, the type of participation that entered mainstream development practices rarely tackled power distribution. Rather, this type of participation revolved around engaging local communities in sharing the burdens of development, with cost-sharing and the co-production of services emerging as the dominant forms of local participation.

What Cornwall and Brock (2005) described reflects precisely how post-development scholars see participation: as a co-opting practice to mobilize labor and reduce costs. On par with their suspicion about the very notion of development, these authors are equally critical of participation. The distrust ranges from describing participation as merely a discursive shift that conceals the real motive of development agendas (Sachs, 1992; Rahnema, 1992) to treating it as a strategy created by development institutions to co-opt social movements (Escobar, 1996). Some have referred to participation as "the new tyranny" in development, something that sustains and perpetuates power inequalities between the haves and the have-nots (Cooke & Kothari, 2001, p. 3), while others conceptualize it as a paradox in which people are "dragged into partaking in operations of no interest to them" (Rahnema, 1992, p. 116). Participation, in post-development critique, is used as no more than a "cosmetic

label" for legitimation purposes (Mikkelsen, 2005, p. 54): to make project proposals appear more attractive to donors without any actual intention of following through.

Worth noting is that the post-development line of thought itself has been subject to various critiques (see, e.g., Crewe & Harrison, 1998; Kiely, 1999; Nederveen Pieterse, 2000, 2010; Eriksson Baaz, 2008) for its oversimplification of mainstream development and the dichotomous good/bad argument that follows. Nederveen Pieterse (2000, p. 186), for instance, even concluded that post-development offers nothing but "creative destruction" and "fashionable interpretations," pointing to the school of thought's complete dismissal of development efforts without offering any concrete suggestion for an alternative. Claiming that post-development arguments were misleading, Nederveen Pieterse (2000, 2010) maintained that they were products of a single, narrow representation of mainstream development, as well as a one-dimensional view of modernity.

While I agree with the above observation regarding the oversimplification inherent in post-development arguments, I also believe such arguments should not be dismissed entirely, but rather treated as tools for evaluating the notion of participation. Their critique, for instance, suggests that neither the motivations behind participatory programs nor their outcomes should be taken as givens. Several studies have, in fact, concurred with this assessment, although they do not necessarily share the post-development critiques' skepticism about the motives of mainstream development. Rather, the gap between intention and practice in participation has been described as a result of several assumptions embedded in the design of participatory programs. This, consequently, has led to many participatory approaches being symbolic rather than meaningful.

2.3 Problems with participation: assumptions and paradoxes

Several scholars (Cleaver, 1999; Mohan & Stokke, 2000; Kapoor, 2002; Eversole, 2003; Cornwall, 2003, 2008) have noted that participatory techniques are grounded on certain sets of assumptions; if these assumptions are not addressed, the unintended gap between intention and practice in participation will persist. One such assumption can be traced back to Chambers (1994a, 1994b) in terms of how local communities are portrayed in his discussion of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). Cleaver (1999), among others (Mohan & Stokke, 2000; Kapoor, 2002; Kelsall & Mercer, 2003), has pointed out that Chambers tended to romanticize local knowledge and essentialize local communities, while overlooking the complexities inherent in them. Chambers' (1994b, p. 1450) "openness to complexity and diversity" appears to be a

refrain from problematizing local knowledge, treating such knowledge as naturally benign, a view characterized by Cleaver (1999, p. 605) as "equally untenable and damaging." By portraying local communities as simply resourceful and capable of making meaningful changes, Chambers failed to recognize how structural constraints within these communities could make participation a challenging approach (Cleaver, 1999; Platteau & Abraham, 2002; Kapoor, 2002). Moreover, he did not recognize that participation can be shaped by processes of negotiation and accommodation between the different stakeholders, as these communities are divided along the lines of class, race, gender, ethnicity, and age (Desai, 1996; Galjart, 1995; Kelsall & Mercer, 2003; Cleaver & Hamada, 2010; Das, 2014; Mandara et al., 2017).

Overlooking the complexity and structural deficits within these communities can lead to the exclusion of certain groups from participation (Puri & Sahay, 2007; Shortall, 2008; Shrestha & Clement, 2019). The construction of local communities as a homogeneous group means that participatory projects only reach a subset of their intended beneficiaries: those who have sufficient means and capacities to participate (Singh, 2006; Das, 2014; Mandara et al., 2017). This type of bias often results in the exclusion of vulnerable and marginalized groups, who are unable to participate in a project due to a lack of resources, education, or other factors. Addressing the question of who was able to participate, Wiebe's (2000) case study of a Guatemalan community project showed that participation appeared to respond mainly to the interests of a community's middle class. The poorest people, due to daily subsistence demands, could not attend frequent group meetings, or spend their limited time and resources learning skills that were not immediately profitable. This, effectively, excluded them from active participation. In a similar fashion, Singh's (2006, 2008) research on female participation in a water governance project showed that the Indian caste system prevented women from the lower strata from accessing water resources in upper caste localities, where most public sources were located. These empirical findings suggest that participatory projects that fail to consider the social differences among participants in terms of class, caste, and religion may end up reinforcing social and economic hierarchies rather than transforming them.

The same effect is produced when gender inequality and gender norms in local communities are left unaddressed in participatory program design. Several researchers (O'Reilly, 2004; Todes et al., 2010; Das, 2014; Masanyiwa et al., 2014) have problematized how local customs and gender ideology can determine or interfere with women's participation. Domestic work and childcare responsibilities, for example, could prevent many women from attending training sessions located far away from their homes (Wiebe, 2000). Even when participation is possible, gender ideology dictates the extent to which women can meaningfully engage in these projects; Shortall (2008), for example, showed that the dominant male norms in a Northern Irish community alienated women from presenting development initiatives, since they felt that to

get funding they needed to go to extraordinary lengths to prove the value of their work. Furthermore, Mandara and colleagues (2017) cited a case of a woman withdrawing from her role in community leadership to protect her marriage, showing how gender-based power dynamics within the household may inhibit women from participating in public life. Along the same lines, Cleaver and Hamada (2010) illuminated how gender is intertwined with other dimensions of inequality, such as caste or wealth, and advocated for a more holistic view when assessing inclusion and exclusion in participatory development.

Together, the above studies suggest that failure to take into account the heterogeneity of local communities—in particular, diversity within groups and the ways in which different social locations impact people's capacities to participate—can hinder the intention to empower in participatory programs. Moreover, they urge us to consider that the designers or practitioners of participatory programs may have deeply divergent epistemologies, meanings, and values from those of local communities, leading to a sizeable gap between "global ideas" and "local translations" (Schnegg & Linke, 2016, p. 800). These differences, in addition to knowledge gaps and skills gaps, contribute to contention in participatory practices and compromise the empowerment goals underlying the projects (Sabiescu et al., 2014). Failure to take into account the existing power dynamics or the nuances of local beliefs and customs can lead to participatory practices not being perceived as legitimate or meaningful by local stakeholders, making it difficult for them to invest in the project or trust its intentions (Eversole, 2003).

Furthermore, assumptions regarding what participation should look like in practice can also yield unintended effects. The notion that participation means attending and speaking in group meetings, for instance, may not be in line with a local context where access to public spaces is not available to certain groups of people (Mosse, 1994; Singh, 2006; Jones, 2011). Failing to take into account the norms and practices in local contexts can lead to a "lost in translation" issue, where community participants perceive their involvement as labor rather than as empowerment or taking ownership (Kelsall & Mercer, 2003). When participation models are applied to a setting in which values and cultural tendencies contrast greatly with their fundamental premises, participants are put into a position of having to act in ways incompatible with their cultural norms (Platteau & Abraham, 2002; Rodloytuk, 2007; Ngai, 2017).

Consequently, participatory interventions present a number of paradoxes (Kelsall & Mercer, 2003; Jones, 2011; Sabiescu et al., 2014; Enns et al., 2015). A particularly alarming aspect of these projects is that, despite their intention to empower communities and bring sustainable livelihoods, they tend to reinforce dependency instead (Nagar & Raju, 2003; Vincent, 2004; Kirmse, 2009; Sahoo, 2013; Y. Yang, 2016; Ngai, 2017). As a result, these projects—however sincere their intentions—fail not only to achieve their empowerment objectives, but also risk disempowering their beneficiaries (Cleaver, 1999;

Kelsall & Mercer, 2003; Toomey, 2011). This paradox was clearly demonstrated in Sahoo's (2013) research on an NGO development project in India. Although the NGO included local people in its development projects to promote awareness and sustainability, it was later discovered that participation in these activities did not translate into participants becoming aware of development. In contrast, local participation was contingent on concrete incentives like employment, and people stopped participating once those incentives ceased to exist. Sahoo (2013) also pointed out that the presence of development professionals in these projects undermined participation and disempowered the local beneficiaries, who tended to focus on issues they believed these experts would approve of rather than what they personally thought was urgent or important. By constantly telling people how to fix their problems, these experts took on the "provider" role (see Toomey, 2011) and created conditions that required sustained intervention, thereby increasing dependency in the target communities instead of empowering them and making them self-sufficient.

This section reveals the contradictions that underlie participatory development and critically examines previous studies that have problematized its practices. Even though participatory development seeks to meet the needs of beneficiary communities, it seems oblivious to inequality issues rooted in local conditions that negatively affect people's capacity to participate. It is common for participatory programs to be designed with preconceived ideas and a limited understanding of local structures and cultural norms, resulting in projects that do not adequately reflect community needs. Moreover, this approach to development also perpetuates the idea that local communities cannot meaningfully participate in the development process without external intervention, disregarding both their knowledge and experience. This undermines the agency of local actors, further entrenches the existing power dynamics between them and practitioners, and perpetuates the idea of paternalistic development. In such situations, participatory initiatives are often ineffective and fail to produce the desired results, while causing long-term problems such as increased dependency.

The above studies raise questions as to whether external interventions can lead to autonomous responses by individuals. If the goal is to instill autonomy in beneficiaries, the assumption that external forces can create this condition seems counterproductive. Furthermore, this body of literature shows that any external intervention should be tailored to the specific needs of the beneficiary community. This is done by taking into consideration existing social, cultural, and economic dynamics, as well as acknowledging the role of local actors in participatory development processes. The following section examines the literature that explores the role played by local participants in shaping participatory development, while acknowledging the relevant social and political dynamics that may hamper or enhance their involvement.

2.4 Local agency in participation

The previous section has examined how participation is addressed in development aid contexts, focusing particularly on the underlying assumptions and related paradoxes. It is clear from the above studies that local communities are far from homogeneous groups; rather, they are divided along the lines of class, gender, ethnicity, and religion. The recognition that local beneficiaries are heterogeneous makes inquiries regarding who is participating in the process, whose interests are at stake, and what extent local actors have in negotiating their own interests relevant.

Previous studies have pointed out the problem of participation projects being hijacked by elites (Platteau & Abraham, 2002; Kelsall & Mercer, 2003; Jones, 2011; Samanta & Nayak, 2015; Schnegg & Linke, 2016; Wahid et al., 2017). Since participatory methods are based on assumptions about a unitary local community and what participation looks like, they can only promote the voices and values of those whose identities most align with such assumptions, such as the most articulate, educated, or accessible members of a community (Hayward et al., 2004; Funder, 2010; Coelho & Favareto, 2010; Watkins et al., 2012; Mahé, 2018). Voices outside of these preconceived formulations are disregarded, while the illusion of inclusion is maintained. As shown, participatory programs that fail to take into account these assumptions run the risk of merely providing opportunities for the powerful, reproducing the existing socio-political structures they aim to transform, and excluding vulnerable groups from access to development resources (Hildyard et al., 2001; Hayward et al., 2004; Singh, 2008; Cleaver & Hamada, 2010). In some cases, exclusion can be quite subtle; for instance, participants might share their knowledge about project recruitment with friends and family only (Funder, 2010; Platteau & Abraham, 2002; Samanta & Nayak, 2015). In other cases, exclusion becomes confrontational, such as when participants refuse to accept new members and deny them access to project resources (Wiebe, 2000).

These studies confirm S. White's (1996, p. 154) observation that "people are not a blank sheet for development agencies to write on what they will." As in the aforementioned examples (Wiebe, 2000; Platteau & Abraham, 2002; Singh, 2006, 2008; Funder, 2010), local participants can actively reserve resources for themselves and for their social networks, thereby effectively turning participatory development into exclusionary practices. This suggests that the agency, motivation, and impact of local participants is a notion worth investigating if we aim to understand how participatory programs manifest in practice, as well as the extent to which they actually contribute to community development. Research on participation, however, has traditionally focused on what development agencies have done and should have done (e.g., Watkins et al., 2012), while neglecting the potential contributions of local actors. While the heterogeneity of local communities has long been recognized as a point to consider (see e.g., Cornwall, 2003, 2008; Hildyard et al., 2001; Mohan, 2007;

Eriksson Baaz, 2008), it is rarely viewed as an opportunity for further analysis. As a follow-up to this argument, this section examines two studies by Chandrasekhar (2012) and Funder (2010) that revealed the complexity of participation at the local level.

An analysis by Chandrasekhar (2012) of NGO participatory projects focused on helping three Indian coastal villages recover after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami revealed how participation changes over time when local conditions and stakeholders' needs and capacities change. Chandrasekhar (2012) found that NGO projects are often not engaging for local participants, particularly those with a distrust of existing institutions; these participants chose to participate in NGO projects after the disaster, however, to utilize the limited resources available. Their participation in the recovery project decreased a few months after the tsunami as their priorities changed. As this study suggests, changes in conditions can dictate people's interests and capacity to participate.

Taking into account that people are different in their approaches to participation as a result of their changing needs and capacities means recognizing them as actors with specific interests, motivations, and interpretations of the participatory development process, rather than "passive subjects waiting for development to be done for them" (Kelsall & Mercer, 2003, p. 299). This opens a space for studying how stakeholders negotiate their roles and influence at different stages of the participation process. An ethnography conducted by Funder (2010) on a Thai village's participatory project illuminated how the level of influence of local actors changed throughout the process. At first, they acted merely as gatekeepers, connecting NGO field workers with households they deemed "good enough" to participate in the development effort. Once they engaged in the project's activities, they strategically utilized its resources to maximize their own economic interests, shifting the project away from the communitarian goal intended by the NGO development workers. Through their involvement, these local actors significantly reshaped participation both in terms of breadth and content, regardless of whether they used adaptation, confrontation, or subversion strategies.

Both examples above show that participation may not be an externally controlled process; by referring to it as "the new tyranny" (see Cooke & Kothari, 2001, p. 3)—a position commonly held by post-development scholars—critics have failed to acknowledge the role of local actors in shaping the process. These local actors, when briefly mentioned in the participation literature, are mainly present to highlight the complexity of community structures and hierarchies (e.g., Wiebe, 2000; Kelsall & Mercer, 2003; J. Labbé et al., 2015) or to expose unequal power relations between development workers and their beneficiaries (e.g., Eriksson Baaz, 2008; J. Labbé et al., 2015; Toomey, 2011). Rarely are they depicted as actors with their own meaning-making and personal motivations for taking part in development projects (exceptions can be found in Funder, 2010; Chandrasekhar, 2012; Rye & Vold, 2019). As these aforementioned empirical cases show, the most transformational intentions

can come to a halt when intended beneficiaries decide not to participate (e.g., Chandrasekhar, 2012), or when powerful interest groups within the community use the well-meaning efforts of development projects for their own ends (e.g., Wiebe, 2000; Funder, 2010), preventing others from participating (see also Cornwall, 2008; Jones, 2011).

Taking a close look at local communities means asking how these actors interpret the participation process, and what motivates them to engage or to disengage. Meaning-making and motivation, however, seldom receive attention in the literature of participation. This silence can be attributed to the assumption that people will participate because it is good for them or because it is socially responsible (Cleaver, 1999). Problematizing this assumption naturally leads to a series of questions: Why do local actors participate at all, and how do they make sense of their participation? Are they motivated by economic incentives, communitarian goals, or some other rationales? What impact do these motivations have on the outcome of participation throughout the course of the projects, and how do they shape the interpretation of participatory development initiatives? The following section examines the few previous studies on the motivations of local actors involved in participatory development.

2.5 Motivations in participation

Previously, I reviewed the limited studies on local agency in participation and argued that we need to problematize the reasons that motivate local actors to participate. Motivation, as Eversole (2003, p. 792) observed, is "one of the least-understood areas of development practice." The few studies that have attempted to address this topic identify two types of incentives: economic and emotional. While economic rationales often dominate social norms as a basis for explaining participation motivation, both incentives seem to be fleeting and context-dependent.

Economic incentives and livelihood have been cited most frequently as explanations for local participation (Funder, 2010; Montanari, 2012; Sahoo, 2013; Y. Yang, 2016; Rye & Vold, 2019). Several development projects were implemented in regions of extreme poverty where many of the beneficiaries lacked stable employment; thus, these projects were perceived as a way to generate income and maintain livelihoods (Wiebe, 2000; Sahoo, 2013; Montanari & Bergh, 2014). Economic incentives can be seen as a means to support the local communities' material condition and hence perceived as empowering (Rye & Vold, 2019); for these local actors, participation became a unique opportunity to improve their living conditions and fulfil aspirations for themselves and their families (Montanari & Bergh, 2014). However, reliance on economic incentives also meant that many considered participation to be a

means to an end, and terminated their involvement once resources or income were no longer available (Sahoo, 2013).

Interestingly, Funder (2010) showed that people participate to gain access to project resources, which they can later use for individual gain. Resources in this case refer to not only material goods but also knowledge and opportunities to expand one's social network. As the project in question took place in a location where Thai Buddhist and Thai Muslim communities coexisted, the tension and separation between these two communities manifested itself in the subtle way in which participants only distributed information about the project resources to members of their own ethno-religious communities. This not only skewed participation in terms of ethnicity and religion, but also distanced the project from its intended communitarian goal. Funder (2010) concluded that as local actors take ownership of a project, they can strategically redefine the institutional framework of participation in ways that maximize their own benefits rather than using what was obtained via the project for communal purposes.

Research has also examined how emotions can encourage or maintain participation. Trust has been identified as a significant factor in predicting people's motivation to participate in development projects (Angeles & Gurstein, 2000; Eversole, 2003; O'Reilly, 2011; Chandrasekhar, 2012). Cooperation itself does not necessarily foster trust between the implementing agencies and local participants (Cornwall, 2008); rather, development practitioners may find themselves perceived as untrustworthy, illegitimate outsiders by the local community they aim to help (Eversole, 2003). In low-trust societies, it can be difficult to motivate people to participate in development projects, as many question the legitimacy of development organizations and existing social structures (Angeles & Gurstein, 2000; Eversole, 2003). When development practitioners fail to deliver concrete results that benefit the entire community rather than just the elites, local participants may lose trust in them (Montanari & Bergh, 2014) or feel exploited and alienated (Szczepanikova, 2010; Rye & Vold, 2019). In such contexts, NGO development workers must cultivate trust through emotional labor in their interactions with the local participants. For example, O'Reilly (2011) highlighted that the need to ensure villagers' participation in NGO projects requires NGO workers to exhibit empathy in their interactions with villagers, and even to "change your personality so that people will believe in you" (O'Reilly, 2011, p. 220). This emotional management, to the point of engaging in "deep acting" (see Hochschild, 1979) as highlighted in the previous quote, is necessary for these practitioners to form and maintain a personal bond with local residents, which in turn creates a sense of obligation for these residents to participate and help the NGO project move forward.

Once again, the discussion of trust illustrates how one cannot assume that people will want to participate purely for the sake of participation or because they (somehow) perceive participation to be beneficial. In fact, the findings of

these above studies suggest the opposite: local participants are suspicious of participatory development, worrying that they are being taken advantage of, and will not get involved unless certain incentives (whether economic or emotional) are provided (Angeles & Gurstein, 2000; Funder, 2010; Eversole, 2003; Sahoo, 2013; Rye & Vold, 2019). And while people do acknowledge that participation gives them access to economic and social capital, they also think it entails opportunity costs (Mosse, 2004; O'Reilly, 2010, 2011). Accordingly, this suggests that local actors' motivation for becoming involved and maintaining participation should not be taken for granted. Problematizing motivations requires us to examine the different meanings that local actors attach to participatory development in relation to the local context, their social relations with NGO workers and other participants, and their individual needs for respect. Using this lens, development scholars can gain a deeper understanding of how local actors approach and shape participation.

Shifting the attention away from external implementers, such as development agencies, and turning toward local actors to illuminate the outcome of participation, it is worthwhile to acknowledge the local context in which participation processes unfold. Given that the empirical context of my study is Vietnam, it is necessary to address how the country's political setting, as an authoritarian regime, may pose challenges for local participation in development projects, especially when this process involves civil society actors such as NGOs. The next section will review previous research on participatory development under authoritarian regimes to situate this study in this body of literature. A more thorough examination of the study's context can be found in Chapter 3, where the historical development of Vietnam's civil society and its relations with the authoritarian state will be brought into focus.

2.6 Participation in authoritarian settings

This section is a review of previous studies examining citizen participation in authoritarian contexts. Prior to zooming in on this, the section outlines a number of general findings from previous studies related to the complex dynamics between the state and civil society in authoritarian countries to help contextualize strategies and practices employed by civil society organizations (CSOs) when they develop and execute their development initiatives under authoritarianism.

Research on development endeavors in authoritarian settings constitutes a vast body of literature in which the roles of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and global civil society networks are often highlighted. This is because the inclusion of citizens in these authoritarian regimes in democratic decision-making processes is often associated with INGO-led and foreign-funded development programs aimed at promoting social welfare and democracy in new and emerging democracies (Hyde et al., 2023; H. Li &

Farid, 2023; Bush, 2015). Many of these INGO-led programs, including civic education initiatives, community dialogues, and civil society support, can be construed as forms of "indirect democracy promotion" (Grimm & Leininger, 2012, p. 396), aimed at encouraging citizens to participate in politics and empowering them to demand accountability from their governments (Lawson & Epstein, 2019). This, inadvertently, appears as a threat to the authoritarian state's legitimacy, leading to a situation in which these organizations must balance the goal of supporting democratization against the reality of working under a political regime that may find the nature of their work threatening (Spires & Dai, 2018; H. Li & Farid, 2023; Hyde et al., 2023).

A significant dimension of this literature, consequently, deals with patterns of relations between the authoritarian states and civil society actors (e.g., Spires, 2020; Toepler et al., 2020; K. M. Yang & Alpermann, 2014). In these contexts, CSOs find themselves "embedded in a web of bureaucratic practices and legal codes which allows those in power to monitor and regulate collective activities" (Wiktorowicz, 2000, p. 43; S. Li, 2020; Spires, 2020), with the state's infrastructure serving to restrict their autonomy (Wischermann et al., 2018). These studies have highlighted the precarious position of CSOs in the face of authoritarian practices of restriction and suppression (H. Li & Farid, 2023). There is, of course, a difference between the threat experienced by an INGO, which is registered in one country and has programs and offices in other countries, and that experienced by a local NGO registered under the authoritarian regime. For the former, dealing with authoritarian regimes involves debating whether "to stay or to exit" these countries (H. Li & Farid, 2023, p. 512). For the latter, the threat extends to closure of the organizations or even imprisonment of the organization's leadership (Sidel, 2023). This distinction is often not made clear in this body of literature, however.

The recognition of the precarity experienced by CSOs in authoritarian regimes has raised a growing concern among scholars: Do the constraints under which they operate have implications for the effectiveness of their projects (Bush, 2015; Hyde et al., 2023; Noakes & Teets, 2020)? Since these organizations do not want to jeopardize the safety of their staff or risk expulsion from the host country (Hayton, 2020; H. Li & Farid, 2023), when it comes to development projects pursued in authoritarian nations, there is a strong incentive for development professionals to pursue programs that are "regime compatible," avoiding direct challenges to or confrontations with authoritarian rule (Hyde et al., 2023, p. 1030; Bush, 2015; Morgan, 2016). This is a legitimate strategy to ensure the survival of their projects, but it also prompts the inquiry that if the goal of such projects is to promote democracy or empower the citizens to get more involved in political conversations, then this objective would be compromised due to external constraints. This resonates with Grimm and Leininger's (2012) investigation, which emphasized that, in general, when it comes to peace building and democracy building in post-conflict and authoritarian societies, there is an overall lack of strategies for addressing intrinsic

conflicts and also for embedding democracy promotion efficiently. The strategy, rather, has been to handle the matter with an uncoordinated, "wait and see" approach (Grimm & Leininger, 2012, p. 408).

While the above studies have pointed to a trend toward stagnation or suggested an outcome detrimental to the democratization process, in practice, CSOs can adopt flexible strategies to exert change, even under repressive conditions (Crotty, 2009, Frölich, 2012; Hsu, 2010; de Souza, 2010; Henderson, 2011; Dai & Spires, 2018; A. N. Vũ, 2019). Even when the survival of CSOs operating under an authoritarian state's control depends on their relationship with the government, they can work toward their goals in two main ways.

First, these organizations can act as subcontractors to assist the state in providing social services to its citizens (Crotty, 2009; Hsu, 2010; Fröhlich, 2012). In doing so, they make their work transparent to public authorities (K. M. Yang & Alpermann, 2014), and in some cases, even let state officials claim credit for their work (Spires, 2011). Under state influence, it is often the case that INGOs work with policymakers and local NGOs with solid government affiliations rather than with citizens and grassroots organizations, developing pilot projects to influence state policy (Noakes & Teets, 2020). Adopting this approach of "not blaming but assisting the government" (Dai & Spires, 2018, p. 75) is one of the ways CSOs can skillfully embed themselves within the structure of the authoritarian state and assert their influence under restrictive circumstances.

A second strategy is to frame their advocacy carefully, adopting a "meticulously calculated and technocratic approach" to social change (Faludi, 2016, p. 6; K. M. Yang & Alpermann, 2014). Instead of overtly opposing the state, CSOs take steps to appear non-confrontational, such as adopting a "behind the scenes" role in activism (A. N. Vũ, 2019, p. 436; Fröhlich, 2012) or launching non-protest forms of activism (de Souza, 2010; Faludi, 2016; Y. Mai, 2022). In these cases, local NGOs provide citizens with the necessary resources to help them act without getting involved directly with their activities (A. N. Vũ, 2019). Social change can also be achieved through less visible means, such as raising awareness of a community issue by engaging youth in educational campaigns and workshops (Oosterhoof et al., 2014; Y. Mai, 2022).

Due to the strategies employed by civil society organizations within authoritarian regimes, a pertinent question arises when examining citizen participation in such contexts: Does participation possess the potential to facilitate democratic reforms? This question does not have a clear-cut answer (see Armony, 2004; Brancati, 2014; Ciftci & Bernick, 2015; Hyde et al., 2023). Some scholars have maintained that participation in CSO initiatives has the potential to enable citizens, especially those with higher levels of education, to voice their demands and facilitate democratization (Ciftci & Bernick, 2015). In fact, significant social change has taken place thanks to this form of participation (see, e.g., Q. P. Phạm, 2022 on the Vietnamese LGBTQ movement). Others remain skeptical; as Mahé (2018, p. 233) aptly noted, the outcome of

participation in authoritarian settings can be ambiguous: "potentially threatening—as it can be connected to democratic ideals—but also a resource—a tool for domination." Put differently, there is mixed opinion on the relationship between participation in CSO projects and democracy in authoritarian contexts, where the outcomes of these projects are contingent upon the complexities and contestation in the local environment (Y. Yang, 2016; K. M. Yang & Alpermann, 2014). Furthermore, projects involving citizen's participation can also be employed by the state to consult with its citizens. When the boundary between civil society and the state is not clear-cut, authoritarian regimes can make use of participatory development efforts to promote their own agenda.

In the view of many scholars (e.g., Teets et al., 2022; Giersdorf & Croissant, 2011; Yabanci, 2019), participation is often used by authoritarian regimes as a means of co-optation and control, thereby strengthening authoritarianism instead of challenging it. As Hyde and colleagues (2023) have suggested, regimes can use citizen engagement and the appearance of procedural democracy to strengthen a democratic façade, potentially stifling bottom-up and grassroots demands for democratization. Another theory is that the incorporation of the participation element in development projects can distract local actors from their everyday problems (Gourgues et al., 2013), resulting in them being resigned to their circumstances rather than challenging existing structural inequality. In this context, the state can also leverage cultural norms to motivate citizens' participation, and the successful implementation of participatory projects by the state can enhance trust between local communities and the state (Mahé, 2018). Moreover, the "empowerment" discourse underpinning participatory development practices can also be used to transfer responsibility from the state to local communities, holding disadvantaged groups accountable for their own development. This absolves the state of any accountability or obligation to make changes that would resolve underlying structural problems (Cornwall & Brock, 2005; Leal, 2007). Consequently, participation can be used to depoliticize development and further reinforce the status quo.

In terms of political change, previous findings have also suggested that participation can lead to the co-optation of social movements in authoritarian regimes: the state can utilize such channels to identify and manage sources of societal discontent (Brancati, 2014). This includes identifying emerging community leaders and turning them "from challengers into defenders" of the regime (Giersdorf & Croissant, 2011, p. 5; Yabanci, 2019; Case, 2009). The motivation of those participating in civil society networks is also worth noting here: many see civic participation as a means to an end and participate merely to gain access to material benefits and expand their networks. In the Arab world, participation can be used as a venue for utilizing clientelist networks that help authoritarian regimes survive and maintain control of society (Ciftci & Bernick, 2015). In Qatar, those who engage in civic participation are most often believers in the status quo who are seeking access to patronage networks,

rather than those desiring change (Gengler et al., 2013). Similarly, Giersdorf and Croissant (2011) showed that members of Malaysia's urban middle class have emerged as leaders in civil society projects and are being groomed as pro-government leaders by the regime, while Teets and colleagues (2022) revealed that participants can signal their leadership skills to the regime through participation. In other words, instead of promoting democracy, civic participation may allow an authoritarian regime to exert greater control over emerging leaders (Yabanci, 2019), channel the direction of civil society toward perpetuating existing social structures, and prevent the formation of any meaningful organized opposition.

As a whole, these studies show how civil society and the state are intertwined in authoritarian settings: while citizens can, through participation in civil society programs, express their discontent and push for democratic values, there is strong evidence that such participation can reinforce rather than challenge authoritarianism. Furthermore, these studies indicate that participatory development initiatives implemented by CSOs are constantly subject to the multifacetedness and contingencies of their local environment. Under repressive conditions, the success of such efforts depends heavily on the organizations' ability to navigate these complexities and establish good relations with state officials. Therefore, it is imperative to question not only whether civil society participation in such conditions can actually contribute to social development and social change, but how participation manifests itself in such contexts, taking into account the relevance of cultural norms and political constraints.

2.7 Youth approach to participation

This section addresses existing literature on young people's participation in participatory development programs in light of this study's focus on youth participation. Many development agencies targeting children and young people place a high value on youth participation, and the rhetoric of youth as agents of change remains at the core of their policies (Ansell, 2016; Bersaglio et al., 2015; Rye & Vold, 2019; Hart, 2008a). However, the extent to which these programs can encourage meaningful participation among young people remains controversial for a variety of reasons.

First, several scholars have observed that youth participation processes are often driven by the goals and purposes of adults or local elites rather than young people's own desires (Azmi et al., 2013; Kallio & Häkli, 2013; Morgan, 2016; Skelton, 2010; Björnsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2018). Even when young people are included in participatory development, their involvement remains superficial due to this "ambiguous agency" (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012, p. 365; Rye & Vold, 2019). In contrast to the initial goal of contributing to democratic citizenship, this sort of superficial engagement can result in youth

dissatisfaction and diminished trust (Spires, 2018), as well as a failure to achieve meaningful change in young people's lives (Morgan, 2016). This adult-centered approach to development also further reinforces the notion that young people lack the knowledge, skills, and experience needed to effectively participate in development initiatives, thus undermining their potential to contribute.

Second, scholars have also warned of the danger of depoliticized development, where the emphasis is placed on empowerment and capacity-building rather than advocating for structural changes or social transformation (see, for example, Cornwall & Brock, 2005; Morgan, 2016). As a result of depoliticized development, youth are deterred from engaging in political reflection (Eliasoph, 2011; Hart, 2008b). As Eliasoph (2011) explained, development programs have a tendency to suppress disagreements and controversy in favor of uncontroversial outputs that may appeal to donors. These sorts of programs train young people to concentrate solely on technical skills, such as taking notes and running meetings; consequently, the youth involved in them fail to connect their participation with larger political issues. The risk of depoliticized development is even more evident in authoritarian settings, where many youth programs are state-funded (Spires, 2018) and can be used as devices by the state to manipulate young people's ideological preferences, to the extent of preventing contentious youth activism (Yabanci, 2019). Development agencies also want to avoid being perceived as troublemakers in contexts where political contestation is prohibited by the government (Morgan, 2016), leading them to implement participatory programs that steer clear of engaging with young people's political views or reflections on global inequality (Hart, 2008b). Rather, most of their activities focus on changing young people's behaviors (Morgan, 2016), grounded in a narrative that constructs youth as problematic or delinquent (Southon & Pralhad, 2003). Instead of empowering youth to challenge the status quo or participate in political dialogue, these programs emphasize individual behavioral change by promoting "responsible citizenship" (Morgan, 2016) or self-responsibility and self-governance (Zhan, 2016). In addition to failing to change the position of disadvantaged youth or bring about structural change in society (Morgan, 2016), this approach fails to consider the influence of donors and policies designed in the global North on the social and economic prospects of youth in the global South (Hart, 2008b). Furthermore, the neoliberal belief that citizens should solve social problems on an individual basis, rather than through a state-led approach, leads to an uncritical acceptance of neoliberal values and global governance (Zhan, 2016).

Third, it must be noted that young people themselves often lack sufficient resources, knowledge, power, and social capital to effect changes (Rye & Vold, 2019). Cultures that enforce gerontocracy also prevent youth from speaking up, making decisions, or even having opinions about certain issues (Björnsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2018; Jørgensen, 2018). This bars them from

participation in processes that have real political consequences, which tends to favor people who are well-organized and have strong connections to key actors in civil society or the state (Coelho & von Lieres, 2010). Their agency is, in other words, restricted to their social space, which for many in the Global South is characterized by a general awareness of political repression, state violence, and curtailed freedom of speech (Abdou & Skalli, 2018; Azmi et al., 2013). The lack of security and their vulnerability to authoritarianism make it difficult for youth to engage in meaningful civic engagement, and participation in civil society initiatives can even provoke resistance or discouragement from friends and family (Abdou & Skalli, 2018; Y. Mai, 2022).

Young people's participation can be used by adults to serve their own interests, and their inclusion in development projects can be merely symbolic (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). However, this does not mean that youth cannot utilize the participation process in a way that suits their interests. Instead, youth should be regarded as purposeful agents with their own goals and initiatives, "hustling for [their] rights" (Jørgensen, 2018, p. 141) and expressing their desires and discontent (Laine et al., 2018) in ways that may differ from how development agencies and donors envision the process (Rye & Vold, 2019).

In development projects, youth can pursue their own agendas in terms of utilizing opportunities available to them to obtain their share of resources (Rye & Vold, 2019; Kallio & Häkli, 2013). There is evidence that young people can engage in self-promotion through participation (Yabanci, 2019; Kirmse, 2009; Björnsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2018); for instance, an investigation of youth participation in a donor-funded youth space in southern Kyrgyzstan showed that these youth perceived participation as "getting a ticket to the West" (Kirmse, 2009, p. 296). Young people can, furthermore, advance their career paths through participation, whether by learning critical skills that will help them get a good job (Björnsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2018) or by signaling their leadership skills to powerful actors (Yabanci, 2019).

Youth participation in development projects is not always motivated by self-promotion. As Nagel and Staeheli (2015) demonstrated, youth can use these venues to develop their own political projects that differ from those promoted by development agencies. This process enables them to become active actors in their local communities—something that Rye and Vold (2019) have characterized as a type of counterpower articulated as resistance to adults' control. Skelton (2010), in a similar fashion, illustrated how young people can create a different kind of politics even in their limited spaces, urging scholars to consider youth's creative political agency. As part of this process, youth can make use of their participation in development activities to challenge the generational and gendered hierarchy in their societies (Jørgensen, 2018). Furthermore, they can develop flexible strategies for entering and exiting political spaces, as well as search for alternative channels to direct their ambitions for change, and alternative spaces that embody their values and vision (Abdou & Skalli, 2018; Laine et al., 2018).

Even if participation does not lead to political or social change, studies show that they still have positive affective outcomes for young people who get involved, producing a form of "sustainable pleasure" (Efird, 2015, p. 1152; Kirmse, 2009; Morgan, 2016). Such satisfaction can stem from increased knowledge and self-confidence (Ansell, 2005; Björnsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2018; Abdou & Skalli, 2018), or better citizenship skills (Teets et al., 2022). Moreover, as Efird (2015) has shown, participation in community-based projects can enhance youth's affection for their own hometowns. Young people can also utilize donor-funded youth spaces as meeting grounds to spend time with friends and engage in youth subcultural activities without the fear of repercussions for breaking communal norms (Kirmse, 2009). Participation, in other words, offers these youth the opportunity to experience freedom from everyday expectations and increase their autonomy.

This section reviews previous literature on youth participation and identifies several factors that can potentially hinder it. These factors include a lack of inclusion in decision-making, youth's limited access to resources, and the tendency for development programs to be designed from the perspective of adults or elites. Furthermore, the literature reveals a problem with participatory development efforts, which focus primarily on changing youth behaviors without addressing structural and systemic problems. Even so, these barriers do not prevent young people from carving out a niche for themselves and utilizing participation to advance their own interests. These findings demonstrate that young people are creative actors whose strategies and desires intimately shape the outcome of participatory development projects, whether they are striving for self-promotion, developing their own initiatives, or simply finding a space where they can experience freedom, pleasure, and a sense of belonging.

2.8 Concluding remarks

This chapter presents a review of previous research on participatory development, highlighting how the concept of "participation" has been a subject of scrutiny due to its ambiguous conceptualization, underlying assumptions, and paradoxical outcomes. This body of literature primarily focuses on the techniques and objectives employed by development agencies, reflecting a top-down research approach, while lacking investigations into the contributions of local actors themselves. It is important to note that local participants are far from a homogeneous group, and the failure of development agencies to acknowledge their diversity and complexity may explain why many participatory development projects fail to achieve their intended goals. An exploration of participation, therefore, must include an understanding of these local participants as independent agents who may or may not share the same perspective on participation as development agencies.

Building on this argument, this chapter presents a review of prior scholarship that investigates the strategies and motivations of local actors engaging in participatory development programs. These studies suggest that a nuanced examination of motivations should consider the different meanings that local actors attach to their participation, taking into consideration local norms, social relationships with other stakeholders, and the capacities shaped by structural conditions. This review highlights the finding that people's motivations for partaking in participatory development should not be taken for granted. In other words, while there is an assumption in participatory development that people want to participate simply for the sake of participation, in practice, local actors may question the legitimacy of these projects, and need concrete incentives or convincing before agreeing to join. This, consequently, requires development agencies to cultivate trust in local communities to encourage their participation. This finding further highlights the need for more studies examining local motivation in participatory development. However, this scholarly discussion remains limited and fragmented across various contexts.

Given the focus of this study on youth participation within an authoritarian state, this chapter also delves into the literature on participation in authoritarian settings. Existing research on participation in authoritarian contexts presents mixed evidence regarding the relationship between participation, citizens' perceptions of the authoritarian state, and democracy. This complexity arises from the intricate interplay between civil society and the state in such settings, whereby CSOs must operate under restrictions and constraints to ensure their own survival. Given that civil society groups must ensure that their activities are in line with state policies, the outcomes of participation in civil society projects in this setting can range from promising social change to the reinforcement of authoritarian rule. Furthermore, this literature highlights that while citizen participation can provide an avenue for expressing discontent and advocating for democratic values, it can also unintentionally reinforce authoritarianism or serve as a tool to legitimize the regime.

Finally, the literature review zooms in on studies of youth participation in development projects and activities. It shows that in societies that uphold generational hierarchies, barriers such as development programs designed from adult or elite perspectives and limited youth access to resources can impede youth participation. Additionally, youth participatory development tends to prioritize changing youth behaviors without addressing underlying structural and systemic issues. Despite these challenges, young people often find ways to carve out spaces for themselves to advance their interests, whether through self-promotion, developing their own initiatives, or simply seeking joy and a sense of belonging.

This existing body of research provides mixed evidence regarding the democratic potential of participation in civil society projects in authoritarian settings and offers limited clarity as to how youth engage in this process. This recognition of gaps in the literature underscores the need for further

investigation, which is where my research contributes. Acknowledging these gaps opens up opportunities to study the role of local youth participants in shaping participatory development in contemporary Vietnam.

Moreover, this review emphasizes that participatory development initiatives carried out by CSOs face local environmental complexities, contingencies, and disputes, particularly in repressive conditions. Therefore, it is essential to not only question whether civil society participation under such conditions contributes to social development and change, but also to understand how participation manifests itself in these contexts, considering the influence of cultural norms. This acknowledgement highlights the significance of examining the historical-cultural context of participation. This will be addressed in Chapter 3, where the political and cultural landscape of Vietnam from a historical perspective is explored in depth.

3. Context: Vietnam's historical development and state-civil society relations

This chapter serves to contextualize and explain the current state of civil society in Vietnam within the context of a one-party regime. It does so by tracing the trajectory of Vietnam's civil society in relation to its history through three sections.

The first section outlines Vietnam's long development process. It begins by introducing Vietnam's extensive and brutal history of wars and colonialization, along with the significant impact this history has had on the country's economic, cultural, and social development. In the first half of this section, Vietnam's historical encounters with China, France, and the United States are examined. The next half sheds light on Vietnam's post-war development following independence in 1975 and the introduction of market-based reform (Đổi Mới) in 1986. It addresses the economic and societal challenges facing the country after independence and illuminates how the Đổi Mới reform contributed to the country's development process through a wide range of economic, social, and institutional changes, intimately shaping relations between the state and civil society in Vietnam.

The second section of this chapter traces the foundation of Vietnamese civil society in the country's long and complex history. This is accomplished by reviewing different cultural elements and historical events in Vietnam's history that resemble civil society in spirit, such as Vietnamese traditional values that emphasize patriotism and solidarity (e.g., Q. T. N. Nguyễn, 2016; Jamieson, 1995), or Vietnamese social movements during the colonial period (Gadkar-Wilcox, 2014a). These established the foundation for modern Vietnamese civil society and show that civil society functioned in Vietnam long before the development process, even if it did not take the same form that Global North scholars who write about civil society (e.g., Putnam, 2000; Alexander, 2006) often envision.

The third section illuminates current conditions, turning the gaze to the relations between the state and civil society in Vietnam. This section opens the black box of authoritarianism (Malesky, 2021), revealing how the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) maintains control of the public sphere and how civil society actors can maneuver inside this authoritarian regime.

By progressing through these steps, this chapter aims to situate the study within Vietnam's socio-political and historical development, whereby the

notion of civil society takes on a wide range of meanings. It sets the stage for the following chapter on theory, which will provide deeper theoretical conceptualization to define what civil society means in this particular investigation.

3.1. Revisiting history: wars, colonialism, and the road to development

Vietnamese history is marked by a long and complex series of invasions, colonization, and wars, as well as ideological struggles shaped by the Cold War. This section situates Vietnam in this extensive history in terms of its road toward development.

3.1.1 Vietnam's history of wars and colonialism

Vietnam was under Chinese rule for nearly a thousand years; the first invasion took place in the second century B.C.E., when the Han Dynasty of China established a province in the northern region of Vietnam. While Vietnamese history textbooks record notable periods of relative independence from China, these periods were not long-lasting. Vietnam gained independence from China in 939 C.E. after Ngô Quyền's victory over the Chinese army, initiating a period of sovereignty that lasted for several decades (S. Chan, 2006). Nevertheless, territorial conflicts between China and Vietnam continued after this benchmark. This long, complex involvement with China has profoundly shaped the Vietnamese language and culture, a point I will return to in the next section.

The arrival of the French in Southeast Asia in the 19th century marks the next major event in Vietnam's history of struggle. During the six decades of French colonial rule, from 1884 to 1954, Vietnam was considered to be part of French Indochina, a grouping of French colonial territories in Southeast Asia (S. Chan, 2006). The French established a colonial government in Vietnam, seized lands, and forced local farmers to work on plantations, while hoarding resources and profits (Llewellyn et al., 2019). This exploitation led to widespread poverty and increasing social inequality, with wealth and land ownership concentrated in the hands of a small minority: Q. H. Lâm (2008) estimated that while Vietnamese feudal landlords, French colonial landowners, and Catholic landlords accounted for less than 5% of the population at the time, they owned 70% of the country's land. During World Wars I and II, hefty taxes were imposed on the Vietnamese in the form of debt and produce to finance France's military involvement, while young Vietnamese men were forced to serve as soldiers. These burdens, along with the hardships caused by natural disasters, led to several years of famine during the period of French

rule, notably the 1945 famine, which claimed the lives of between 600,000 to 2 million Vietnamese[1] (Gunn, 2011; Marr, 1997; Dũng, 1995).

The 1945 famine proved to be the catalyst for considerable local support of insurgent forces, and thus had its own political repercussions (Huff, 2020). As the desperation of starvation overshadowed the fear of colonial rule, people joined forces with the Việt Minh communist group to raid rice warehouses, take back their produce, and rebel against French troops. Most notably, the famine paved the way for the August Revolution of 1945 led by the Việt Minh and their revolutionary leader, Hồ Chí Minh. The revolutionaries succeeded in overthrowing the French colonial government and established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the north. This was followed by the First Indochina War between the French and the DRV, which lasted eight years (London, 2023a).

In 1954, following the Geneva Conference, the French signed a ceasefire agreement with the communist-led DRV, ending the First Indochina War. This agreement, known as the Geneva Accords, required France to move their troops out of Vietnam and effectively dissolved their colonial empire in Southeast Asia. It also had long-lasting repercussions for Vietnam, as the agreement temporarily divided the country into two states: in the north, the DRV, a pro-communist government led by the Communist Party, and in the south, an anti-communist, US-supported government known as the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). While the Geneva Conference also called for an election to be held in 1956 to reunify Vietnam, it never took place due to ideological conflicts. Hence, Vietnam remained divided for the next 20 years.

As the United States' involvement escalated with the provision of increasing financial and military support for the South Vietnamese government, the conflict between North and South Vietnam became a huge military operation. Lasting from the early 1960s to 1975, this conflict, known today as the Vietnam War, had a dual nature, serving as both an international conflict and a civil war due to the intricate web of regional and global dynamics that shaped its trajectory (London, 2023a). On the one hand, it was a civil war that pitted two factions from within the same country—North Vietnam (the DRV) and South Vietnam (the RVN)—against each other in a struggle for ideological and territorial supremacy (Miller & T. Vũ, 2009). This internal conflict was rooted in the deep-seated divisions that emerged as a result of Vietnam's colonial history, and it embodied the clashing ideologies of communism and capitalism. While the North Vietnamese leadership dreamed of achieving national unification and building socialism (T. Vũ, 2009), anticommunism was alive and active among the South Vietnamese, who viewed communism as a serious threat to Vietnamese traditional values (T. Hoàng, 2009).

[1] Gunn (2011) has noted that the figures vary depending on the sources: while French sources estimated around 600,000 to 700,000 deaths, official Vietnamese statistics reported 1 million to 2 million victims.

On the other hand, the Vietnam War carried a distinct international dimension: the involvement of powerful external actors—most notably the United States and the Soviet Union—transformed the conflict into a proxy battleground for the larger Cold War rivalry. While the Soviet Union and China supported the communist government of North Vietnam, the United States' backing of South Vietnam and its military intervention marked an effort to contain the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, aligning with its broader global policy (Herring, 2004). This external involvement blurred the lines between a purely internal struggle and a broader contest for influence between major world powers. This North-South ideological split in Vietnam, in other words, was emblematic of the divided world in which the Cold War was waged, a division that was felt all around the globe (see Yangwen et al., 2010).

The Vietnam War was a devastating conflict marked by significant loss of life and the substantial destruction of the economic infrastructure and natural environment (London, 2023a). While there are no reliable statistics on human casualties, the reported numbers range from one to three million Vietnamese lives lost during the United States' decade of intervention (Hirschman et al., 1995). In terms of economic impact, the conflict resulted in the destruction of critical infrastructure, disrupted agricultural production, and diverted resources from development (H. V. Lương, 2003). Equally disastrous was the environmental toll, with the widespread use of chemicals and defoliants causing long-term ecological damage (Hupy, 2008). The country was, effectively, in ruins after the war.

3.1.2 Post-war independence: Đổi Mới and the development process

The end of the 1970s marked an important historical turning point for Vietnamese in both zones of the conflict. The Vietnam War ended in April 1975, marking the triumph of the Communist Party and an official beginning for an era of national independence. The war, however, left a bitter aftertaste. For many Southern Vietnamese, particularly those who were associated with the US-backed government, Communist triumph meant not only the loss of private property but also a threat to their lives. Fearing persecution and retaliation by the communist forces, many fled the country immediately in the late spring of 1975, while another wave followed in 1977. Altogether, a large number of Vietnamese refugees risked their lives to escape communist rule (K. D. Bùi, 2023; Harms & D. Labbé, 2023).

For those who remained in the country after the war, the subsequent years were characterized by poverty and hardship. The economy and the infrastructure, after 20 years of battle, were effectively in ruins, and the CPV's unsuccessful attempt at Stalinist central planning also cut off the country from trade and international financing (London, 2023a). Amidst the hardships caused by

the socialist state's economic planning, Vietnam sent troops to Cambodia in 1978 (H. H. Lê, 2023; London & Pincus, 2023). The purpose was to combat the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge, which had launched cross-border attacks on Vietnam and targeted ethnic Vietnamese for persecution, thus posing a significant security threat to the country. This caused the Chinese government, which had been supporting the Khmer Rouge, to cut off aid to Vietnam (H. H. Lê, 2023), subsequently leading the Vietnamese economy—which at the time relied heavily on Chinese imports of essential supplies—to collapse.

In the beginning of the 1980s, Vietnam was among the world's poorest nations (H. V. Lương, 2003; London, 2023a). At this juncture, the CPV began to acknowledge that despite achieving national aspirations of independence and unification, it had failed to deliver on the promise of economic security with its socialist planning strategy. Recognizing that centralized economic planning was perhaps not the best strategy for promoting economic growth, the country's leadership sought to change its development trajectory (London, 2023b). This began with a slight liberalization of the economy, allowing state-owned enterprises, as well as individual farmers, to buy and sell their surplus independently (Rama, 2023). This period has been described as one of experimentation: by loosening restrictions and allowing independent trading to take place, the CPV was hoping to save (rather than abandon) socialist planning by keeping a close watch on such transactions (Beresford, 2008; Gainsborough, 2010a, 2010b). This plan, however, did not take the intended path, and was followed by a gradual process in which local experimentation, elite competition, and resistance to central control over everyday trading activities eventually led to the Party's "grudging acceptance of a greater role for market allocation" (London, 2023a, p. 6). In 1986, the CPV held its Sixth Party Congress, where it officially embraced fundamental institutional reform, which is commonly referred to as Đổi Mới ("Renewal" or "Renovation"). Thus, while the reform was officially launched in 1986, scholars of the period (e.g., Beresford, 1989, 2008; Fforde & De Vylder, 1996) have suggested that it had been embedded in local Vietnamese imaginary many years before.

Đổi Mới marked a critical turning point in Vietnam's economic history, shifting the philosophy from state socialism to a "market economy with socialist orientation," or "market socialism" (Leshkowich, 2023, p. 246). As the state relaxed its grip on population movements and activities with this reform, it progressively liberalized the country's economy, leading to an enormous transformation of many aspects of Vietnamese society. Prior to the reform, prices for goods and services were determined by the government, but Đổi Mới allowed market forces to determine prices, leading to a significant increase in the availability of goods and services. Đổi Mới also allowed for the growth of a private sector, as well as a significant increase in foreign investment by opening Vietnam's economy to international trade and making it easier for foreign companies to invest in the country. Furthermore, this reform

led to significant rural-urban migration and occupational shifts away from agriculture in Vietnam, which accordingly fostered a swift transition to an urban society (Harms & D. Labbé, 2023; D. Labbé, 2014; Harms, 2011; D. Labbé & Boudreau, 2011).

In terms of international politics, during Đổi Mới the country opened itself to the global community and underwent significant changes in various sectors, including international relations. The Đổi Mới era witnessed Vietnam's normalization of relations with both China and the United States (Sasges, 2023). Furthermore, Đổi Mới policy encouraged foreign investment, trade, and cooperation, which opened the doors for international actors to offer their development support. As a result, the 1990s saw the gradual integration of INGOs into the country's development landscape, which brought their own models of development, humanitarian initiatives, and capacity-building to Vietnam.

Altogether, these changes helped create jobs, stimulate Vietnam's economic growth, and spur the country's transition from a rural to an urban society. Following Đổi Mới, Vietnam successfully reduced poverty from over 60 percent in the 1980s to below 5 percent in 2019 (Baum, 2020, p. 5); thus, the reform is often referred to as an "extraordinary" economic success that took Vietnam on a journey "from poverty to prosperity" (Rama, 2023, p. 131). This transition to the status of a lower middle income country in just one generation (London & Pincus, 2023) helps brand Vietnam as "one of the greatest development success stories" (World Bank, 2020, p. 1) as well as "a role model for development" (Thoburn, 2013, p. 99). Đổi Mới is viewed as the critical juncture at which the CPV, through a change in its economic strategy, reestablished its dominance and legitimacy as the regime leadership through steady and prolonged macroeconomic growth and a significant improvement in living standards (London, 2023a, 2023b). Among its various influences on Vietnam's economy, this reform, according to H. Nguyễn (2015), also paved way to the emergence of a distinct and unique Vietnamese youth culture with its own way of expressing and understanding the world. She articulated this phenomenon in the following quote:

> Amid a youth population far removed from the anti-American resentment that characterized postwar Vietnam, Western influences have made their way into everyday teen life. Teen Viet [Vietnamese teenagers] have acculturated to many aspects of the Western world and have since adopted the consumerist and individualist ideologies that characterize Western social life. (H. Nguyễn, 2015, p. 17)

In other words, this reform has a profound impact on the country's youth, namely its post-reform generation. As H. Nguyễn (2015) showed, Đổi Mới triggered a notable cultural shift: while collectivist values remained integral to the Vietnamese society, certain aspects of the Western world began to exert a growing influence, especially among the younger generation, who grew up

during the 1990s and 2000s and were exposed to the rise of the Internet and Western media products. This manifested in a distinct lifestyle and pursuit of ideology that significantly differed from the former generation, especially in the realm of fashion, entertainment, and consumption behaviors.

Following Đổi Mới's open-policy, Vietnamese citizens gained access to alternative sources of information from the Internet and the blogosphere. This helped challenged the monopoly of state-controlled media, which for many Vietnamese, used to be the primary source of information (Q. P. Phạm, 2022). The erosion of the party-state's control over information flows enabled the opening of space for some aspects of the public sphere to thrive (T. H. Bùi, 2015). Furthermore, Đổi Mới was associated with the arrival of multilateral donors and neoliberal institutions in the country, and was followed by a boom in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) funded by international development agencies (Wischermann, 2003). Thus, many scholars (e.g., Salemink, 2006; Norlund, 2007; Kerkvliet et al., 2008) have established Đổi Mới as the condition for a non-state sector in Vietnam to develop, and therefore credit it with the emergence of "civil society" in Vietnam.

This section has provided an overview of Vietnamese history, which was characterized by constant wars and struggles. Since the North-South unification in 1975, the country has transitioned from complete ruin in the post-war period to the status of a lower middle income country. This rapid economic growth and intensive urban transformation, a result of Đổi Mới, has contributed not just to Vietnam's economy, but also to a wide range of social, ecological, and institutional changes. In other words, Đổi Mới transformed the country not only economically, but also socially, and had a profound effect on relations between the state and society. Thus, Đổi Mới is often described as fundamental to Vietnam's development and the emergence of Vietnamese civil society.

While Đổi Mới certainly played a role in encouraging a non-state sector in Vietnam, conflating this period with the emergence of civil society in Vietnam is short-sighted. The following section will outline examples of civil society spirit in Vietnam throughout its history to show that civil society functioned in Vietnam long before Đổi Mới. An examination of civil society in Vietnam, therefore, must not neglect the informal groups and movements formed by citizens, even when these associations are not legally recognized as civil society organizations.

3.2 The foundation and spirit of civil society in Vietnamese history

The previous section featured an overview of Vietnam's history through the country's transformation following the Đổi Mới economic reform. As

demonstrated, Đổi Mới contributed significantly to the Vietnamese economy, and is often referred to as the period when civil society emerged in Vietnam (see, e.g., Salemink, 2006; Norlund, 2007).

Linking the rise of civil society in Vietnam solely to Đổi Mới, however, is simplistic. The purpose of this section is to illuminate civil society's presence in Vietnam's history prior to Đổi Mới, demonstrating that it existed and functioned long before modernization. In doing so, this section highlights the importance of recognizing that civil society's manifestations can be diverse and multifaceted, extending well beyond the conventional NGO model that is often dominant in the Western perspective. Three elements are outlined in this section: the emphasis on solidarity inherent in Confucianism and Taoism; anti-colonialist movements during the French colonial era; and the vibrant intellectual scenes during the time of Vietnam's North-South division.

3.2.1 Confucianism and Taoism: the emphasis on solidarity

Vietnamese history is deeply rooted in its interaction with China. In East Asia, particularly Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, classical Chinese intellectual tradition has had a tremendous impact (Madsen, 2002, 2008). A cultural outcome of this impact is the spread of Confucianism and Taoism into these regions. During the long period of Chinese domination, Confucianism and Taoism emerged as prominent ideologies in the Vietnamese education system.

Historically, Confucianism has been defined as a way of thinking, an ethical system, a political philosophy, and a scholarly tradition derived from the teachings of Confucius (Goldin, 2014). In this philosophy, a person is not viewed as a detached entity, but rather as a member of his or her human relationships, and each individual is given a specific place in society. Confucianism emphasizes obedience and duty to one's family, respect for elders and authorities, appreciation for knowledge and morality, and maintenance of the social order in the spirit of harmony and reciprocity (Q. T. N. Nguyễn, 2016; Nosco, 2008). In Confucian thought, human beings can be taught and perfected through the combination of individual and communal effort, and they should seek objective knowledge from the external world in order to improve their goodness (Goldin, 2014; McHale, 2002). The philosophy emphasizes compassion and benevolence toward others, as well as cultivating one's moral goodness through acts of altruism (G. Chan, 2008). Thus, followers of Confucianism believe that people have a moral duty to show compassion to those who are suffering, as part of its vision of ethical uniformity.

Another philosophy that became prominent in Vietnam through Chinese domination is Taoism, a philosophy attributed to Lao Tseu, a Chinese contemporary of Confucius (Vương et al., 2018). Taoism emphasizes the importance of living a pure life through the natural way of doing things, stressing the virtues of simplicity and humility (Xu, 2022). This kind of harmony, the ideology asserts, is conducive to goodwill and integrity. Taoism is known for its yin-

yang symbol, which represents the inescapably intertwined duality of everything in nature, where no quality can exist without its opposite. Because of its emphasis on harmony, the Taoist doctrine seems antithetical to attempts to enact to radical change, leading to passive attitudes, inaction, and resignation (Q. T. N. Nguyễn, 2016).

Both Confucianism and Taoism remain influential in modern Vietnamese society; as Trương and colleagues (2017) have noted, their virtues are deeply ingrained in the culture and are often referenced in everyday life, shaping how Vietnamese folk conceive of social roles and the relationship between individuals and their community. As a result of their emphasis on duty to the family and the aim of a harmonious society, Confucianism and Taoism have played a significant role in forming the spirit of civil society in Vietnam. These philosophical influences, in particular, account for why a strong associational and solidarity culture existed prior to Đổi Mới (K. G. Nguyễn & Q. T. Nguyễn, 2018). Jamieson (1995, p. 33), for instance, has pointed to the heterogeneity of informal, loosely structured, voluntary groups that existed in traditional Vietnamese villages, including "clubs for everything from kite flying to raising songbirds, clubs for old soldiers, for people born in the same year, for students of the same teacher." Jamieson noted that all such groups emphasized cooperation and solidarity, possessed mechanisms to dampen potential social conflict, and served as mutual aid societies. Similarly, T. N. Nguyễn (2013) studied Vietnam in the 17th and 18th centuries and emphasized the role of craft village and guild associations in providing mutual assistance to members, both in terms of profession and livelihood.

This evidence suggests that civil society elements existed in Vietnam long before the emergence of Đổi Mới. Specifically, the existence of heterogeneous groups and associations in traditional Vietnamese villages and the emphasis on solidarity, cooperation, benevolence, and social harmony can be seen as forms of civic engagement and civil society spirit long before modernization.

3.2.2 Anti-colonialism movements and cultural reforms during the French colonial era

The second element that shaped Vietnamese civil society can be traced back to the French colonial period, when Western ideas, especially the Enlightenment movement of France itself, were introduced and developed in Indochina's colonial society. This laid the foundation for several social movements and cultural reforms in Vietnam, which fundamentally changes the way people conceive of their relations to society. Whereas social space in the previous, feudal period narrowly focused on relations between villages and clans, the social movements that took place during the French colonial period opened up space for individuals to participate in the public sphere. This is another fundamental element that has shaped Vietnamese civil society.

Several anti-colonial movements were initiated by Vietnamese intellectuals during the French colonial period in an effort to rise up and reclaim independence (Marr, 1980). A prominent example was the formation of the Duy Tân League (League for the Renewal of Vietnam), a revolutionary resistance group that carried out several insurrections and raids on French colonial offices, prisons, and administrative centers (Morlat, 2017; Chesneaux, 1955). According to the League's philosophy, society could only be reformed by increasing people's knowledge in all areas of life, including education, the economy, and culture. As part of this initiative, the League sent several middle-class Vietnamese students to Japan to study the modernization process that was successfully transforming it at the time (S. Chan, 2016). The goal was to train a young generation of intellectuals and revolutionaries, who would be well-equipped to fight against French colonialism.

An initiative by members of the Duy Tân League upon their return from Japan was the creation in 1907 of a free school—Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục (Tonkin Free School)—that was open to all. A short-lived effort, the school was intended to modernize Vietnamese society through a radical paradigm shift: by reimagining Confucianism as an East Asian spiritual tradition rather than a universal worldview, and by embracing ideas from the West that the founders saw as rationalized visions of the world (Gadkar-Wilcox, 2014a). As part of an effort to promote educational reform, the school taught students to read and write the new national script (Romanized script), and gave them instruction in politics, economics, science and technology. Gadkar-Wilcox (2014a), however, has contended that the school's real purpose was to resist French colonialism: by offering a space for collective learning, the Tonkin Free School equipped Vietnamese students to become active citizens (rather than passive subjects under colonial rule) and enabled them to collectively strengthen their sense of national identity, thereby advancing the cause of national liberation.

A year after the Tonkin Free School opened, the French colonial government shut it down, arrested its leaders, and suppressed its publications. The anti-colonial movements in Southern Vietnam persisted despite this oppression. In the subsequent decades, expanding literacy led to the increasing popularity of newspapers and print media, facilitating the growth of diverse political opinions (McHale, 2004). Pamphlets, books, newsletters, and radio were utilized by Vietnamese pro-independence activists to spread anti-colonialist messages, which contributed to the emergence and proliferation of a political press as well as the formation of a vibrant public sphere in various urban centers (Peycam, 2012).

These movements are evidence that a public sphere for civil society existed in Vietnam at the beginning of the 20th century in the form of resistance against French colonial rule (K. G. Nguyễn & Q. T. Nguyễn, 2018). They highlight the anti-colonial character of civil society as well as its potential for democratization, with civil society acting as an autonomous sphere of action

capable of energizing resistance against tyrannical regimes (Mastnak, 2005; Seligman, 2002; J. Cohen & Arato, 1992). This spirit of resistance developed and thrived in Vietnam during the 20th century in response to colonial oppression, enabling people to speak out and act in accordance with their desires for national liberation.

3.2.3 Intellectual movements during the North-South division

Another historical element that lay the foundation for Vietnamese civil society can be traced back to the intellectual movements in both North and South Vietnam during the post-Geneva era. Following the Geneva Accords in 1954, Vietnam was split into two states: a pro-communist government in the north, and an anti-communist, pro-Western government in the south. While opposition to their respective governments was present in both North and South Vietnam, the forms of dissent varied between the two states, with protests in the South as opposed to a more covert struggle in the North.

In the North, a noteworthy cultural-political movement took place in the late 1950s led by two major publications: Nhân Văn (Humanities) and Giai Phẩm (Masterpieces). Both publications emerged when state-run universities and institutes in North Vietnam were expected to produce official records of history, philosophy, and literature that legitimized the current regime (Pelley, 2002). Consequently, writers and artists were pressured to conform to certain political agendas in their production; this suppression of free expression sparked a powerful movement for arts and literature liberalization, in which writers and artists demanded an easing of censorship of their work. Following this campaign, two independent publications advocating freedom of speech and creativity—Nhân Văn and Giai Phẩm—were established (Zinoman, 2011). Both publications highlighted the importance of artistic freedom and sought to create a platform for unfettered expression amidst an atmosphere of political censorship, causing the government of North Vietnam to label them "reactionary." Both of these major journals were shut down, and key participants were imprisoned or sent to reeducation camps (L. H. T. Nguyễn, 2012).

In the South, the vibrancy of civil society can be seen in the public opposition to the South Vietnamese government's suppression of Buddhism in the early 1960s. Ngô Đình Diệm, the president of the pro-Western government in South Vietnam at the time, alienated many Buddhist leaders and followers with his pro-Catholic policy and his harassment of Buddhist monks. Several protests and rallies advocating for religious freedom took place in response to these actions: university professors resigned from their positions, students walked out of classes and gathered to protest, and Buddhist monks set themselves on fire (Jacobs, 2006). Gadkar-Wilcox (2014b) has attributed this political fervor to the same intellectual environment that sparked protest movements around the world, part of which stemmed from the radicalization of American universities in the 1960s. As Gadkar-Wilcox (2014b) has explained,

South Vietnam in this era was home to a vibrant intellectual community that debated Kant, Freud, and Marx's theories, and engaged with issues related to the civil rights movement, race consciousness, and international racism in their publications (see, e.g., Lý, 1967; N-L. Nguyễn, 1968; T-V. Nguyễn, 1967). This cultural dialogue not only demonstrated a strong sense of racial and social justice permeating South Vietnamese politics, but also showed that an active civil society existed here.

It is hence evident that in spite of the North-South separation, Vietnam maintained an active civil sphere. Human rights and freedom of expression were advocated in both parts of the country, despite their differing governments and ideologies. This indicates that Vietnamese citizens were engaged in the political process and had a degree of autonomy, even during the height of the North-South internal conflict. These movements were similar to the anti-colonial movements during French rule in that they emphasized the resistance drive of civil society against regime repression, regardless of whether the government was communist-led in the north or Western-backed in the south. What set them apart from the social movements during the French colonial period was the use of independent journalism (in both parts of the country) and the strong intellectual engagement with Western theoretical influences (in South Vietnam) that laid the foundation for these vibrant public spheres.

This section has focused on aspects and elements of civil society embedded within Vietnam's historical narrative. These elements can be found in the influence of Confucianism and Taoism, the proliferation of anti-colonial movements during the French colonial period, and the dynamic intellectual landscapes that unfolded within both Vietnamese states during the North-South division. This exploration aims to demonstrate that civil society is an intrinsic aspect of Vietnamese society. In other words, it would be hasty to conclude that civil society only surfaced in Vietnam following the Đổi Mới economic reform, as proposed by Norlund (2007). Instead, this study aligns with the perspective shared by scholars such as T. H. Bùi (2013, 2015), Wells-Dang (2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2023), and A. N. Vũ and Q. B. Lê (2023) who have seen Đổi Mới as the event that marked the *restoration* of civil society in Vietnam after twenty years of North-South internal conflicts. This viewpoint emphasizes that civil society has historical roots in Vietnam's cultural and political spheres and acknowledges that it did not emerge as a result of Đổi Mới. Rather, the Đổi Mới reform enabled Vietnamese civil society to reawake in more organized forms after several years of struggles and conflicts. The upcoming section will offer an exploration of civil society in contemporary Vietnam, shedding light on its current manifestations and dynamics.

3.3. Civil society in contemporary Vietnam: a complex scene

This section explores the patterns of state-civil society relations in contemporary Vietnam, taking into account that Vietnam is a one-party, authoritarian state. The purpose of this section is to provide information on the type of authoritarianism that exists in the Vietnamese context, thus avoiding the tendency to "black box" authoritarianism that has been identified by Malesky (2021, p. 163). Furthermore, it illuminates how civil society continues to exist and function within a one-party authoritarian regime, even though several regulations have been issued by the state to limit its role.

3.3.1 Patterns of conflict and the grip of the authoritarian state

The Communist Party (CPV) came to power in the spring of 1975, as the North and South of Vietnam unified. A decade later, it introduced the Đổi Mới economic reform, characterized by a shift from a central planning economy to a market economy. Due to this 1986 reform, a non-state sector was able to emerge, boosting private commerce and CSOs (Kerkvliet et al., 2008; Norlund, 2007; T. A. Hoàng, 2013). Đổi Mới was followed by a boom in NGOs funded by international entities, along with a rise in internet access and social media platforms, leading to the emergence of a vibrant online community (Wischermann, 2003). As T. H. Bùi (2015) noted, these actors have been, tolerated by the state (or at least are not easy for the state to control). Patterns of state-society relations in Vietnam have significantly shifted in the era following Đổi Mới, with new potential for societal and political change, despite the CPV's reservations when it comes to political reform.

It must be noted that the CPV has not given up its authority over the people in this context. Rather, the rapid economic development and cultural globalization process that followed Đổi Mới forced the party to find novel ways to exercise its control over the population, one of which was to act as a gatekeeper for traditional values, controlling the rhetoric of propriety and impropriety, and controlling people's attitudes toward cultural influences from the West (Wilcox, 2000; R. Q-A. Trần, 2014). A prominent example of this was the Social Evils Campaign launched in 1996, which emphasized the state's condemnation of drug use, prostitution, pornography, and homosexuality (P. Horton & Rydstrøm, 2019). State-controlled media in this period frequently suggested that these "social evils" were the unwanted effects of modernization, excess capitalism, and Western moral degradation (Wilcox, 2000).

This suspicion of cultural influences from the West partially explains the Vietnamese state's hostility toward the term "civil society," resulting in multiple and conflicting narratives of what civil society means, what it does, and how it should function (A. N. Vũ & Q. B. Lê, 2022; K. G. Nguyễn & Q. T. Nguyễn, 2018). Despite being increasingly integrated into the Vietnamese

political landscape, the term "xã hội dân sự" (civil society) still remains at the margins of official state discourse and is often avoided in official or public documents. These documents instead prefer phrases such as "tổ chức xã hội" (social organizations) or "tổ chức nhân dân" (people's organizations); these terms are considered less sensitive, as they imply that such organizations are under state control (Wells-Dang, 2023, p. 75).

One reason for the reservations around this notion is the fact that classical Chinese intellectual traditions did not even have a word for civil society, let alone a theory that explained it (Madsen, 2002, 2008). Since this tradition is tremendously influential throughout East Asia, including Vietnam (see Section 3.2.1), it explains the alienation of the term in the Vietnamese language. The use of the term is, in fact, a result of international development: it was introduced into the local language through donor documents that frequently translated the term "civil society" from English into Vietnamese. As Hannah (2007) has explained, there was pressure on the Vietnamese state to adopt the term from international agencies and NGOs, whose common agenda was to promote Western-defined ideas about democracy through concepts such as "civil society," "human rights," and "participatory development." These international actors (e.g., United Nations Development Program, 2003; World Bank, 2001) supported the creation of effective institutions representing civil society, such as grassroots democracy, grassroots organizations, and local NGOs, in order to hold the state accountable.

In this context, the notion of "civil society" is often regarded by Vietnamese authorities as a guise used by Western institutions to exert control over the country and, as such, a threat to their legitimacy. Deemed as a politically "sensitive" term (in Vietnamese: "nhạy cảm") (Wells-Dang, 2023, p. 75; K. G. Nguyễn & Q. T. Nguyễn, 2018, p. xxvii), civil society is frequently, in state-led narratives, depicted as "powerful instruments" of external hostile forces and overseas reactionary groups (A. N. Vũ & Q. B. Lê, 2023, p. 190) and thus condemned as "an evil force seeking to undermine the political system of Vietnam and the leading role of the Party" (H. T. Mai & Schweisshelm, 2020, p. 6). It is common for state propaganda, as well as state-sponsored news and research to warn against "dark forces" attempting to undermine the political regime under the guise of civil society and democracy (Weiss & Hansson, 2023, p. 12; T. H. Bùi, 2013; A. N. Vũ & Q. B. Lê, 2023).

As far as space for citizen voices is concerned, the Communist Party claims it represents society and citizens by providing channels through which central leadership can communicate policies to citizens and citizen critiques can be channeled back to the central level and monitored if the Party determines it necessary (Kerkvliet & Porter, 1995; London, 2014). In this spirit, the Vietnamese state renders the notion of civil society "superfluous" (Rydstrøm et al., 2023, p. 226). Consequently, Vietnam's contemporary civil society does not readily fit into the concept of a discrete sector: there are no official truly "non-governmental" organizations, given that everything is "part of either a

Party or a state structure" (Hayton, 2020, p. 79). For instance, mass organizations in Vietnam—such as the Women's Union, Youth Union, Trade Union, and Farmers' Union—all belong to the Vietnam Fatherland Front, an umbrella organization sponsored by the CPV (Bedner & Berenschot, 2023; Rydstrøm et al., 2023; Hayton, 2020).

Aside from mass organizations that are recognized in the country's constitution, Vietnamese citizens are also permitted to form their own associations. This process, however, is extremely convoluted and thus dispiriting in practice. Under Decree 88/2003 on Promulgating the Regulations on Organizations and the Operations of Associations, activist groups and networks in Vietnam must complete a lengthy and costly bureaucratic process involving several certificates in order to register themselves as official associations (Rydstrøm et al., 2023; London, 2014; Sidel, 2008, 2010). This process can be especially difficult for small-scale groups, given their limited resources, and such groups are thus prevented from obtaining legal standing (Pallas & L. Nguyễn, 2018). Without legal registration status, these groups cannot operate legitimately: they are unable to open a bank account, obtain funding, or apply for publication licenses (Oosterhoof et al., 2014). This technocratic registration process, therefore, acts as an official screening process that effectively restricts the reach of social movements (Sidel, 2010), as it allows the state to maintain a firm control over which organizations can be part of the public sphere and which cannot. Many Vietnamese civil society groups, even those engaging in areas accepted by the state, such as HIV-prevention or education, remain unregistered (Wells-Dang, 2023; P. Horton et al., 2015). Many choose to register as private companies or production cooperatives instead, although this type of registration entails tax disadvantages (Smith & Darko, 2014).

It is worth noting that even CSOs that manage to gain legal status have to operate in a restrictive political environment, in which the state maintains control over their activities. Licensed social organizations are legally and practically connected to the state, "entangled with the state and each other one way or another" (Norlund et al., 2006, p. 36) and "linked by a chain of official ties to the central committee of the Communist party" (Hayton, 2020, p. 79). All grants and programs implemented by these registered organizations require approval from the Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA), a government umbrella agency that falls under the Vietnam Fatherland Front (K. G. Nguyễn & Q. T. Nguyễn, 2018). In addition, any project involving foreign financing must be legally approved by government agencies (Wells-Dang, 2012, 2023; Hayton, 2020). Forced to navigate within a constrained political landscape in which the state oversees their operations, these civil society institutions are severely restricted in their ability to function.

While working closely with and frequently reporting to state agencies, these legally registered organizations are also not exempt from becoming targets of state persecution. In 2022, a number of registered NGOs became entangled in legal troubles and were forced to shut down, their leaders

imprisoned on charges of tax evasion, anti-state propaganda, and "abusing democratic freedoms" (Sidel, 2023, p. 1; Hướng-Thiện, 2023). The details of these cases were not made available to the public (Trịnh, 2022), prompting speculation that the state was using arbitrary laws to criminalize those speaking out against its policies (Walker, 2023). Registered NGOs used to be considered relatively safe, since they had legal status and worked closely with the government. Accordingly, the persecution of entities that were once thought to be safe, which some believed to be unprecedented (H. L. Trần, 2022), through both criminal prosecution and regulatory means, seems to indicate that the Vietnamese state is closing down its civic space (Sidel, 2023; Trịnh, 2022; CIVICUS, 2022a, 2022b). This has led to uncertainty among civil society actors, who fear that the state is tightening its grip, and that being involved in civil society is increasingly dangerous.

During the summer of 2022, the state issued a new decree narrowing the definition of foreign NGOs allowed to operate in Vietnam, while retaining extensive prohibitions on activities that violate Vietnamese "national interests," "social order," "social ethics," "national customs," or "national unity" (Sidel, 2023, p. 1). Also released was a new draft of a central government decree that, if passed, would strengthen the role of the Party in managing associations and further complicate the establishment process for citizen-formed associations. The draft, moreover, outlined a broad range of prohibited activities that can lead to significant sanctions for civil society groups, as well as grounds for terminating or suspending associations. In a climate where many NGO leaders are criminally charged and bloggers who oppose the current government are imprisoned, the suppression of civil society expression is a growing concern (Trịnh, 2022; H. L. Trần, 2022). This climate of fear and insecurity has led CSOs and activists to be increasingly vigilant about their activities (Hướng-Thiện, 2023; A. N. Vũ & Q. B. Lê, 2023), knowing that they could face severe penalties or the dissolution of their groups if they are found to be in violation of the draft legislation.

This section has explored an aspect of relations between the state and civil society in Vietnam that is characterized by suppression and antagonism. It has demonstrated how Vietnam's authoritarian state controls civil society institutions, restricting public participation and civil society's arena for action. Evidence presented in this section shows that using arbitrary laws to punish citizens who oppose an authoritarian state's policy is one method such a regime can use to exercise its control over its citizens.

It is important to note that Vietnam still allows civil society institutions and actors to operate within its authoritarian framework. In this regard, I second Malesky's (2021) assertion that a broader use of the term "authoritarianism" can lead scholars to overlook subtle institutional differences and policy variances within authoritarian systems, resulting in a failure to acknowledge that authoritarian climates do have the potential to change. Research on civil society in similar authoritarian contexts, such as China, has also shown that quasi-

official organizations can slip beyond the state's control, and that members of these organizations "can more or less turn them from agents of governmental manipulation into instruments for the expression of ideals, or mobilization and co-ordination of interests, against the party-state" (Ding, 1994, p. 32; see also H. Li et al., 2017). In a similar fashion, Heng (2004) has argued that lack of autonomy (from the state) can propel civil society actors to devise their own potent forms of opposition activities from inside the system. The next section explores how civil society institutions are able to maneuver—even under the close scrutiny of the state—illuminating patterns of cooperation between the state and civil society in Vietnam.

3.3.2 Patterns of cooperation and room to maneuver

While the Vietnamese language did not originally have a term for civil society (Madsen, 2008), and the Vietnamese state did not find the term acceptable (H. T. Mai & Schweisshelm, 2020; Wells-Dang, 2023), in practice there is space for civil society actors in Vietnam to exercise their influence. Representative institutions, as well as autonomous secondary associations, form an important part of Vietnam's political atmosphere and societal activities (London, 2014; Thayer, 2009; Wells-Dang, 2023). As demonstrated in Section 3.2, foundational elements for civil society have been put in place throughout the nation's history, including Vietnam's engagement with two Chinese philosophical frameworks, Confucianism and Taoism, as well as its contact with the West during the French colonial era and the Cold War period. This has contributed to the development of an autonomous public sphere in Vietnam, despite the state's tight control.

Worth noting here is that the state does not completely alienate civil society actors when it comes to policymaking. Rather, negotiation is at the heart of relations between the state and civil society in Vietnam (Wells-Dang, 2012, 2023; Hayton, 2020; London, 2014), a process which allows Vietnamese civil society to exercise significant political influence. Negotiation is characterized as being similar to performing a "complex dance" (Hannah, 2007, p. 124) or engaging in "a delicate balancing act" (C-B. Nguyện, 2022, p. 1), with Vietnamese CSOs trying to accommodate both foreign donors and the Communist Party.

Vietnamese CSOs are able to do so, first and foremost, by ensuring a good relationship with state officials. Hayton's (2020) extensive investigation into Vietnamese societal structures suggested that actors can make use of personal connections to leverage their agendas. Moreover, it is worth noting that a significant fraction of NGO directors and founders are themselves members of the CPV and/or retired government officials and can utilize their links to the state to obtain legitimacy, access, and influence when advocating for their goals (Wells-Dang, 2012, 2023). This reflects Heng's (2004) observation that even when enmeshed in a system characterized by pervasive official control,

patronage, and intricate linkages, Vietnamese citizens are able to leverage their insider connections and familiarity with the system to engender a form of politics that subverts the established order. In particular, actors associated with civil society can use their personal relationships and leverage network connections to engage with policymakers and corporate elites, creating "informal pathways for social action" (Wells-Dang, 2012, p. x).

A second strategy is avoiding politically sensitive topics, which enables Vietnamese CSOs to effect social change while maintaining a low profile. This approach has also been adopted by NGOs in China, and has been referred to by Dai and Spires (2018, p. 75) as "not blaming but assisting the government." In the Vietnamese context, CSOs can work with the party to shape policy and act as consultants for environmental and development policies. They can even oppose the party's decisions, as long as their pursuit and agenda do not challenge the party's supremacy (Wells-Dang, 2023). Thus, Vietnamese civil society actors have adopted the term "lobbying" from the English language to describe what they do; as Hayton (2020) and T. A. Hoàng (2013) have reported, the strategy is to find some part of the state that supports the civil society group's agenda and then work through it so as to not appear threatening or disloyal. Fragmented and nonconfrontational civil society activities—such as LGBTQ pride parades and celebratory flash mobs (Rydstrøm et al., 2023; Y. Mai, 2022; Oosterhoof et al., 2014) or environmental protests (T. H. Bùi, 2016)—are allowed to take place (provided permits are obtained), as these activities are deemed nonthreatening to the state's legitimacy.

Third, the media and the blogosphere in Vietnam can also contribute to effective network advocacy (Thayer, 2023; Wells-Dang, 2023; T. H., Bùi, 2016; Heng, 2004). Media such as print, radio, and television can be used by civil society actors to influence public opinion and reach government officials. On the internet, commentators and bloggers have formed virtual networks that take advantage of social media to critique government policies on a variety of topics, including corruption, human rights, the failure to protect democratic rights in the constitution, environmental concerns, and the South China Sea dispute with China (Thayer, 2023). The use of social media as a type of "political resource" (T. H. Bùi, 2016, p. 95) continues to be widely employed by both state and civil society actors to exert their influence, despite the well-known fact that several bloggers have been jailed for openly challenging state legitimacy (CIVICUS, 2022b; Dương, 2017). Social mobilization initiatives have been shifting away from state-linked agencies to independent voices in the wake of the blogosphere. Acknowledging this change, many CSOs have adapted their advocacy strategies to better fit the landscape of online social movements (Wells-Dang, 2023).

Using these maneuvering strategies has enabled the sphere of CSOs in Vietnam to continue to grow despite restrictions imposed by the state: as of December 2014, Vietnam officially has 52,565 association (Wischermann & Đặng, 2018, p. 129). Moreover, according to a former official at the Ministry

of Home Affairs, there are over 200,000 unregistered community-based organizations throughout the country that are operating effectively and have breached no laws in the process (N-L. Nguyễn, 2016, p. 6). These data suggest that in Vietnam some 100,000 associations exist, within or alongside the authoritarian political regime (Wischermann & Đặng, 2018). This has created a vibrant scene comprised of groups diverse in scale and structure (A. N. Trần, 2023), ranging from small, informal self-help groups to large, internationally funded Vietnamese NGOs (VNGOs) with international staff working inside and outside of Vietnam. These organizations carry out a range of initiatives, such as social activities and policy development (Kerkvliet et al., 2008; Norlund, 2007; Q. B. Lê et al., 2016; T. A. Hoàng, 2013). Furthermore, since most CSOs are aware of one another, they also share resources and network to extend their reaches and strengthen their platforms (A. N. Trần, 2023).

3.4 Concluding remarks

This chapter began with an overview of Vietnamese history. Section 3.1 illuminated the context of modern Vietnam's economic and social development, through which the foundations of civil society in Vietnamese history were established.

As exemplified in Section 3.2, the claim that Vietnamese civil society emerged exclusively as a result of the 1986 economic reforms and the subsequent influx of INGOs into Vietnam is a predominantly Eurocentric interpretation. This viewpoint ignores the wide range of forms that civil society can take beyond NGOs. Following this, the chapter explored how Confucianism and Taoism, which have their roots in Chinese philosophical frameworks, anticolonial movements, and intellectual influences from French and American involvement, have shaped Vietnamese civil society in the contemporary era.

Section 3.3 examined how civil society operates within the parameters of Vietnamese authoritarianism, where relations between the state and civil society exhibit both antagonistic and cooperative patterns. Authoritarianism is manifested through attempts to regulate non-state entities, whereby state political structures do not allow organizations outside their framework to exist.

Yet, despite the fact that overt dissent against the state can result in imprisonment, civil society actors also possess avenues for interacting with state actors and operating within these political structures to achieve their goals. If one views this context simply as "authoritarianism" without considering its nuances, potential transformations may be overlooked (Malesky, 2021). As this chapter has shown, in Vietnam there are both conflictual and cooperative dynamics in the relationship between the state and civil society. Under the vigilant gaze of the authoritarian state, civil society actors have limited yet tangible room to maneuver, providing prospects for change and negotiation if they opt for an approach that is nonconfrontational.

In the next chapter of this dissertation, I present a theoretical perspective on civil society, emphasizing how the focus on meaning-making processes can be utilized in order to study civic engagement. This shifts the focus toward the actors participating in civil society, transitioning from the macro-level approach often observed in the literature (as demonstrated in Chapter 2), to a more micro-level analysis.

4. Theory: civil society, tiny publics, and meaning-making

A brief overview of the historical development of Vietnam was provided in the previous chapter, along with an examination of the dynamics of the relations between the state and civil society in this context. This historical overview highlights that unlike in many democratic nations, civil society in Vietnam, a one-party state, cannot operate as an autonomous, separate sector, but rather is intricately intertwined with the state through complex structures and mechanisms. This complex relationship challenges conventional approaches to studying civil society, especially in authoritarian contexts where the traditional understanding of it as an independent entity is not applicable.

Acknowledging this complex relationship, this chapter introduces a novel way of studying civil society actions in authoritarian settings. First, the chapter delves into the conventional conceptualization of civil society and highlights the limitations of applying these concepts in authoritarian environments. Subsequently, it introduces an alternative conception of civil society, viewing it through the lens of small groups or "tiny publics" (Fine, 2014, 2021) in order to better capture the nuanced interactions and dynamics at play. Finally, the chapter explores the potential of studying the meaning-making processes of members in these small groups, particularly how they interpret and derive meaning from their participation. Utilizing concepts such as "frame," "boundary," and "narrative," the chapter will highlight how an investigation of these meaning-making processes offers valuable insights into the link between youth participation in small group settings and their implications for civil society in Vietnam.

Adopting this theoretical lens, the chapter highlights the significance of small groups in shedding light on Vietnamese civil society. It demonstrates how an examination of young people's interpretations of their development in Vietnamese development programs can provide insight into civil society from within, offering a nuanced understanding of its dynamics and complexities within the context of an authoritarian state like Vietnam.

4.1 Conceptions of civil society

Civil society, a multifaceted and often elusive concept, has garnered significant attention and diverse interpretations within the realm of social and political discourse (see, e.g., Foley & Edwards, 1996; Alexander, 2006; Lee, 2004). Scholars tend to disagree on what this sphere entails, especially when dealing with questions such as whether organizations with connections to the state and/or the market should be included in this definition (Calhoun, 2011). It is also debated whether this concept includes the family, problematizing the public/private dichotomy implied in de Tocqueville's conceptualization of civil society (Strolovitch & Townsend-Bell, 2013). Some contend that the three entities (state, market, family) should remain distinct from civil society (Way 2014). Some dismiss organizations with economic production (the market) from this definition (Alexander, 2006). Others problematize these attempts to conceive of civil society as an ontologically distinct sphere altogether, referring to them as having "unnecessarily overdrawn boundaries" (Kopecky & Mudde, 2003, p. 2; Hendriks, 2006). Due to all of this disagreement, civil society—as a concept—has been described as "amorphous" (Hendriks, 2006, p. 486), "malleable" (Strolovitch & Townsend-Bell, 2013, p. 12), and "flattened out to such an alarming extent that it loses its credibility" (Chandhoke, 2001, p. 1).

The purpose of this section is to first introduce the two major interpretations of civil society, along with their assumptions. Second, by exposing the issues with these interpretations, the section sheds light on how civil society can be conceptualized differently, especially when studying authoritarian contexts.

4.1.1 Two major interpretations of civil society: assumptions and issues

A common interpretation of this concept, commonly known as Strand I of civil society scholarship, can be traced back to Putnam (1993, 2000) and de Tocqueville (1969), who emphasized that participation in civic associations, such as churches, schools, and professional societies, helps citizens foster the habit of acting together, strengthening the democratic polity. This view regards civic associations as the generator of social capital, namely "networks, norms and trust," which "facilitates action and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1993, p. 35). In Putnam's (1993) analysis, participation in civic associations can generate social capital, facilitating action and cooperation for mutual benefit. Social capital and democracy go hand in hand, Putnam asserted, and it is through civic associations that citizens can collaborate, dialogue, deliberate, and negotiate, which in turn helps foster a healthy democracy. Claiming a positive link between social capital and democracy, Putnam (2000) proposed that increased participation in such civic associations can

foster a healthy democracy, while declining participation leads to decreased trust and a range of social problems.

Another interpretation of civil society, known as Strand II, identifies civil society as an autonomous sphere of action capable of energizing resistance against tyrannical regimes (Mastnak, 2005; Seligman, 2002). This view highlights the conflictual character of civil society, as well as its potential for democratization, linking civil society with various social movements (Arato, 1981). Civil society, in this view, acts as a source for state opposition, therefore making a significant contribution to the political ambience (Ehrenberg, 1999; J. Cohen & Arato, 1992; Seligman, 2002).

Comparing the historical origins of the two strands makes it clear that the political context within which scholars theorize civil society is intimately connected to how the notion is defined and how the relationship between civil society and the state is conceived. Strand I, as Lee (2004) pointed out, was developed in the American context, where freedom of association is well entrenched both in the Constitution and in the cultural psyche: citizens already have strong confidence in the liberal democratic state. This context explains why scholars who embrace this strand focus on the binding role of civil society, a view akin to Durkheim's (1893/1964) functionalism thesis, which would characterize civil society as a component in a system of interrelated parts, all functioning to serve societal equilibrium and solidarity. In contrast, Strand II emerged out of the rise of anti-communist movements in Eastern Europe, wherein the totalitarian state is constructed as evil and antithetical to democratization processes (Mastnak, 2005; Seligman, 2002). This "political" or "conflictual" variable sets Strand II apart from Strand I, echoing a Marxist political theory's view[2] (most evident in Gramsci's 1971 writings) that construes civil society as a mass of free, self-interested individuals liberating themselves from the state (for a more detailed analysis of the concept of "civil society" in Marxism, see Hunt, 1986 and Adamson, 1987).

Despite these differences, both strands of interpretation share two main assumptions about civil society. First, the postulation of political autonomy is alive in both Civil Society I and II: both strains maintain that civil society is a sphere independent of the state. Second, they both agree that civil society is "good" for society, claiming a positive relation between civil society, social welfare, and democracy. This trend can also be observed in the international development community, in which anything associated with the buzzword

[2] Marx himself did not take such a hopeful stance on civil society. In his limited writing on the subject, he conceived of civil society as a by-product of modernity and capitalism, and "a field for the play of egotistical, purely private interests" (Alexander, 1998, p. 4; Hunt, 1987). In other words, Marx conceptualized civil society as a site of class conflict dominated by the state rather than a site of struggle against the state (Hannah, 2007). Building on Marx's idea, Gramsci (1971), a Marxist political theorist, theorized that civil society, despite being initially an arena dominated by state interests, could turn into a key vehicle for social movements that challenged the dominance of the state and the ruling class (J. Cohen & Arato, 1992; Sassoon, 1991). Gramsci's prediction hence echoes Civil Society II's thesis.

"civil society" is considered good (Hannah, 2007). Holding onto these assumptions, however, can be problematic when investigating civil society and civic actions.

First of all, the assumed link between civil society and social welfare is easily refuted once the nuances of civil society are taken into account. Among others, Kopecky and Mudde (2003, p. 9) acknowledged that civil society is a heterogeneous sphere in which various groups coexist: "sometimes together, sometimes apart, sometimes together against the state, sometimes alone against each other." In this view, civil society is comprised of different actors with different goals, visions, and ideologies; each holds their own interpretation of what the public good entails and what inclusion means (Calhoun, 2011). Consequently, pro-democratic organizations can coexist with extremists or hate groups (Ekiert, 2019), which calls into questions whether there can be any one unified "civil society" (Hannah, 2007).

Second, civil society and state in some contexts, such as authoritarianism, often share a close relationship. Thus, drawing a distinction between the state and civil society may not be possible (Lewis, 2013; Wischermann, 2010; Hannah, 2007; Lee, 2004). In fact, the presumption of autonomy may not even exist in Western, non-authoritarian settings, where de Tocqueville's portrayal of civil society still dominates academic and public discussions. If one takes financial independence as a rigid criterion to determine whether an organization is a civil society actor, one must problematize the fact that most CSOs in the West receive funds from their nation-states, philanthropists, or the business sector. This suggests that these CSOs are not completely autonomous or completely free of influence from either the state or the market, as Strand I thinkers have theorized. In the context of the UK, for instance, Maloney and colleagues (2000) highlighted the importance of the financial support that public authorities offer community associations, as well as the information flows between the two sectors. They argued, among other things, that the state provides the political infrastructure for CSOs to function and thrive and has a significant role in the generation and maintenance of social capital.

Furthermore, as Kopecky and Mudde (2003) aptly pointed out, the criterion of financial autonomy becomes even more problematic if one looks beyond the confines of the nation-state. Many Western states and private foundations, for instance, fund CSOs in developing countries to implement aid programs, contributing to the building of domestic civil society in these regions. So, while these CSOs may be financially independent from their own nation-states, they rely on the funding, and perhaps pursue the agendas, of another. The support for civil society in developing nations from international donors may be a highly political form of intervention dressed in the guise of "development" in order to, among other aims, further a neoliberal economic agenda (Hearn, 2000; Jenkins, 2001, 2002; Mohan, 2002; Mercer, 2003; McEwan, 2003). Thus, civil society's complete autonomy from state or elite intervention is nothing more than an "optical illusion" (Chandhoke, 2004, p. 152).

In recognition of these issues, this study does not limit its scope to organizations that meet the autonomy requirement often seen in both major interpretations of civil society. Rather, it acknowledges that the boundaries between civil society and the state—as well as the market—can be blurred and slippery (Hendriks, 2006; Hannah, 2007; Wischermann, 2005), especially in regimes where CSOs exist under the close watch of the state. In this context, recognizing the seemingly intertwined relationship between the state and civil society can be useful to dissect the dynamics between these two actors, as well as to identify groups and associations that represent civil society—something the civil society literature often neglects. The next subsection expands on this argument by examining civil society in authoritarian contexts and proposing a more fruitful approach for its study that focuses on what civil society does rather than what civil society is.

4.1.2 Tracing civil society in authoritarian regimes

The previous subsection revisited two strands of conceptualizing civil society and problematized two main assumptions underlying these strains, which view civil society as an autonomous sphere distinct from the state and as a sector contributing to a society's welfare and democracy. Here, I showed that one should not take the positive relationship between civil society and democracy or social welfare as a given, since civil society is a heterogeneous sphere in which different groups with different values and ideologies coexist. Accordingly, the assumption that CSOs automatically contribute to the welfare and solidarity of society is nothing more than the consequence of biased selection by scholars who have conveniently ignored or excluded groups that did not match their own visions of civil society. The notion of autonomy may just be an illusion or a type of wishful thinking, given that most often CSOs rely on external funding, and hence are not completely free of external influences or interests.

These criticisms are nothing novel. There is, in fact, a growing discontent with civil society theory when it comes to underlying assumptions of what constitutes civil society as well as its roles in society and politics (Hannah, 2007). This is most evident in non-Western scholarship, particularly in regions such as East and Southeast Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and North Africa (see, e.g., Lee, 2004; Heng, 2004; Wischermann, 2005, 2010, 2011; Lewis, 2013; Hannah, 2007; Jenkins, 2001, 2002). Clearly, the Western liberal foundation of civil society does not travel well, and clinging to this foundation to explain civil society in non-Western contexts is not only unfruitful, but also problematic. Wischermann (2005, p. 219), having studied civil society in Vietnam extensively, maintained that the Western definition of civil society is merely an ideal type that "more often than not leads to essentialist, Western-oriented, value-based notions of civil society compared to which Southern societies and Southern civil societies appear to be 'not yet' developed or at least

'less developed.'" In other words, Wischermann points to the underlying Eurocentrism in the civil society literature, and advocates for a different approach to identifying and examining civil society activities in contexts where a distinction between state and civil society is not possible, such as in authoritarian regimes.

Previous investigations of civil society in authoritarian political landscapes have shown that civil society and the state share a nuanced and complex relationship that involves both patterns of collaborations and restraints (Lee, 2004; J. Carroll, 2004; Wischermann, 2005, 2010, 2015; Lewis, 2013; Akman, 2012; Hannah, 2007; Thayer, 2009). In such contexts, it is more fruitful to conceive of civil society in terms of its roles and functions than to try to determine if an organization meets the "autonomy" criterion to qualify as a CSO. Accordingly, a "logic of actions" approach—i.e., looking at the actions of civil society and what it can accomplish—as proposed by Wischermann (2005, 2010) would be better suited to this endeavor, as opposed to a "logic of domain" approach—i.e., describing what civil society is or what it might be. This view prioritizes action over structure, conceiving of civil society not as a fixed entity but as a "mode of interaction within a given society" (Wischermann, 2010, p. 9) that results in overlaps, continuities, and some level of cooperative behaviors between CSOs and the political order.

Various attempts have been made to conceive of civil society using the logic of actions approach. Uphoff and Krishna (2004) located civil society actions on a spectrum that covers a wide range of activities, from supporting state policies to public resistance. Building on this notion of a spectrum, Hannah (2007, p. 93) conceived of civil society activities as placed on a "continuum," with civil disobedience and mass demonstrations at one end, and welfare and social services provision at the other. Between the two extremes, civil society can also act as the opposition or a watchdog or perform lobbying or advocacy (Hannah, 2007). A simpler version of this model can be found in Young's (2000) dualistic approach, which she derived from J. Cohen and Arato's (1992) distinction between offensive and defensive collective action. As Lewis (2013) keenly observed, Young's approach is a productive framework that helps illuminate both patterns of cooperation and contestation underlying the interaction between the authoritarian state and civil society.

For Young (2000), civil society actions could be viewed through the lens of two functions. The first, "self-organization," refers to the aspect of civil society that delivers resources and services to marginalized populations, providing grounds for people in a community to come together for mutual benefit and the articulation of group consciousness. The second function, "public sphere"—which Young built based on Habermas' (1991, 1996, p. 360) vision of civil society as "a network for communicating information and points of view"—refers to a mediating set of institutions that gather interests and concerns from citizens, transmitting them to a public sphere through which the state's actions and decisions can be questioned or challenged.

Evidently, the two functions that Young outlines here match the two endpoints of Hannah's (2007) continuum of civil society activities.

Young's dualistic approach to viewing the functions of civil society is a particularly useful device for making sense of the push-pull relationship between the state and civil society in authoritarian contexts. As Lewis (2013) argued, the states in these settings are supportive of the first function of civil society—the self-organization role—and encourage CSOs to engage in service delivery. In authoritarian regimes such as China and Vietnam, this encouragement even paves the way for the establishment of government-operated NGOs (GONGOs)—publicly sponsored NGOs affiliated with a government ministry—characterized by largely government-appointed leadership and government-funded activities (Foster, 2001; Wu, 2003; K. G. Nguyễn & Q. T. Nguyễn, 2018). When fulfilling the "self-organization" function, CSOs act as subcontractors to assist the state in delivering social services to its citizens (Hsu, 2010; Wischermann, 2010); hence, the relationship between the state and CSOs in these instances reflects patterns of cooperation. This collaborative reception from the state can be explained by the fact that civil society, when acting as service deliverer, helps the state fulfil functions that it is unable, or unwilling, to fulfil. Subsequently, these activities help legitimize the state from within: both in terms of legitimizing the state's abilities to address the needs of its citizens, and fulfilling a portrayal of the state as politically open to civil society's contributions (Lewis, 2013; Thayer, 2009; Wischermann et al., 2015).

The same cannot be said for the "public sphere" function of civil society, which carries the role of gathering public concerns and creating autonomous spaces in which multiple discourses can be developed and promoted. The authoritarian state perceives this civil society function as an alarming threat to its legitimacy, therefore spending considerable resources to restrict the ability of civil society to act as producers of public arenas of discussion (Fathollah-Nejad, 2014). This results in severe repression, such as detainment and punishment, for those who participate in what Thayer (2009, p. 1) has referred to as "political civil society," or engage in overtly confrontational behaviors that the state deems "regime opposition" (A. N. Vũ, 2017, p. 1182) or "distributing reactionary propaganda" (Thayer, 2009, p. 12; Gainsborough, 2010b; Hayton, 2020). This is not to say that this second function of civil society does not exist in authoritarian regimes. Some levels of civil society expression of values related to democratic freedom, transparency, and meaningful participation continue to shape civic life in these societal contexts (T. H. Bùi, 2013; J. Carroll, 2004; Hewison, 1999). However, CSOs engaging in these activities are watched carefully by the state, "surviv[ing] only insofar as they limit any democratic claims making" (Spires, 2011, p. 36; Lee, 2004; Pongsapich, 1999; Hedman, 2001). Authoritarian states also use legal measures to restrict those engaged in public sphere activities, such as withholding registration from associations that receive more than a certain amount of their income from

foreign sources (Hailegebriel, 2010, referring to the case of Ethiopia), or placing restrictions on NGOs' political advocacy and increasing censorship (Lewis, 2013, referring to the case of Russia).

So far, this discussion has shown that the state in authoritarian contexts maintains a dual policy: it encourages civil society to act as a service deliverer yet restricts it from facilitating discursive activities in the public sphere. This dual policy allows the state to protect its legitimacy while continuing to receive resources and support from international donors. This political order explains why CSOs in authoritarian contexts can be rather polyvalent: they both advocate for democratic values and help maintain authoritarian rule in their activities (Wischermann et al., 2015). Hannah (2007, p. 124) characterized this polyvalent attitude as "a complex dance" that CSOs must engage in as they navigate between domestic and international ideas of development and civil society. While it is evident that the authoritarian state imposes controls on what CSOs can and cannot do, and in doing so dictates the meanings of development and civil society in local contexts, the influence of international donor communities on civil society actions must not be overlooked.

Several scholars have expressed their skepticism of this influence, which they regard as a co-optation of civil society by international development projects (Mercer, 2003; Jenkins, 2001, 2002; Wickramasinghe, 2005; Hearn, 2001). On the one hand, a "good governance" agenda can be considered a form of political intervention that attempts to challenge authoritarian states by transforming them from the ground up (Jenkins, 2001, 2002). On the other hand, donor support for the formation of service-providing CSOs in developing nations has resulted in the worldwide transformation of CSOs into policy experts and service providers with close relationships to both donors and the state (W. K. Carroll & Sapinski 2017; Bebbington et al., 2008; Glasius & Ishkanian, 2014). This, accordingly, has led to what Hannah (2007, p. 85) referred to as a "crippled" and "watered down" civil society, one that serves to legitimate both the state's and the donor's policies, leaving the status quo unchallenged (Mercer, 2003; Jenkins, 2001, 2002; Wickramasinghe, 2005; Hearn, 2001). In other words, acting as mere service providers that comply with international development funding procedures not only means that CSOs lose their political potential, but also that they become increasingly subsumed in professionalization and bureaucratization, which in turn hinders their ability to connect with grassroots activism and create meaningful social change (W. K. Carroll & Sapinski, 2017; Pant, 2017).

While sharing the concerns of the above scholars regarding the co-optation of civil society by both the authoritarian state and the international development agenda, I argue that this critical lens should not cause us to overlook the capacity of CSOs to contribute to development and social change in authoritarian contexts. Here, it is important to reimagine Young's dual framework—to conceive of the two functions she outlines not as dichotomous, but rather as part of the complex choreography that civil society actors perform to

achieve their goals. Since we recognize that the relationship between the state and civil society in this context is not entirely straightforward, and that civil society actions can be polyvalent, it can be suggested that civil society groups in authoritarian states engage in both functions Young outlines, albeit not overtly. In other words, I argue that the public sphere function can coexist with the service delivery function in civil society daily activities, but that this requires skillful maneuvering in terms of framing and negotiation with the state. For instance, the success of the Vietnamese LGBTQ movement in the last decade is an example of how social change can be pursued using a "meticulously calculated and technocratic approach" that does not overtly challenge the authoritarian state's rule and power (Faludi, 2016, p. 6; Y. Mai, 2022).

Expanding Young's framework, this study recognizes that in authoritarian regimes, civil society still plays a significant role in driving societal and political development, although this development is restricted to areas that are negotiated by civil society actors as nonthreatening to state legitimacy; in other words, it takes the form of negotiated development. This approach suggests that the turn of CSOs toward becoming professional service providers, as driven by international development practices, does not necessarily mean a loss of political edge. Rather, this turn can be construed as part of a skillful maneuver that allows civil society, by negotiating the meaning of its activities, to make use of its service-delivery, self-organizing function (which is allowed by the state) to carve out space for its public sphere function (which is restricted). In other words, in contexts where compliance is essential to survival, compliance should not be merely interpreted as consensus.

This acknowledgement paves the way for a novel approach to studying civil society actions in authoritarian contexts that focuses on meaning-making. Because negotiated meaning is central to understanding how CSOs perform their activities, this investigation is based upon looking at how civil society actors make sense of their participation in civil society and development processes, as well as how they envision the role of the state in development. My conception of civil society is akin to that of Fine (2012a, 2014), who conceived of civil society as consisting of small groups or, in his words, "tiny publics." Whereas Fine focused on group relations as a means to understand civil society, this study instead looks at what happens inside these tiny publics that engage in civil society activities in which both "self-organizing" and "public sphere" functions can be performed. Here, the question becomes the following: How do those who participate in these activities conceive of their role in shaping development, and how can we draw on their meaning-making to understand the internal dynamics of civil society, its consequences, and its potentials? This investigation hence reflects a "sociological miniaturism" approach to studying social processes (Stolte et al., 2001, p. 387).

4.2 Development programs as tiny publics

This study starts with the assumption that development programs are small groups that can be recognized as participating within a broader civic structure. Essentially, these programs are tiny publics, allowing us to investigate civil society and civic engagement using a "sociological miniaturism" approach (Stolte et al., 2001, p. 387) to shed light on a larger institution by focusing on the groups and people that comprise it.

Coined by Fine (2021, p. 14; Fine & Harrington, 2004), the term "tiny public" is defined as "a group with a recognizable interaction order and culture that strives to play a role within a civic structure, democratic or authoritarian." The concept was developed based on the recognition that small groups can possess an implicit political dimension and contribute to the formation of a collective identity. By "small," Fine meant "a collective whose members know each other as distinct individuals" (Fine & Harrington, 2004, p. 343). Fine argued that these small-scale collective units have significant implications in larger sociopolitical contexts and can thereby be a lens that allows scholars to make sense of civic and political engagement. In other words, it is in the examination of such groups that one sheds light on the dynamics of civic engagement within diverse frameworks, for "these publics are society itself" (Fine, 2021, p. 15).

The "tiny public" concept reflects Fine's critique of a gap in political sociology, in which he identified an absence of studies that investigate the public sphere through the lens of group culture and interaction. Unlike Putnam (2000), who conceived of civil society and civic engagement in terms of formal civic organizations (e.g., bowling leagues or religious organizations), Fine (2014, p. 11) saw civil society in small group dynamics and urged scholars to turn their attention to the "less formal, often nameless groups" that one might find in a coffee shop or gathered around a kitchen table. Fine saw such groups as the cause, context, and consequence of civic engagement, and maintained that it is through small groups that the micro foundations of civil society can be observed and analyzed (Fine & Harrington, 2004). He proposed that the use of this context would allow political sociology to recognize that "a range of publics—elites, conformers, the marginal, and the resistant—all depend on the meanings, the social relations, and the structural possibilities provided by local communities" (Fine, 2021, p. 16).

Fine's stance on civil society and his manner of examining civic engagement bear a strong resemblance to the ways other scholars have studied civil society actions in authoritarian regimes (e.g., Wischermann, 2005, 2010; Hannah, 2007; Wells-Dang, 2014b, 2023). Hannah (2007) and Wischermann (2010) also advocated for the need to take into account less conventional forms of civil society, including more casual groups, as long as they perform some civil society functions. As stated in Subsection 4.1.2, this perspective stems from the recognition that civil society and the state in authoritarian

settings share a nuanced and complex relationship, and there is no clear autonomy of civil society organizations from the state's control. Thus, Wischermann (2010, p. 9) urged us to adopt a "logic of action" approach when studying civil society—to prioritize action rather than structure, and to conceive of civil society not as a fixed entity but as a "mode of interaction." Fine's focus on small groups reflects the spirit of this logic of action approach: his conception of small groups as the cause, context, and consequence of civil society is grounded on an emphasis on what these small groups can do—i.e., perform civil society roles and activities—rather than what they are. This view lays the groundwork for an understanding of society as a web of small, close-knit groups, as Walzer (2007, p. 132) noted here:

> Civil society itself is sustained by groups much smaller than the demos or the working class or the mass of consumers or the nation. All these are necessarily pluralized as they are incorporated. They become part of the world of family, friends, comrades, and colleagues, where people are connected to one another and made responsible for one another.

In various publications, Fine (1979, 2012b, 2014, 2021) and his collaborators (Fine & Harrington, 2004; Fine & Van den Scott, 2011; Fine & Corte, 2017) have extensively explored how small groups play a pivotal role in shaping the civic engagement of their members. Fine highlighted different functions and features whereby groups can serve as the medium to connect individuals to a larger social system, simultaneously acting as the cause, context, and consequence of civil society.

First, Fine (2014, 2021; Fine & Harrington, 2004) maintained that groups have both framing and mobilization functions, which provide the impetus for civil society actions. Groups provide schemas for members to interpret the meanings of events and serve as an outpost through which people align themselves with broader ideologies, symbols, and movements. These essential resources link the group's membership with larger political and cultural themes, giving groups the ability to shape civic mindsets and civic actions. Through participation in these tiny publics, individuals gain social networks and framings to construct their identities, embedding them within larger "imagined communities" (a term coined by Anderson, 2006) they feel loyal to and shaping their sense of self as well as of citizenship.

Second, groups provide context for the enactment of civil society through social control. Repeated and reciprocal interactions among members allow groups to monitor and sanction, shaping behaviors through a system of incentives that encourages individuals to collaborate flexibly for the common interest. Furthermore, group expectations and norms contribute to the drawing of group boundaries, enacting "order without law" (Fine, 2021, p. 150), which maintains cohesion and unity among members while uniting them against

outsiders. Disruptors of the group's harmony or those who resist its norms may be excluded or marginalized, reinforcing the group's control mechanisms.

Third, certain benefits derived from participation in small groups, including feelings of fun and pleasure (Fine & Corte, 2017), create conditions for collective identification, strengthen the sense of belonging, and encourage further engagement. Individuals who experience the positive impact of group participation are more inclined to sustain their involvement in similar settings. In turn, these groups become not just sources of inspiration, but also practical models for participation on a larger scale. In this way, small groups can become the "gravitational centers of civic life" (Fine & Harrington 2004, p. 346), and serve as resources that can be mobilized for public participation, with individuals motivated to extend their participation beyond the group's setting.

When Fine's observations on small groups are applied to study youth participation in development programs, a clear link emerges between these training settings and the broader civil society. These programs bring young participants together to engage in discussions about community issues, thereby providing them with a context to collaboratively determine which societal challenges merit collective response. This process results in the recognition and prioritization of certain issues as significant social problems that warrant collective action, setting them apart from less pressing concerns. Essentially, these development programs function as "tiny publics" that equip participants with a framing lens to comprehend pressing matters within their communities and their roles—as responsible citizens and active contributors—in addressing them. Furthermore, these programs provide tangible resources and support, such as capacity-training and small grants, to facilitate the realization of youth's development initiatives and projects. This has direct implications for mobilizing young individuals to deepen their involvement in civil society initiatives, or even to initiate their own development projects. Participation in these programs can also create a sense of belonging to the groups, which, as Fine (2012a, 2014, 2021) noted, can lead to increased commitment and draw these participants into more civic engagement endeavors.

In essence, the integration of Fine's theory of "tiny publics" as constituting civil society into the investigation of youth participation in development programs sheds light on the intricate connection between these programs and the larger fabric of civil society engagement. An analysis that addresses the norms and practices embraced in these programs, as well as illuminating the shared visions and resources that these programs offer youth, can provide deeper insights into how youth participation in development programs contributes to further involvement in civil society initiatives. Accordingly, a thorough exploration of the perspectives and experiences of youth as they immerse themselves in these programs is crucial. This calls for a specific recognition of how group members are agents who actively make sense of their participation in development programs through processes of meaning-making. In this regard,

the following sections spotlight various concepts grounded in the literature on meaning-making that are useful for this investigation. Through this multifaceted approach, the study can shed light on the nuanced dynamics shaping youth participation in development programs and their broader impact on civil society engagement.

4.3 Meaning-making in tiny publics

As stated above, in Fine's conceptualization of civil society through "tiny publics," micro-culture is placed at the forefront of analysis. The link that Fine established between culture and civil society functions comes from the understanding that every group develops its own culture, namely "a bounded set of images and traditions that come to characterize those individuals to themselves and often to outsiders" (Fine, 1995, p. 129). This shared set of meaningful references helps inform what members of a group perceive as legitimate actions, intimately shaping both individual and collective identity (Fine, 1995). Accordingly, the focus on social relations, local interactions, and shared meanings within small groups allows us to observe civil society functions in a micro-level (Fine, 2010, 2012a, 2014, 2021). This micro-sociological analysis, Fine argued, can be used as an interpretive framework and a starting point through which a grounded, action-oriented structural analysis is made possible.

Precisely how one is meant to go about performing this type of analysis to investigate civil society, however, remains obscure in Fine's research. What is clear is his fondness for the dramaturgical approach and ethnography, which he believed to be essential tools for studying interactions within groups and group cultures. While these methodological approaches are certainly useful for identifying group cultures,[3] if one's purpose is to illuminate civic engagement and the link between individuals and civil society, it is imperative to move beyond identification and ask how individuals make sense of their own group's culture in relation to their participation in the civil sphere.

While it is important to identify what kind of shared values, norms, and collective memories constitute the group's culture, it is equally important to investigate how individuals make sense of these shared tools and resources to establish and nurture civic attitudes and actions in their daily lives, thereby contributing to social development. This gap in Fine's approach can be

[3] Fine (1979, p. 734) coined a new term, "idioculture", to refer to the idea that "every group has to some extent a culture of its own," rather than using what he acknowledged to be "the most logical phrase": group culture. He explained that "group culture" had previously been used with different meanings, and he thus felt the need to come up with a new term. Given that this particular conceptual debate is at best peripheral to the aim of this dissertation, I have chosen not to unnecessarily overwhelm the reader with more new terms, thus reporting on Fine's ideas using "the most logical phrase."

addressed with tools from theoretical concepts on meaning-making. Through meaning-making, one can identify the boundaries these individuals draw on to construct their belonging in the groups, the narratives they rely on to make sense of their participation in these groups, and the framing they use to conceive of their contributions to the development process outside of the group context. Building on Fine's conceptualization of the tiny public, this study demonstrates how individuals' participation in small groups and the meanings they attribute to their participation can help illuminate youth participation in societal development on a micro scale. This section thereby addresses three concepts to be utilized in studying meaning-making: frame, narrative, and boundary.

4.3.1 Frame

Meaning-making takes on various forms, one of which involves frame generating. Goffman (1974) conceptualized "frames" as mental orientations that structure perception and interpretation. Individuals rely on these cognitive frameworks to make sense of their experiences by organizing them into meaningful structures. Frames are shaped by past experiences and cultural norms, serving as problem-solving tools for interpreting the surrounding world. The interplay of cognitive and cultural processes contributes to the creation of frames, highlighting the role of both individual cognition and broader cultural context in shaping individuals' understandings of events and experiences.

The concept of frame holds wide-ranging implications. In the study of social movements, frames offer valuable insights into how these movements define their objectives and rationalize their motivations. Additionally, the concept aids in understanding how social movements strategically leverage collective identity to promote collective action. This is achieved by framing their goals and activities in ways that resonate with the shared identity of the group (Snow et al., 1986; Snow & Benford, 1992; Benford, 1993, 1997; Benford & Snow, 2000). A "collective-action frame" functions as an interpretive framework that highlights a collective set of values, beliefs, and aspirations for transformative change (Snow & Benford, 1992). It is important to recognize that collective-action frames are not static or internally consistent; they may contain contradictions and evolve over time (Giddens, 1976). This dynamic nature underscores the ongoing negotiation and adaptation of frames within the context of social movements. Furthermore, emphasizing the link between discourse and frames, Johnston (1995) suggested that collective-action frames can be effectively reconstructed and understood by closely analyzing the discourse embedded within social movements. This signifies that the language used, the narratives presented, and the ideas conveyed within social movements are elements that serve to unveil framing mechanisms and their role in shaping collective mobilization. This link between frame and discourse can be seen in, for instance, media coverage of national elections, with language

referencing winners and losers shaping the framing of politics as a strategic game (McMenamin et al., 2012).

In the context of development practices, framing helps us understand how individuals collectively perceive problems related to the development process. Here, the concepts of "diagnostic framing" and "prognostic framing," coined by Snow and Benford (1992), hold particular significance. While these dimensions of framing are often interconnected within interpretive frameworks of social movements, the focus here is on diagnostic framing and prognostic framing as analytical dimensions.

Diagnostic framing involves the strategic act of defining and presenting the societal problems that a movement aims to address (Snow & Benford, 1992; Benford & Snow, 2000). It serves as the foundation of a movement's narrative, identifying perceived injustices, grievances, or disparities. This framing dimension shapes how both members and potential supporters understand the context of the movement and identifies who or what is to blame for the problem.

In its function of assigning blame, diagnostic framing lays the groundwork upon which prognostic framing is constructed. By identifying problems, it paves the way for garnering support and envisioning relevant solutions (Snow & Benford, 1992; Cress & Snow, 2000). Prognostic framing relates to how social movements envision and articulate potential solutions to the identified issues. It involves articulating a collective vision that outlines the desired future state, offering a roadmap for achieving the movement's goals. This framing dimension is essential for shaping followers' comprehension of the movement's purpose, as well as fostering shared commitment.

Moreover, prognostic framing bridges the gap between a movement's ideological foundation and the concrete steps taken to realize its objectives (Cress & Snow, 2000). It transforms abstract ideals into actionable strategies, outlining tactics and initiatives that drive the movement forward. This framing aspect aligns with the movement's overarching narrative, advocating for why specific actions are not only necessary, but are also promising avenues toward a better future.

In essence, while diagnostic framing establishes the narrative foundation for a social movement by identifying core issues to be addressed, prognostic framing provides strategic tools to present a coherent and compelling roadmap for change (Snow & Benford, 1992; Cress & Snow, 2000; Benford & Snow, 2000). By defining problems in ways that resonate and articulating concrete solutions for an envisioned collective future, movements can mobilize and inspire followers, while also cementing their positions within the broader social discourse (Taylor & Whittier, 1995).

In the realm of development programs, the introduction of topics related to development, such as environmental pollution or gender inequality, is often accompanied by a multifaceted framing process. This framing serves to not only present the issues at hand, but also to establish a comprehensive

perspective on the problems and solutions. In essence, when such topics are addressed, a diagnostic framing of the problem is provided, shedding light on the underlying causes. Moving forward, a prognostic framing of the solution is offered, outlining potential approaches to mitigate the development-related problems or achieve development outcomes (see, e.g., Svensson & Wahlström, 2023; Martin, 2003 for concrete applications of these two concepts in analyzing, respectively, the climate movement and neighborhood activism).

These frames serve a dual purpose. First, they confer a sense of legitimacy on a development program's agenda. By framing the program's objectives as responses to authentic development challenges, these frames underscore the urgency and importance of the initiatives. Secondly, they provide legitimacy for the recommended actions or behaviors advocated by these programs as viable solutions. The frames essentially highlight the proposed strategies as logical and rational responses to the identified problems.

Furthermore, identifying these frames not only enhances our understanding of the issues at hand, but also sheds light on the diverse and sometimes conflicting interests of various actors within civil society. As they envision the trajectory of societal development, these actors adopt differing perspectives on the problems and corresponding solutions. In essence, the various ways in which problems and solutions are framed reflects the dynamic nature of civil society, which harbors a spectrum of approaches to development.

Beyond mere communication, the act of framing serves as a powerful tool that shapes perceptions, justifies actions, and reflects the nuanced perspectives of various stakeholders. Understanding these frames is not only essential for comprehending the dynamics of development initiatives, but also for deciphering the complex interplay of interests and priorities that define the landscape of civil society's vision for societal progress. In this way, framing is a helpful concept for shedding light on the norms and strategies promoted by development programs and, by extension, illuminating how such environments can become tiny publics that promote civic engagement in their participants.

4.3.2 Narrative

When frames are arranged in a "storified" structure with an overarching plot involving chronological events and characters, a narrative is produced (Stapleton & Wilson, 2017). Narrating stories is a way for us to process our encounters by retelling them within a coherent and meaningful structure.

Like frames, narratives are rich and complex cultural forms that encode understandings of the world and shape social actions (Daniel et al., 2011). However, there are key distinctions between frames and narratives, and the two concepts should not be used interchangeably (Aukes et al., 2020; Nepstad, 2002). Specifically, narratives employ certain unique rhetorical features that differ from those of frames: while frames specify a diagnosis and prognosis

for a problem using rhetorical expressions of meaning and intention in contestation (Martin, 2003), narrative employs features of emplotment and temporality (Olsen, 2014), within which a series of events is linked temporally and causatively to convey moral values and social norms (De Fina & Tseng, 2017; Bradby, 2017). In narrative telling, the use of plot and the unfolding of events in chronological sequence helps add a moral and practical dimension to the storyline: events derive meaning from their connection to other events within the story's sequence, revealing their temporal and causal relationships (Davis, 2002). Based on how narrators arrange the order of the events and what they choose to include, "every fully realized story" can become a "kind of allegory" (H. White, 1980, p. 17), exemplifying that certain actions lead to certain consequences. This is demonstrated effectively by Bradby (2017, p. 211) in the following example:

> A widely employed minimal definition of story has two events that are linked sequentially such that re-ordering the events changes the meaning of the story as follows:
>
> 'I got sick. I went to the doctor'
>
> compared with
>
> 'I went to the doctor. I got sick.'

Narratives, or "persuasive storytelling" (Fajer, 1992, p. 528), have emerged as powerful strategies within social movements, taking up significant space in this body of literature. Like frames, narratives serve as dynamic tools that promote mobilization efforts by inciting and sustaining momentum. One of the reasons narratives work in this context is their ability to bridge the gap between technical jargon and individual experience. Narrative plays a special role in amplifying the voices and experiences of those who may otherwise be overlooked in scientific, technical, or expert discourse (Polletta, 1998a, 1998b, 2002). For these marginalized individuals, sharing personal stories can become an act of resistance and empowerment, allowing them to reclaim their agency, challenge dominant discourses, counter prevailing stereotypes, and offer alternative perspectives (Carbin, 2014; Naples, 2003). Furthermore, narratives allow the audience to see the world and experience underlying moral lessons through another person's eyes (Olsen, 2014). By leveraging their inherent relatability through the "common ground in human experience" (Fajer, 1992, p. 528), narratives can evoke emotional resonance and inspire broader public support.

Using these features, narratives can facilitate both external mobilization and internal cohesion. Externally, narratives serve as bridges, fusing the gap between the movement and individuals who may not have direct experience

with the movement's core issue, ultimately encouraging their alignment with the cause (Bernstein, 1997). Internally, narratives foster a shared sense of collective identity within the movement through the construction and transmission of common beliefs, values, and commitments to change (Polletta, 2006). Narratives unify the individual experiences of participants into something cohesive that transcends individual stories, reminding them that their struggles are part of a broader narrative of change (Nepstad, 2002; Polletta, 2006; Taylor & Whittier, 1995).

In light of such insights, Fine (1995, p. 128) has proposed that a social movement can be aptly described as a "bundle of narratives," and identified several narrative forms frequently utilized within this context. Each narrative is carefully crafted so that it evokes specific emotions among audiences by aligning itself with the context in which it is presented. "Horror stories" are used to validate the participation of members in a movement by taking on negative events and presenting them in a dramatic, compelling manner to elicit sadness and anger. "War stories" are similar to the stories soldiers tell after a battle, and involve members reflecting on their experiences in the movement to emphasize the challenges that it faces, while at the same time asserting that the movement is righteous and its members are morally justified. "Happy endings," in contrast, focus on the benefits and changes that occur as a result of participating in such movements; they serve to boost morale and compel members to stay involved.

Interestingly, Fine (1995) pointed out that most of these stories fall under the category of personal experience narratives, in which the teller is the primary character in the account and communicates how a movement shaped their trajectory. Some movements showcase "stories of acceptance," in which the self is initially portrayed as flawed and the social movement is depicted as the savior of the self. This narrative follows a similar pattern to religious narratives: the individual is initially lost, but eventually finds redemption through the help of the movement, gaining moral standing in the process (Fine, 1995). Alternatively, movements that aim to deflect stigma often employ heroic narratives to portray the narrator as a victim of injustice, presenting an untarnished and heroic self in the story. These narratives serve as powerful internal propaganda for the movement, justifying both its mission and outcomes.

By exploring the narratives shared by participants in development programs, this study illuminates both personal stories and collective reflections on civic engagement. The analysis uses as its starting point Fine's (1995) recognition that as participants engage in these development initiatives, they become intertwined with a shared, overarching narrative. The influence of this shared grand narrative is perceptible in the manner participants articulate their experiences within development programs. These narrative threads can provide insight into the informal history of the group, showing the kinds of "emotions, cognitions, and cultural artifacts" generated within the groups that connect the participants to the larger society (Fine & Harrington, 2004, p. 347;

Scheff, 1994), with these small group contexts serving as repositories of civic memory or as sites for the retelling of national identity narratives (Johnston, 1991). An examination of these narratives also reveals whether the group's culture contests dominant cultural scripts or aligns with them.

In addition, "tiny public" is not only instrumental in the creation of collective action, but also determines how individuals conceive of their own identities and is central to the socialization process that creates citizens (Fine & Harrington, 2004). Thus, examining participants' narratives can shed light on how young people construct civic engagement through participation in development programs. While crafting their narratives, these young informants are not only recounting events, but also engaging in a process of sense-making in which they intertwine their self-perception and aspirations with their experiences in development programs. As Davis (2002) has noted, narrative explanation operates retrospectively: participants attribute meaning to past events based on how these events shaped their present circumstances or are expected to shape their future actions. Here, the choice of narrative style—whether participants opt for stories of acceptance, heroic stories, happy endings, or horror stories—can offer deeper insight into how they, in hindsight, make sense of their participation and its impact on their identity. Analyzing the kind of plots, moral lessons, and characters involved in their stories can reveal how youth make sense of their participation in development programs—both within the context of participation and outside it.

4.3.3 Boundary

A final concept that is relevant to the investigation of the meaning-making processes of participants in a tiny public is "boundary." The focus on boundaries stems from the acknowledgement that groups are acutely aware of issues of membership, and the question of "who belongs" is central to how they control their borders (Fine & Harrington, 2004). Groups that are tightly closed and view outsiders as rejecting their values are at risk of "balkanizing": when that happens, these groups can become heavily "defended communities" and can be difficult to enter (Fine & Harrington, 2004, p. 352).

In the social sciences, boundaries are a well-established concept (see Lamont & Molnar, 2002 for a thorough review). Studying how boundaries are drawn, reified, or challenged across contexts reveals how we attribute meanings to phenomena, groups, and objects, given that individuals organize a significant part of their social interactions around the "formation, transformation, activation, and suppression" of boundaries (Tilly, 2004, p. 214). Furthermore, boundaries are central to understanding how individuals and groups assess and engage in the "construction of belonging" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 203), both in terms of constructing "we-ness" versus "otherness," and in terms of determining exclusion, inclusion, access, and participation (Anthias, 2008).

A group's sense of belonging, collective identity, and shared practices inherently embed, albeit subtly, the very boundaries that define them (Anthias, 2008). Group boundaries are established through group expectations: defining the group's identity also means defining what it is not. Groupness, or the feeling of belonging to a collective, can be constructed through discovered commonalities (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000), whereby mutual interests or affinities among group members, whether they relate to style (Williams, 2009) or aesthetic judgment (Wohl, 2015), can be leveraged into something more permanent and solid (Fine, 2021). It is through this internalization of shared situational affinities that groups construct these traits as taken-for-granted, unchallenged, and seemingly unchanging facets of social and personal existence. Consequently, belonging is conceived of as "natural," and thus becomes "invisible in hegemonic formulations" (Anthias, 2008, p. 8).

The processes of bonding and boundary-making, in other words, are intrinsically interconnected: the same shared commonalities that forge strong bonds among group members can simultaneously serve as barriers, shaping groups' perceptions of themselves as distinct entities (Fine, 2021). Groups serve as both inclusive entities and exclusive borders within this construction of belonging: constructing "groupness" involves a dynamic interplay between inclusion and exclusion, fostering internal cohesion while simultaneously banding against external others. Via this process, groups produce a "natural" community of people and function as exclusionary borders of otherness (Anthias, 2008).

The distinction between two types of boundaries—symbolic and social, as proposed by Lamont and Molnar (2002)—is particularly useful for envisioning this construction of belonging. "Symbolic boundaries" are conceptual devices used to define reality, a medium through which social actors organize people, practices, and objects into meaningful categories (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). These types of boundaries constitute elements of intersubjective meaning structures, providing actors with interpretive strategies and principles of classification to make sense of themselves, others, and the environment. While symbolic boundaries can shape actors' behaviors, they are not necessarily reflected in the formal structure of institutions or the distribution of resources. They are also subject to contestation: different groups struggle over them, hoping to impose their vision of society and make it accepted as the norm.

When a system of classification becomes widely agreed upon, symbolic boundaries transform into social boundaries. Only then do these classification systems take on a constraining character and shape social interactions in important ways, such as shaping the grouping of individuals in stabilizing patterns, with concrete consequences for resource distribution. "Social boundaries," therefore, refer to objectified patterns of social differences manifested in the unequal access to and unequal distribution of social opportunities and resources, whether material or nonmaterial (Lamont & Molnar, 2002).

Symbolic boundaries become social boundaries when they become socially accepted.

The relationship between symbolic boundaries and social boundaries can be imagined as a constant negotiation. Symbolic boundaries are, of course, never fixated: individuals and groups constantly compete in the production, diffusion, and institutionalization of different systems of meanings and classifications. As Anthias (2008, p. 9) aptly described, boundaries are "forms of political practice." The struggle over defining socially-agreed symbolic boundaries has relevant implications for the process of not only creating or sustaining, but also contesting or dissolving institutionalized social differences (Tilly, 2004; Alexander, 2007).

Acknowledging the permeability of symbolic boundaries and the consequences, as well as potential, of this permeability, allows one to recognize the relevance of boundary work and how this process, manifested via the actions of individuals and groups, contributes to shape social boundaries and access to resources. As individuals negotiate for their version of symbolic boundaries, they engage in boundary work, known as "the efforts of demarcation in which people become involved, to distinguish and separate activities, phenomena, objects, conditions, or people from each other" (Åkerstrom, 2002, p. 517). Via this process, they can bring some social objects inside a category (boundary expansion), push others out of the definition frame of a category (boundary contraction), or reorder the hierarchical positions of social objects within an existing category (repositioning) (Wimmer, 2008, 2013; see also Åkerstrom, 2002). Through boundary work, one can observe the social construction of reality in action: actors who strive to reify a boundary participate in the struggle to transform their own imagining of symbolic boundaries into a commonly accepted "shared representation" of the world. When applied within the framework of group dynamics, boundary work enables individuals to navigate the negotiation of their membership and belonging in a group—either by securing their inclusion or justifying the exclusion of others.

In light of the acknowledgement that development programs, as tiny publics, can have balkanizing and excluding features, and with prior research suggesting that access to such programs can be restricted (see Chapter 2), a central concern in this study is whether participatory development programs are truly accessible to young people. To address issues of access and membership, it is necessary to identify what constitutes "requisites of belonging" in these programs. In other words, we must engage with this question: "What is required from a specific person for him/her to be entitled to belong, to be considered as belonging, to the collective?" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 209). By uncovering these requisites of belonging—the requirements for entry into development programs—this analysis sheds light on the symbolic boundaries pursued by actors associated with the programs.

Furthermore, through an examination of the participants' narratives, the study observes how the negotiation of belonging takes place through boundary

work techniques, recognizing that individuals can choose to adopt, internalize, or negotiate the boundaries imposed upon them. Analyzing how young people negotiate their access and belonging to development programs can illuminate the extent to which the boundaries of these tiny publics are permeable and, consequently, the extent to which they are accessible to a wider public.

4.4 Concluding remarks

So far, this chapter has outlined different elements that constitute my theoretical argument. As these involve concepts and studies from different disciplines, and the thread linking them may not be easily visible, this concluding section is intended to illuminate how these parts connect into a whole, and how this contributes to the aim of this dissertation.

This chapter began with an overview and problematization of the concept of "civil society," which has yielded several debates in previous scholarship. As argued in the first section of this chapter, scholarship on civil society has tended to hold many assumptions about this non-state sector. One of these assumptions is that civil society is a distinct, autonomous sphere, separate from the state. This assumption can be problematic, especially when what constitutes civil society still remains obscure. Furthermore, in contexts where the relationship between the state and non-state sectors are intimately intertwined, such as in authoritarian settings, maintaining the prerequisite that civil society must be completely distinct from the state is to say there can be no civil society in authoritarian contexts.

This study offers a way to study the functions of civil society even under the close monitoring and restrictions imposed by the state. In the second section of this chapter, I revisited the literature on civil society in authoritarian regimes to show that even under these restrictions, civil society can be a relevant actor in the development process. Young's (2000) framework has been especially helpful here, with its conception of civil society as having two main roles: that of self-organizing service deliverer, and that of bringing deliberation into the public sphere. In political contexts in which the public sphere function of civil society is highly repressed and restricted, civil society organizations can focus on acting as service deliverers to contribute to development—a role that may hold the potential for challenging the state's authority.

What can be taken from this discussion on civil society is that rather than imagining civil society as the third sector that performs checks and balances with the state and market, it is more useful to focus on what these organizations can do on a spectrum including welfare provision, lobbying, acting as a watchdog, or promoting resistance (Hannah, 2007). This is essentially the "logic of actions" approach proposed by Wischermann (2005), who maintained that civil society is a not a fixed entity, but rather manifests itself through concrete actions. In authoritarian settings in which the state has

monopolistic power to determine whether an organization can be legally registered as a CSO, focusing on civil society actions prevents us from overlooking interesting, unconventional, small-scale forms of civil society.

At this juncture, Fine's (2014, 2021) conception of civil society as being constituted of tiny publics is particularly useful. Fine provided a micro-sociological approach to dissecting a macro sphere, shifting the focus toward small groups which he saw as the mediums through which individuals connect to the larger society. Fine saw such groups as the cause, context, and consequence of civic engagement, and maintained that it is through small groups that the micro foundations of civil society can be observed and analyzed.

The integration of Fine's conception of civil society as being constituted of tiny publics into the investigation of youth participation in development programs sheds light on the intricate connections between these programs and the larger fabric of civil society engagement. An analysis that addresses the norms and practices embraced in these programs, as well as illuminating the shared visions and resources these programs offer youth, can provide deeper insights into how youth participation in them contributes to further involvement in civil society initiatives.

What remains is to figure out ways to investigate how participation in tiny publics contributes to civic engagement. The answer to this question can be found in meaning-making, which is essentially what this study is about. This requires an investigation into how these individuals make sense of the shared values, norms, and collective memories that stem from their participation in development programs, and how this meaning-making process helps inform their civic engagement. The study thus utilizes the concepts of frames and narratives to illuminate how development programs provide the mental structure and grand stories these individuals require to interpret the world around them, to conceive of which societal issues are important, and to view themselves and their roles in society. Furthermore, the concept of boundaries is useful in highlighting how belonging and membership are constructed and negotiated, shaping both inclusion and exclusion in participatory development.

The focus on meaning is particularly relevant to the case of Vietnam, where, as I have previously argued, civil society actors must perform a complex choreography in their relationship with the state, justifying the legitimacy of their activities by negotiating the meanings and framings of their activities. By turning the analytical gaze toward meaning-making, this study can at the very least reveal how the development process and development practices unfold through youth participation in development programs. Through meaning-making, one can identify the boundaries these individuals draw on to construct their belonging in the groups, the narratives they rely on to make sense of their participation, and the framing they use to conceive of their contributions to the development process outside of the group context.

Finally, it is worthwhile to conclude this chapter by elucidating the connection between these theoretical underpinnings and the aim of my dissertation.

The aim of this investigation is to explore and analyze how practices in Vietnamese participatory development shape young people's civic engagement, visions, and aspirations toward the development process.

To achieve that aim, I investigate how youth make sense of their participation in development programs, particularly the meanings and motivations they attach to their participation. These young people consist of a segment of Vietnamese civil society that engages in different civil society functions contributing to Vietnamese societal development. This group represents a facet of Vietnamese civil society that more often than not has tended to be overlooked in previous research, given that it is not necessarily involved with organizations that meet the conventional understanding of civil society as defined in previous scholarship. By studying how Vietnamese youth make sense of their participation, this dissertation illuminates how the Vietnamese development process unfolds, establishing the link between participation in tiny publics, civic engagement, and civil society.

5. Methods, data, and ethics

The aim of this research is to explore and analyze how practices in Vietnamese participatory development shape young people's civic engagement, visions, and aspirations toward the development process. This aim is achieved by investigating how development programs organized by CSOs recruit and train local youth participants, and how these young people make sense of their experiences in the programs. In the literature, these participants have often been viewed as "passive subjects waiting for development to be done for them" (Kelsall & Mercer, 2003, p. 299)—an assumption that fails to recognize what motivates these actors in the first place, what can deter them once engaged, and the ways in which they shape the outcome of participatory development projects. Recognizing their role in this process means treating them as agents with their own reasoning and motivations for deciding to get involved in participatory development. This focus calls for a research design and methods that would allow the informants to share about how they make sense of their experiences in development programs, as well as their actions and potential lifestyle changes following participation.

A description of my research design opens this chapter's methodological discussion, highlighting how qualitative interviews and participant observation can be combined to study participation in development programs. This first section also provides a detailed account of the data collection process, including the types and volumes of collected data, as well as any decisions made due to unforeseen circumstances. The next section of the chapter outlines the data analysis process, which involves two cycles of coding and the use of analytic memos. Finally, the last section presents the ethical and methodological considerations of this research, revisiting my selection of development programs and addressing issues of confidentiality and informed consent. It also offers a detailed reflection on my positionality, as well as all the measures taken to address the unequal researcher-informant power dynamic.

5.1 Data collection

This study acknowledges local participants in development programs as heterogeneous groups with diverse motivations, expectations, and meaning-making. Through an approach guided by the epistemological position that

knowledge is socially constructed, this study has sought to understand youth informants as agents who are actively engaged in constructing their own meanings and interpretations.

I chose a research approach characterized by a sense of closeness and flexibility in interaction with my informants. This approach allowed me to capture the nuances of their experiences, which would otherwise have been overlooked. It also enabled me to establish a sense of trust with my informants, which was beneficial in interpreting their experiences. My use of the term "informant" also reflects how I positioned these young people—not as traditional "participants" in research but as active collaborators in the co-creation of knowledge. This perspective recognizes the agency and expertise of young individuals in matters that are important to them, seeing their role as active contributors of knowledge. Furthermore, this choice was motivated by the recognition that Vietnamese society, influenced by Confucian values and authoritarian norms, often creates a divide between authority figures and youth. This divide can make it challenging for young individuals to openly express their thoughts and experiences to a researcher. A collaborative approach to conducting interviews holds the potential to bridge this gap, enabling youth to share their perspectives comfortably, knowing that their contributions are valued and respected.

The following subsections introduce the methods of data collection used in this study, namely qualitative interviews and participant observations. These subsections also illuminate how certain elements of these methods were revised as new insights arose during the data collection.

5.1.1 Interviews

The empirical data that underpin the findings presented in this dissertation primarily consist of interviews. Given the study's focus on young people's participation in development programs and the driving motivations behind this, qualitative interviews emerged as the most suitable method for data collection.

This study used as its starting point the epistemological standpoint that knowledge is socially constructed. Adopting this approach meant that rather than seeing the interview as a one-sided exchange of information, it was viewed as a dynamic, "collaborative achievement" of knowledge production (Talmy, 2011, p. 25; Holstein & Gubrium, 2011). From this perspective, meaning is not simply extracted through precise questioning or transferred through the interviewees' responses; rather, meanings are collaboratively produced, and narratives emerge as a result of the interview encounter and the interaction between the researcher and the informants (Patty & Ellis, 2017; Holstein & Gubrium, 2011). In Kvale's (2008) artful description, the process of interviewing in this case resembles a "journey" as the interviewer "walks along with the local inhabitants, asks questions and encourages them to tell

their own stories of the lived world" (Kvale, 2008, p. 19). While "wandering" along with the informant, the researcher skillfully guides the conversation and listens to the meanings conveyed by the informants, including what's being said "between the lines" (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). This approach to interviewing is characterized by its intimate, relational, and flexible nature, centering the collaborative processes of meaning-making in both storytelling and attentive listening (Patty & Ellis, 2017).

To locate the informants, I posted a message on a public social media page for NGOs and NPOs operating in Vietnam. By December 2019, the page boasted over 16,000 members, with 85% falling within the 18 to 34 age bracket. The post introduced my research project briefly, stating that I was seeking young individuals who had engaged in development programs facilitated by Vietnamese NGOs and local networks. I provided a link to an online form where potential informants could submit their email addresses. In order to ensure confidentiality, only I had access to the responses. Potential informants were encouraged to fill out the form instead of making direct comments to my post. They were also informed that no unauthorized persons would have access to the data. I then made contact with potential interviewees using the email addresses they provided, offering a more detailed description of the research. If the person was still interested in participating in the research at that point, I set up a time for an interview.

One person who responded to the form offered to help distribute it through various alumni networks, due to her extensive participation in development programs. Initially, I had concerns about the issue of "internal confidentiality" (Tolich, 2014) (a more thorough reflection on this issue can be found in Section 5.3). However, I rationalized that distributing the form did not necessarily mean she would know who would respond and agree to an interview, and finally accepted her offer.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face or online, depending on the informant's location. Initially, this choice was made in order to diversify the sample by including individuals from small, distant provinces rather than limiting my research to urban areas. Conducting interviews online is considered appropriate when the research design calls for diverse interviewees scattered across different locations (Tucker & Parker, 2019; de Villiers et al., 2022). This choice became more relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, as some informants preferred online interviews. Toward the end of the data collection period, I exclusively conducted online interviews due to the nationwide isolation measures instituted in Vietnam.

Throughout the interviewing process, I continuously listened to the interviewing accounts and adapted my research strategies accordingly. One important adaptation concerned the interview guide, which had been formulated before I started the data collection process. This interview guide had been structured around the assumption that participation primarily involved engagement in a single development program. However, the interviews revealed

a different reality: the majority of my informants had participated in multiple programs, with some being involved in as many as eight in less than two years. Furthermore, their degree of involvement in these programs sometimes changed over time, with some informants transitioning from being learners to becoming facilitators or trainers within the same program after a few seasons. Additionally, because participation often represented a dynamic process rather than a one-time event, the informants' perceptions and motivations regarding participation sometimes shifted. To accommodate these evolving insights, I adjusted and refined my list of interview questions. This flexibility allowed for more self-reflective and contextually-relevant conversations. The final interview guide included questions relating to the following themes: participation as a process (for informants who had taken part in more than one program); life stages (associated with participation); emotional experiences (during and after participation); the impact of participation on young people's lives; and the different barriers to and facilitators of participation. A comprehensive list of final interview questions can be found in the Appendix.

Facilitating meaningful conversations requires a diverse skill set (Baxter-Magolda & King, 2007). Throughout the interviewing process, I found myself navigating the dual role of the interviewer (Hermann, 2004), which requires critical awareness of the emotional labor involved in conducting research (Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2014). In my role as a researcher, I was actively building an ideal persona: one the informants would enjoy having around and feel safe confiding in. On the one hand, this persona required me to exercise empathy and build a sense of closeness in the interview interaction, in order to comprehend how the informants perceived and interpreted the world around them, as well as to assist them in elaborating on their emotional reflections (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011). On the other hand, I recognized the need to maintain an attitude of "deliberate naiveté" (Kvale, 1996, p. 33), continuously inquiring about the meanings of terms employed by the interviewees and their perspectives on topics I might already actually be familiar with, as well as avoiding making assumptions about their frames of reference.

Furthermore, it was important to reflect on how culture shapes communication during the interviews. Recognizing certain cultural cues as indicators of emotional content enabled me to explore the informants' meaning-making processes and tailor follow-up questions accordingly. For example, in Vietnam, humor serves as a popular channel for indirectly expressing criticism (Scott et al., 2005). During the interviews, I frequently observed informants laughing and employing humor and irony to articulate their concerns and frustrations about the development landscape. One informant, for instance, humorously used the common idiom "trăm hoa đua nở" [meaning: "hundreds of flowers bloom"] to describe Vietnam's development landscape in an ironic manner. This was her way of criticizing the fragmentation and lack of collaboration between groups that pursue community development, and the idiom was employed to highlight how the "blooming" became intertwined with the

subsequent speedy "fading" of development projects. Moreover, cultural hierarchy is also a factor to be considered in these interviewing conversations. As this was an issue pertinent to my positionality and how that shaped my interactions with the informants, it will be discussed in detail in Section 5.3 on methodological and ethical considerations.

Finally, a challenge often encountered during interviews, as pointed out by Baxter-Magolda and King (2007), is the difficulty informants face in articulating their reflections. Expressing thoughts can be intellectually demanding, requiring time for clear verbalization, and often not resulting in clear statements on the first attempt. In such instances, I encouraged the informants to move beyond mere event descriptions and explore the underlying meaning by rephrasing the questions. This technique involved selecting a phrase, word, or aspect mentioned in their previous response and requesting further elaboration. This approach effectively assisted informants in clarifying and expanding on their reflections, enabling me to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their perspectives. Below is an example of this technique in practice:

> Informant: When attending these programs, I feel more respected. I feel respected and that I can voice my opinion. I don't feel restricted or feel too shy or uncomfortable to speak my mind.
>
> Yên (interviewer): So which type of environment would make you feel restricted and uncomfortable?
>
> Informant: For example, when I attended some meeting at my local neighborhood, it would be very difficult. I would feel too reluctant to speak [...] But with NGOs I'm always respected, and the way people approach things are better. They always understand, respect different opinions, in general I think it's a safe environment.
>
> Yên (interviewer): I want to return to the point you made about respect so I can make sure I understand you correctly. You said at neighborhood meetings you don't feel comfortable to discuss issues and you don't feel as respected as when being in the NGO environment. Could you elaborate more on this? For example, what do you think were the factors causing this difference?
>
> Informant: First it would have to be age, because at these local meetings there are people older than me, I would have to address them as "uncle" or "grandpa" […]

These prompts were aimed at guiding respondents toward exploring not just what happened but also why they interpreted events in a specific manner. By shifting the focus from a description of the event to the underlying meaning-making process, my follow-up question helped co-create a more nuanced version of knowledge and insights from the informant's responses.

In total, I conducted 33 interviews with 31 informants. Nineteen interviews were conducted online. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at a coffee shop per the informants' choice. The informants included 13 men and 18 women and their ages ranged from 19 to 33 at the time of the interview. The average interview length was 90 minutes, with the shortest 50 minutes and the longest lasting 130 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese.

5.1.2 Participant observation

My second data collection method was participant observation in development programs and related meetings. The decision to incorporate participant observation into the research design was rooted in several reasons. First, participant observation provided an invaluable opportunity for firsthand immersion in the settings relevant to the study—a unique window into the subjective dimension of human existence (Krieger, 1985). Secondly, participant observation, with its immersive qualities, could aid in contextualizing the research and bridging the gaps identified in my interviews. The data collected through participant observation was able to shed light on aspects that were previously puzzling or unclear, enhancing the depth of my analysis. Finally, it enabled the building of trust and rapport with the informants, which facilitated more genuine and meaningful interactions, and further enhanced the comprehensiveness of the research findings.

However, due to the fact that the data collection coincided with the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the possibilities for conducting participant observations during my data collection period were significantly limited. In the first half of 2020, Vietnam implemented strict measures to combat the virus, including mandatory mask wearing, quarantine protocols, contact tracing and, eventually, nationwide isolation (Minh et al., 2021). Consequently, all youth development programs scheduled for this period were cancelled. Thus, despite my extended six-month stay in Vietnam, which spanned from January to July 2020, I was only able to carry out two participant observations.

The first instance of participant observation allowed me to experience a unique aspect of my role as a researcher, particularly in terms of how it influenced the data collection process. It also showed how limitations caused by the pandemic could bring forth new opportunities. In early April 2020, during the nationwide lockdown, I received an invitation from one of my informants to participate in an online seminar focused on development programs for Vietnamese youth. She mentioned that our previous interview had prompted her to reflect deeply on her extensive participation experiences. These reflections, along with a recognition of the feelings of isolation and disconnection many were experiencing due to the pandemic, inspired her to create a platform where alumni of these programs could share their experiences with potential applicants. I was pleasantly surprised by the invitation and asked the seminar's

organizing team for an opportunity to introduce myself and my research to the participants. They kindly agreed.

The online seminar attracted over 70 participants from various regions, including Vietnamese youth studying abroad. The event began with a round of introductions, during which I took the opportunity to explain my research and express my interest in recruiting additional interviewees for the project. Some participants already recognized me from our previous interactions, and greeted me using the chat function during the seminar. This recognition and introduction seamlessly integrated me into the event, expanding my network of potential interviewees. Observing this meeting provided valuable insights into the criteria used by NGOs for recruitment and the expectations of program participants. It also offered a glimpse into the network of individuals who had participated in these programs and led to the identification of more potential interviewees for my research.

The second phase of my participant observation took place in June 2020, following the lifting of nationwide isolation measures in Vietnam. During this period, numerous development programs across the country began to announce searches for applicants. Among them was a program organized by an interregional youth network that was led and attended by young people from three different regions of Vietnam. I conducted 20 hours of participant observation in this program.

Going through the entire application process for this program was instrumental in bridging gaps in my interviews. I was transparent with the program organizers about my research intentions when I submitted my application. I conveyed my purpose, mentioning my limited experience in youth groups and community development. The organizers responded positively to my request, granting me access to the program.

During my participant observation in this development program, I introduced myself as a researcher and explained my presence to the other participants during the introductory session. Some participants expressed curiosity about my research, initiating conversations to learn more about my activities or simply to make comments on my diligent note-taking. I welcomed these interactions and provided detailed information about my research topic and focus. However, during the majority of my time at the program, I tried to blend in and avoided making myself stand out. This was a careful consideration based upon my background as a researcher with a graduate degree from a university in the Global North. Simply put, I did not want my background to create a hierarchy in my interaction with the other participants. A deeper reflection on my positionality will be provided in Section 5.3 of this chapter.

According to Spradley's (1980) spectrum of participant observation, my participation in this program could be aptly characterized as "moderate," as I balanced my dual roles as both a participant and an observer. In my role as a participant, I immersed myself in all of the program's activities. This included active participation in lectures, group discussions, various exercises, and

presentations. My full involvement served as a means for establishing a rapport with fellow participants, some of whom were invited for an in-person interview afterward. As an observer, I remained attuned to the unfolding dynamics of the situation, including nuances and surprises that were not initially anticipated. I jotted down my observations in a notebook; when taking these notes, I tried to remain open to the situation as it unfolded and avoid trivializing seemingly insignificant details (Zieman, 2012; Baker, 2006). My notes encompassed a broad spectrum of details, including descriptions of the event's location, the spatial dynamics, the manner in which participants of the program occupied the space, their movements, responses, and emotional fluctuations during various activities and lessons. It is also important to note here that no personal or sensitive data were documented; rather, more general note taking was performed, such as observations of interactions, but without citing specific people. Additionally, I documented the event's procedures and interactions among participants (including language usage and nonverbal cues), interspersing these observations with personal reflections on what I had witnessed. This approach mirrored an "unstructured observation" method (L. Cohen et al., 2007, p. 397), as I entered the situation with an open perspective, observing events before discerning their research significance.

In this section I have presented my choice of data collection methods, as well as the type of data gathered for this study. Because the data collection period coincided with the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were limitations in the types of data available. In total, the findings in this study were drawn primarily from 51 hours of interviews (33 interviews with 18 female and 13 male informants). Additionally, the findings were enriched with data collected from participant observation at one youth-organized seminar (online) and one development program (in-person). The following section will address how the data analysis process unfolded.

5.2 Data analysis

The analysis for this study was performed using an abductive process. It began with an inductive approach via open coding, and subsequently moved to a deductive approach whereby codes were reduced in response to theoretical guidance. This process was characterized by a continuous and thorough engagement with the data, and involved the use of analytic memos as spaces for reflection, allowing for the capturing of insights, questions, and methodological considerations.

In this section, the analysis process is elucidated in detail, offering transparency into the methodological choices and strategies employed. This transparency not only aids in comprehending the analytical approach but also serves as a means of ensuring the trustworthiness of the analysis (Morse et al.,

2002). As Holliday (2007) maintained, a significant aspect of qualitative research is the need for researchers to show their workings, to reveal how they managed the subjectivity inherent within this research paradigm. This is the primary way rigor is maintained, and it makes the writing of the research a central element in achieving accountability. By meticulously detailing the process, the study reinforces its commitment to methodological rigor and integrity.

5.2.1 Coding

The analysis began with the process of open coding. I began first-cycle coding after the first few interviews had been performed. In this first-cycle coding, the purpose was to familiarize myself with the interview material and become attuned to my informants' language and perspectives. With this objective in mind, I found "in vivo" code the most appropriate choice for this inductive endeavor. As Saldaña (2013, p. 61) explained, the principle of "in vivo coding," also known as "verbatim coding," is to generate codes rooted in the direct language of the research informants rather than using researcher-generated words and phrases. As I applied "in vivo coding" in the first cycle, I paid attention to evocative word choices, metaphors, similes, idioms, and emotive words and phrases in the data as I coded the interview transcripts. This helped me stay close to the data, experience their richness, and ground my initial understanding of the data through young people's own voices.

The first cycle of coding was intentionally broad, with the goal of remaining open to the data's guidance and potential new areas of inquiry, free from preconceived notions. The generated codes were organized and managed using NVivo software.

Table 1. Examples of in vivo codes generated from interview data

Interview excerpts	In vivo codes
I was really satisfied. I think what I've learned the most there was not just knowledge, I gained something else much more important. I was able to look at myself and figure out who I am. Back then I had lots of questions for the future, there were problems that remained unsolved and I was hesitant between different choices. But after participating in the program, I have managed to find my own path.	"really satisfied" "not just knowledge that I gained" "look at myself" "figured out who I am" "back then… lots of questions" "problems remained unsolved" "after participation… I find my own path"

That's why I told you I've become "difficult to deal with." There are people who see me like that, and they hate it. They think I'm showing off, that I attended these development programs and now I act all strange. But I think value is not something easy to pursue. If I want to embrace these values, I have to make sacrifices, I have to fight negative influences around me. Well, I think it's worth it. Over time, as people understand what I'm after, they will respect me more. And I believe it's a way to spread these good values, making an impact in silence. I don't need to be vocal about it. I find that naturally over time people will understand why I do what I do, and they will see the merit in it too.	"difficult to deal with" "they hate [my new habit]" "[others] think I show off" "value is not easy to pursue" "embrace values" "have to make sacrifices" "have to fight negative influences" "[others] will respect me" "spread good values" "make impact in silence" "don't need to be vocal" "[others] will understand" "see the merit in [new habit]"
After the program, I bought a Starbucks thermal cup and have continued to use it. I bring it with me whenever I go to coffee shops. I also use straws made from bamboo. There was a period that habit attracted attention, people were staring at me for using those bamboo straws, that was uncomfortable. The staff at the coffee shops were also not fond of my habit, but if you take the first step, then sooner or later someone will join you. You just have to endure and not mind the mean words or gossip coming at you.	"bring it whenever I go" "[new] habit attracted attention" "people staring at me" "that was uncomfortable" "[others] not fond of my habit" "take the first step" "someone will join you" "you just have to endure" "not minding the mean words"

Following the initial open coding phase, I proceeded to identify recurring patterns across the data set. This phase was crucial for identifying relevant grouped coding categories. These categories were constructed by grouping common codes that appeared consistently across all my collected data.

I find resonance in Saldaña's (2013) observation that transitioning from the first cycle to the second cycle of coding can be somewhat challenging. The main challenge lay in the need to narrow down the focus without sacrificing the depth and richness of the data. Here, I followed Namey and colleagues' (2008) guidelines on data reduction techniques to ensure the categories that I chose to focus on were relevant to the research aim. As part of the analysis itself, data reduction allowed me to sharpen, categorize, and organize

information in a way that was pertinent to the study's focus (Miles et al., 2014). In making my decisions about data reduction, which involved recoding and grouping my in vivo codes, I focused on ideas and themes in the text that occurred frequently (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). During this phase, some codes were merged because they were conceptually similar, infrequent codes were assessed for their utility in the overall coding scheme, and some codes that seemed like good ideas during first-cycle coding were discarded due to being redundant or irrelevant to the main objective (Lewins & Silver, 2007). This was an effective starting point for identifying the shared meanings my informants attributed to their participation.

Subsequently, this systematic approach enabled me to streamline the initial plethora of codes and ultimately identify the most pertinent and significant codes and categories. For instance, one striking observation that emerged during the coding process was the notion of self-discovery through participation, as revealed in the prevalence of codes such as "see myself more clearly," "figure out who I am," "realize many things about myself." This group of codes suggested that the informants saw participation in development programs as leading to profound introspection and self-awareness. Identifying these core categories laid the foundation for the subsequent phase, where I explored and identified the interconnections and relationships among the codes and categories (Cresswell, 2007).

An example of finding commonality in codes and merging them into relevant categories with a description and justification of the grouping is provided in the following figure. At this level, the categories are purely descriptive.

Table 2. Examples of grouping codes into categories

In vivo codes	Description of grouped codes	Categories
"realize many things about myself" "understand ourselves more" "see myself more clearly" "look at myself" "figured out who I am" "find my own path"	These codes highlight the process of individuals gaining deeper insights into themselves and experiencing personal growth through participation.	Self-discovery and self-growth through participation

“[new] habit attracted attention” “people staring at me” “they hate [my new habit]” “[others] think I show off” “[others] not fond of my habit”	These codes revolve around the idea that the individual has adopted a new habit or behavior that draws attention from others, leading to social judgments.	Social judgment on a new habit
“value is not easy to pursue” “have to make sacrifices” “have to fight negative influences” “you just have to endure” “not minding the mean words”	These codes emphasize the difficulties and sacrifices individuals encounter when striving to uphold their values, highlighting their resilience and determination in the face of challenges and criticism.	Overcome challenges to uphold values
“take the first step” “someone will join you” “[others] will understand” “[others] see the merit in [new habit]” “[others] will respect me” “make impact in silence” “don’t need to be vocal”	This group of codes highlights the potential for positive change that results from individuals setting examples in their actions.	Positive social impact through setting examples

Moving beyond the initial coding phase, the second cycle of coding represents an advanced stage that demands a higher level of analytical rigor. This phase requires not only the skills to classify and synthesize data but also the ability to conceptualize findings within a theoretical framework (Saldaña, 2013). These skills are essential for a qualitative researcher engaged in the reorganization and reanalysis of data that has already undergone initial organization and reduction. During this phase, I adopted a more deductive approach to comprehend the material, delving deeper into the overarching interpretive themes.

It is important to emphasize that the second cycle of coding is an integral part of an iterative research approach (Morse et al., 2002). It signifies a transition from the initial inductive phase to a deductive orientation. In this phase, pre-existing concepts and theories guide the coding process, enabling a more targeted exploration of elements directly aligned with my research question and objectives. This stage, as described by Morse (1994, p. 25), involves “linking seemingly unrelated facts logically” and “fitting categories one with another” to construct a coherent meta-synthesis of the dataset. The task of interpretation and the examination of the connections between categories

challenges the researcher to move beyond the literal words of the text while remaining receptive to the emotions and underlying meanings conveyed in the data (Lindgren et al., 2020). Ultimately, this stage entails constructing a narrative that interconnects these categories.

To illustrate using the previous example, a clear narrative that can be identified based on the categories is reminiscent of what Fine (1995) identified as a "war story," in which individuals reflect on their experiences within a social movement to emphasize the challenges it faced while asserting that the movement is righteous and morally justified. Similarly, in the categories identified in Table 2, the informants shared about their commitment to uphold their choices, even at the cost of exposing themselves to social judgment. They made sense of their new habits as taking the first step toward making a significant impact on society.

5.2.2 Writing memos

The practice of writing memos helped me significantly during the research process. As a reflective exercise, memoing serves several important purposes in research: it helps researchers make sense of their data, develop analytical ideas, and meticulously document the entire research process (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019; Charmaz, 2014; Miles et al., 2014). Analytic memos, in particular, play a crucial role in recording the research process and practices, subsequently enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings (Rogers, 2018).

Following the guidance of Charmaz (2014) and Saldaña (2013), I approached memoing by allowing my thoughts to flow freely, using a personal language, and not immediately deciding how my notes would be used. As my research progressed, these memos took on various roles. In the early stages, memos served as a reflexive practice to document my thoughts, observations, and any surprises I encountered during data collection. Given that my data collection period coincided with the evolving situation of COVID-19, many of my memos from this stage documented the pandemic's impact on Vietnam's society, the state's crisis management policies, and the responses of citizens and civil society groups. Some of these observations later proved instrumental in contextualizing the analysis, particularly when examining the development practices and strategies adopted by my informants. Memos also helped me reflect on my interview techniques, with some reflections leading to insights into the emotional labor involved in the interviewing process.

In the later stages of my research, memos took on an analytical role, facilitating connections between the data and theoretical concepts while aiding in the development of emergent categories and coherent linkages between them. As noted by Saldaña (2013), writing analytic memos assists researchers in condensing their codes and reanalyzing their initial coding. Throughout the coding process, I found that analytic memos were immensely valuable for documenting and reflecting on my coding efforts and identifying emerging

patterns in my data. A. E. Clarke (2005, p. 202) aptly described memos as "sites of conversations with ourselves about our data," highlighting their role in surfacing critical observations. These observations, in turn, informed my later coding processes when I sought to establish connections between different codes and categories.

Moreover, the relationship between coding and memos is reciprocal, contributing to the process of making sense of the phenomenon under investigation (Weston et al., 2001). I used analytic memos as a space to engage with external input related to my research, incorporating insights from conversations with friends and colleagues that triggered "a-ha!" moments and storing valuable comments from presentations at conferences and seminars, along with any frustrations or unanswered questions that arose during the analysis.

Most importantly, writing memos enabled me to engage with the data on an emotional and human level, allowing me to connect my own experiences with those of my informants. Memoing prompted me to consider how I might have felt if I were in my informants' shoes, thereby revealing aspects that might have remained hidden had I relied solely on coding. For example, despite the primary focus of my research on young people's experiences, the notions of their desire for belonging and vulnerability had somehow eluded my analytical thinking. This was a gap that writing memos helped fill. The following extract from one of my memos illustrates this process:

> Today as I listened again to [an informant] sharing about how one morning she woke up at 4 am to go to the floating market of Cần Thơ with other program participants, I was suddenly taken back to the time I was her age. How would I have felt then? And then it hit me, the excitement, the happiness, that energetic feeling that never seemed to go away when I was with people that I felt connected to. At that stage of my life, I would have rejoiced over the chance to make new friends and find meaningful connections. I would not have hated interactive games or felt bothered by pulling an all-nighter to hear someone sharing about their lives. It was simply a different phase of life, a time when the feeling of belonging was all that matters. As an inexperienced young person filled with insecurity and confusion about what life could be, I wanted to feel like I belonged, to know that someone else recognized some value in me, and to find a purpose. And if someone had reached out to me then, I would have taken their hand, no hesitation. I suspect this is exactly what my data has been trying to tell me: beneath all of those remarks about fun activities and meaningful sharing, these young people simply wanted to feel like they belonged. (Extract from a memo titled "Youth Research," composed September 3, 2021)

Furthermore, to enrich and contextualize the analysis, I also engaged with secondary materials (participant observation data), exploring these connections in the memos. I examined how the meanings of my informants' actions were woven into societal structures by placing the findings within Vietnam's broader sociocultural context. This helped me contextualize the findings in

their cultural context and explore the meanings that young people attributed to participation in development programs in depth.

This section has outlined how the data analysis was undertaken in this study. This process involved two cycles of coding and the writing of analytic memos; both steps aided in the process of conducting a productive conversation with the data and elevating the final analysis. By giving this detailed and systematic description, this section is intended to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Furthermore, this transparency extends beyond the analytical process itself, as it forms the basis for the subsequent section of this chapter, which sheds light on the methodological and ethical considerations. Openly addressing these critical aspects of the research helps provide a holistic view of the study, acknowledging both its strengths and limitations, and ensures that the research was conducted in an ethical manner.

5.3 Methodological-ethical considerations

This section engages with the study's methodological and ethical reflections to offer readers an insight into how I approached these issues in the data collection process. Among the issues discussed are the selection of cases, informed consent, internal confidentiality, and researcher positionality. Attention will be paid to the power dynamics in research, along with nuanced reflections on how this power imbalance, derived from the cultural context, was addressed.

5.3.1 On the selection of development programs: what counts as a CSO?

The first issue I must clarify in terms of methodological considerations is what is meant by civil society organizations (CSOs) in this study. This has subsequent implications for how I selected informants to interview. To address this, this subsection first reviews the different ways civil society in the Vietnamese context has been defined in the literature, before presenting my perspective on the matter.

As stated previously, the focus of this study was youth participation in development programs organized by civil society actors. One of the initial challenges I faced in this project was defining the criteria for selecting appropriate informants who had participated in relevant development programs. This difficulty stemmed from the contested nature of what qualifies as civil society, as well as the legal ambiguity surrounding civil society in Vietnam. To identify the type of development programs relevant for this study, I needed to

identify which groups or associations could be counted as a CSO—something that scholars who have written about Vietnam still disagree on.

Central to this concern is the existence of several organizations that are often perceived as falling under the umbrella of Vietnamese CSOs, but are directly sponsored by the Communist Party. These include mass organizations such as the Women's Union, Youth's Union, and Trade Union. As Wells-Dang (2023) noted, this poses a conceptual problem for scholarship of civil society in Vietnam, prompting the inquiry as to whether or not to include these party-sponsored mass organizations in the investigation.

To date, and to the best of my knowledge, all models of Vietnamese civil society framework have included these party-sponsored mass organizations. For instance, Norlund's (2007, p. 76; Norlund et al., 2006) model identified four types of CSOs in Vietnam: mass organizations, professional associations, Vietnamese NGOs (VNGOs), and community-based organizations (CBOs). Within this model, mass organizations, professional associations, and VNGOs all have strong ties to the state: the first two are directly linked to the Vietnam Fatherland Front, while VNGOs fall under the supervision of a government agency, VUSTA. The last component, CBOs, are comprised of residents in a physical community (e.g., a neighborhood), and can thus be compared to NGOs, as their primary focus is local concerns. Norlund's model focused only on registered organizations, hence neglecting the role and contribution of informal, small-scale, unregistered groups, which make up a large segment of Vietnamese civil society. This has often been an issue in previous research conducted on Vietnamese civil society.

Another potentially useful model for this research comes from V. K. Nguyễn (2008). Like that of Norlund (2007), this model also recognized mass organizations, professional associations, and VNGOs as part of Vietnamese civil society. However, it also extended its reach to cover the press, charity/religious groups, and informal/independent networks as other forms of CSOs. In a similar fashion, Q. B. Lê and colleagues (2016) recognized not only NGOs and CBOs but also internet forums and independent networks as part of Vietnamese civil society. These latter models differ from Norlund (2007; Norlund et al., 2006) in the sense that they recognize how Vietnamese citizens are able to carve out their own "informal pathways for social action" (Wells-Dang, 2012, p. x), even within the limits of an authoritarian regime. They recognized the existence of small, unregistered groups and networks. Moreover, these models recognized the role of internet communication technologies and the press as "unceasingly politically vibrant" spaces (Lim, 2023, p. 31) for spreading messages about human rights and questioning state authorities (see, e.g., Lim, 2023 or Dương, 2017 for specific cases of Vietnamese activists in the political blogosphere).

When selecting cases for this research, I chose to focus explicitly on the more "informal pathways for social action" (Wells-Dang, 2012, p. x). This means that in this investigation of youth participation in development

programs, my focus was on development programs organized by groups and networks that had fewer ties to the state and were more informal and grassroots-based. This decision was driven by a couple of factors. First, these CSOs were seen as more representative of local youth interests, providing a grassroots perspective. Secondly, they have often been overlooked in previous examinations of Vietnamese civil society, where the spotlight has tended to be on mass organizations and professional associations sponsored by the government. Focusing on these groups was thus a way to help fill the gap in previous scholarship on Vietnamese civil society.

Furthermore, it must be clarified here that my research interest centered on the experiences and motivations of young people who participated in development programs organized by these CSOs. This interest did not encompass the CSOs that organize the programs themselves or the nature of their work, such as what they do on a daily basis, how they raise their funds, or what their relationship with the state looks like. This study, in other words, did not deal with the political opinions or religious convictions of these groups, nor were these aspects used to contextualize the findings. What I was trying to achieve was to turn the gaze onto the development activities that these CSOs run in Vietnam to illuminate the impact of such activities on young people.

My research did not focus on programs run by mass organizations sponsored by the Communist Party, such as the Women's Union or Youth Union, or professional associations. Instead, the CSOs in my research fell into one of the following categories:

First, the study included youth who had participated in programs organized by local NGOs. These organizations are legally registered and have connections to the state. They can receive funding from international bodies but are required to report their activities to a government agency, VUSTA, and gain approval from it before operating (K. G. Nguyễn & Q. T. Nguyễn, 2018). While they are linked to the state, this connection is somewhat indirect, allowing them to have some degree of autonomy.

Second, the study involved youth participants in development programs organized by social enterprises or nonprofit firms. These organizations, unable to obtain NGO status, have opted to register as businesses to avoid the bureaucratic hurdles associated with NGO registration (T. A. Hoàng, 2013; Rydstrøm et al., 2023; Pallas & L. Nguyễn, 2018).

Finally, the study included youth participants in development programs organized by informal citizen networks (Wells-Dang, 2014a). These are typically unregistered, small-scale groups, some with fewer than 10 members, formed by individuals passionate about a particular issue. Due to their size and informality, they often go unaccounted for in official statistics (Bạch, 2014). In order to conduct programs, they often collaborate with local NGOs to secure state approval for their activities.

These distinctions highlight the diversity and complexity within civil society in the context of this study. This choice was motivated not only by the fact

that these groups reflected more grassroots youth interests, but also that they have often been neglected in previous investigations of Vietnamese civil society. By delving into the activities and perspectives of these smaller groups, this study aimed to fill a gap in the existing research and gain insights into the dynamics of civil society at the local level.

5.3.2 On internal confidentiality and informed consent

Throughout the process of conducting this study, ethics concerns have played a crucial role in shaping my approach to research and my interactions with the informants. While the information I gathered does not contain references to sensitive personal data, such as political opinions, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or religion, the broader context of an authoritarian state and these informants' involvement in programs run by CSOs required me to maintain a strong ethical framework.

The importance of engaging with ethical reflection also resides in the fact that ethical considerations and trustworthiness are inextricably linked in qualitative research. As J. Rose and Johnson (2020) noted, qualitative research has faced external scrutiny due to perceived deviations from established norms related to reliability and validity. In response to this scrutiny, ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research has evolved into a complex and multifaceted endeavor; this includes an in-depth engagement with existing literature, thoughtful theoretical positioning, and careful selection of data collection and analysis techniques. Ultimately, an essential part of maintaining reflexivity requires researchers to critically evaluate what is at stake and how this can be applied to the research at hand (Pilbeam et al., 2022). Such reflections must inform the entire data collection and interpretation process to not only ensure critical reflexivity, but also to protect the informants and honor their contributions.

In this study, participation in development programs did not emerge as a controversial activity, nor was it considered sensitive by the informants themselves. The informants I spoke with welcomed the opportunity to discuss their experiences in development programs, as well as the spin-off projects they had developed following participation in these programs. Our conversations also did not focus on sensitive personal data, such as political views, sexuality, ethnicity, or religious convictions. My interview questions did not address these items (see Appendix 3 for the list of interview questions), and if the informants happened to mention them, I chose not to pursue that line of conversation.

Nevertheless, the broader context of an authoritarian state and these informants' involvement in civil society initiatives warranted important ethical considerations, particularly regarding issues of consent and confidentiality. Operating within the constraints of an authoritarian state, it was important to acknowledge the potential risks that could arise as an outcome of participation

in civil society activities. This consideration was significant, even though all of these development programs had received state permission to operate. Some, in fact, even had state officials give presentations or deliver lectures. In spite of this, due to the state's mixed attitude toward civil society activities, and the recent persecution of civil society leaders (as noted in Subsection 3.3.1), it was necessary to be aware that affiliation with such programs could attract unwanted attention. This recognition underscored the importance of protecting informants' information, even when our interview discussions did not involve politically sensitive subjects. I implemented comprehensive measures to ensure the informants' identities remained secure, including a meticulous approach to data management and secure storage. All interview data was securely stored, and no unauthorized persons had access to the data.

During the data collection process, it came to my attention that this study faced challenges in regard to "internal confidentiality" (Tolich, 2014, p. 101). This is a risk whereby connected relationships between the study's informants may compromise confidentiality, as the informants can identify each other upon reading the research findings. Despite my efforts to keep their identities unknown, the group I interviewed was a closed group in which several members shared ties, and talking to me was not considered particularly confidential. An informant once shared with me that she had agreed to the interview simply because her friend had already spoken to me and had "vouched" for me. In another instance, an informant delivered a gift to me, which had come from someone else I had previously interviewed. On these occasions, it was evident that the informants discussed their interviewing experiences with one another, although it was unclear to what extent they exchanged information.

To address the "internal confidentiality" problem, I pseudonymized all the development programs mentioned in the interviews, referring to them using the format Program [Number]. I also assigned pseudonyms to each informant, and there are instances in which I refer to the same informant using multiple pseudonyms. This choice was motivated by the fact that these particular individuals were present at different stages of the research and contributed to various types of data; thus, it would be quite easy for someone within the closed group to identify them if I used one pseudonym to refer to them consistently throughout the findings. This was a way of avoiding the risk of someone backtracking to ascertain an informant's identity. I also left out unnecessary details in the findings that could lead to easy identification of informants, such as their location. Throughout the research project, I ensured that confidentiality was secured to the best of my ability.

Another crucial ethical consideration was informed consent. To ensure that the informants fully understood the possible implications of their involvement, I provided them with detailed information about the study's goals and the scope of their participation. This information was contained in a document (see Appendix 2) outlining the purpose, benefits, risks, and other necessary details of the study, allowing the informants to make a fully informed decision.

In addition to informing them that their names would be kept anonymous to the best of my abilities and that they could withdraw from the study at any time, I also gave them an opportunity to ask questions about the study. I made sure that all my informants knew that during the interviews they could ask me to omit any details or aspects of their answers that they did not wish to be mentioned in the study. Furthermore, they were assured of their right to decline to answer any question.

Consent was given either in writing, by signing the research consent form, or electronically, via email. In addition, I received permission from the participants for the use of recording devices. This measure was intended to ensure accurate documentation of the informants' responses and ease transcription. At the beginning of each interview, I explained this to the interviewee, and no objections were raised. In both online and in-person interviews, I used only audio recording.

It is also worth noting that informed consent entails more than just the informant's agreement to participate in the research. In this case, obtaining informed consent also required critical reflection regarding the power dynamic between the researcher and the informants, stemming from the researcher's positionality. The next subsection reflects on this power dynamic, which could potentially influence informed consent and my interactions with the informants. This subsection also outlines how I addressed such issues.

5.3.3 On positionality and the researcher-informant power dynamic

Positionality refers to the societal and cultural background, personal experiences, and perspectives that determine how researchers engage with the research process, including their interaction with informants and data interpretation. Acknowledging the researcher's positionality is ethically crucial in order to understand how data was collected and interpreted, since researchers embark on this journey with what Haraway (1991, p. 111) referred to as "maps of consciousness," which are deeply shaped by class, gender, nationality, and other aspects of their identities. These cultural makeups play an integral role in shaping the relationships of power between the researcher and the informants, and greatly influence how knowledge is constructed and represented (Drake, 2010; Court & Abbas, 2013; Greene, 2014; Scott et al., 2005). Recognizing and reflecting upon my own positionality in the field is integral to illuminating how my background, identity, and experiences shaped both my access to the data and the production of data analysis.

In this discussion of positionality, I concur with several scholars (e.g., Naples, 2003; Chavez, 2008; Breen, 2007; Greene, 2014) that one should not conceive of the insider or outsider position in research as a dichotomy; rather, it is best understood as an insider-outsider continuum (Uldam & McCurdy,

2013). Using the concept of a continuum is especially helpful when certain aspects of the researcher's identity help position them as an "insider" while, simultaneously, markers of difference exist. Sultana (2007, p. 375) aptly described such nuances in the following quote:

> Even if the researcher is from the Global South, in which case some of the access and relational aspects may be addressed, class and educational differences (i.e., material, social, political power differences) remain trenchant markers of difference, and often precondition exploitation in the research process. Conducting international fieldwork involves being attentive to histories of colonialism, development, globalization and local realities, to avoid exploitative research or perpetuation of relations of domination and control.

On this continuum, I position myself closer to the "insider" endpoint, given that I was born and raised in Vietnam in the same decade as my informants. Belonging to the same age group and being familiar with cultural phenomena and youth references helped facilitate the building of rapport with my informants, who generally treated me like a sister or a friend instead of a researcher, and who seemed eager to share their experiences with me. Despite this, my affiliation with a Swedish university and my ability to travel freely within Europe and outside of Asia remained markers of difference between me and my informants. In other words, my relationships with my informants remained unequal despite my background enabling me to bridge some degree of the distance between us.

Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that the interactions I had with the informants were also shaped by the cultural heritage and Confucian traditions of Vietnam (see Scott et al., 2005). It is common in Confucian cultures for individuals to follow hierarchical structures and show respect for and comply with those perceived as having greater authority or expertise (Trương et al., 2017). Experts and scholars are regarded highly in this culture, and therefore the position of authority I held as a researcher may have led my informants to feel that they needed to defer to me and comply with my requests. The cultural expectation of harmony further exacerbates this power imbalance (P. M. Nguyễn et al., 2006). My main concern was that the informants might feel compelled to give responses that aligned with what they perceived I, as the authority figure, wanted to hear. This cultural backdrop also raised concerns about informed consent, begging the question of whether the informants' willingness to cooperate in the research stemmed from an informed understanding of what it entailed, or from an attempt to appease an authority figure.

Being aware of this power imbalance, I found it important to create an atmosphere of trust and openness in my interactions with the informants, both within and outside of the interview context. This meant not only ensuring the informants had a thorough understanding of their rights in the research, thus enabling them to give a truly informed consent, but also mitigating the unequal power dynamics that could have led to reservations in their interactions with

me, the authority figure. Each interview began with me asking the informants about the reasons they chose to participate in the research, as well as their expectations for what the research should accomplish. In addition to easing the informants into the interview, this opening dialogue helped provide more information about the research and clarify potential misunderstandings, and offered insights into informants' expectations. Importantly, it helped construct our roles in the interaction as conversational partners, with the informants' desires and expectations for the research acknowledged and validated.

The influence of Confucianism on the interview was highly apparent in our initial interactions, which were often characterized by a certain reserve on the part of some informants. This happened more frequently with those who were younger than me, which suggests that both my researcher position and the age-based hierarchy were dictating interaction in this context. Some of them hesitated before responding to my questions, frequently prefacing their answers with statements such as "this is just my opinion, okay?" These sorts of qualifiers show that they were concerned about the possibility of making mistakes in their answers and potentially facing criticism. Some expressed doubts regarding the relevance or helpfulness of their responses. Some viewed follow-up questions as a challenge to their previous responses or as indications that they had provided incorrect answers. This initial caution and apprehension can be explained by the broader societal influence of growing up in a Confucian culture, in which young individuals are typically expected to demonstrate deference to authority figures and refrain from saying things that could disrupt social harmony (Kang & Chang, 2016; P. M. Nguyễn et al., 2006). This apprehension, consequently, can lead young people to doubt their ability to provide meaningful information. To address this issue, I carefully framed my questions to avoid being perceived as doubting them or being confrontational. For instance, I often prefaced my inquiries by acknowledging my limited experience and sought to bridge gaps in my understanding. I would say, for example, "I haven't participated in this specific development program before, so there is a lot that I don't know. Could you help me by explaining what you previously mentioned about [the topic in question]?" This was a way to position my informants as the ones in possession of knowledge in the interaction and establish that I was there to learn from them.

Furthermore, I also actively sought the informants' input, encouraging them to make comments (for example, if a question did not make sense) and to provide suggestions throughout the interview. I also made sure to provide clear feedback for the informants, letting them know how their contributions were helping to shape the research, and thanking them for their time and input. Some of my interview topics and questions were revised based on the informants' suggestions. Toward the end of the interviews, many informants shared that they were surprised and pleased by my friendly and approachable attitude, as well as my genuine interest in their perspectives. Since they live in a

Confucian culture, it was not a common experience for these young people to have someone sit down and listen to them.

My relationship with the informants extended beyond the interview setting, which is something I continuously nurtured through open communication, mutual respect, and reciprocity. In fact, I received a lot of help from my informants throughout the research. They introduced me to potential interviewees, informed me of upcoming development programs, included me in closed social media former participants' groups that gave access to unlisted online materials from development programs, and even organized an online meeting in which several themes of my research were addressed (as described in Subsection 5.1.2). In the beginning, I thought it was my young age or my friendly attitude that made the informants feel comfortable relating to me. After much reflection on the amount of help and assistance I received, however, I realized that my presence in the field might have led to me being included in one of these "tiny publics" I was trying to study. As Fine (2021) noted, these groups are embedded in norms of loyalty and reciprocity, characterized by expectations for fair social exchange and emotional giving and sharing. My informants checked on me frequently, asking about my progress and whether I needed more assistance. In return, I was expected to offer intellectual and emotional assistance during times of need: for example, providing them with input and advice regarding their grant applications, helping them find relevant reading materials for their projects, or simply being there as "a shoulder to cry on" when their plans failed to materialize because of the pandemic. Navigating this situation, consequently, required me to constantly toggle between the role of researcher and the role of "team player" in the network. This was a role I happily fulfilled in order to reduce the power imbalance between me and my informants, and to contribute to them achieving their aspirations in any way I could.

Finally, it must be noted that there is a need for both proximity to and distance from a field of research. Having "insider" knowledge, while helpful for data collection and for building rapport with the informants, can also pose challenges in the data analysis stage. DeLyser (2001), for instance, noted that greater familiarity can lead to an increased risk of researchers making assumptions based on their prior knowledge and experience. In my first attempt to analyze the data, I was guilty of taking certain connections in the information for granted, and while these connections were transparent to me as an insider, they were not as apparent to an outsider's eye. Presenting data without explaining the cultural context behind it can lead to it being "lost in translation." I addressed this problem by consulting other researchers who were positioned as "outsiders" to this field and were therefore able to point out the blind spots in my analysis.

5.4 Concluding summary

This chapter has addressed different methodological aspects of this study. This included a discussion of the research design and data collection, techniques of data analysis, and methodological as well as ethical considerations that were taken into account.

The chapter began with an explanation of the research design and the decision to utilize qualitative interviews and participant observation as the main data collection methods. This section illuminated the strengths of these methods in contributing to the research aim and clarified my decision to revise my data collection tools based on insights gained during the process. It also outlined how the research was conducted in the uncertain and ever-evolving context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how that affected the type and volume of data collected.

The subsequent section concerned the data analysis procedure. It detailed my coding process and how analytic memos were utilized to elevate the analysis. An in-depth understanding of how participants make sense of their experiences and motivations in attending development programs can be gained by utilizing this approach.

Finally, the last section provided detailed reflections on methodological and ethical concerns. In this section, methodological reflections on my selection of development programs relevant to this study were provided. Furthermore, this section highlighted how informed consent was obtained from the participants, and how the issue of internal confidentiality, which often arises when conducting research on small, closely-knit communities, was addressed. Moreover, the discussion on positionality shed light on how the authority attached to my position as a scholar-researcher may have shaped my interactions with the informants in a Confucian-influenced society. In acknowledgement of this issue, this subsection outlined the measures taken to ensure the autonomy of my informants was not compromised.

6. Framing belonging: boundary, compatibility, and motivations

Access to participation is the main focus of this chapter. This analysis stems from the recognition that designers and organizers of participatory programs often have their own epistemologies, meanings, and values that intimately shape their vision of what development projects entail and who should be included in them (Sabiescu et al., 2014).

Having the authority to control access to resources, development program organizers are key actors in determining the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion associated with participatory development. Whether these organizers might prioritize those whose identities and values most align with their assumptions and visions, and disregard those who differ from their preconceived formulations, remains a crucial question in development practices. In other words, program organizers are the gatekeepers who engage in an evaluation process to determine what is required from a specific person in order to be entitled to belong, or to be considered as belonging, to a collective (Yuval-Davis, 2006). From a theoretical standpoint, this task of determining who should have access and who should be excluded corresponds precisely to the enforcement of group boundaries and membership, which, as Fine (2021) argued, is a central concern of groups. In the quest to solidify the existing collective, some groups may resist diversity, even leveraging membership criteria as an exclusionary mechanism. These groups then become heavily guarded, "defended communities" (Fine & Harrington, 2004, p. 352). Even so, this boundary enforcement task is viewed positively by groups (Fine, 2021), as it serves to maintain the group's collective identity and sustain its symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnar, 2002).

Boundaries are, of course, never fixed in stone: individuals and groups constantly compete in the production, diffusion, and institutionalization of different systems of meaning and classification (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). Rather than being passive observers who simply comply with entry requirements and guidelines, young people interested in development programs are able to construct or negotiate their own "requisites of belonging" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 209) to justify their admission. From the perspective of youth participants, the task of acquiring membership in any collective requires them to engage with the question of what is required to be a member of such a collective and what the group identifies with. As a result, these young people are involved in a

boundary negotiation process that involves leveraging their own personal capital and motivations. While they are subjected to external evaluation from the gatekeepers of these programs, they can strategically negotiate and construct their belonging. Through their attempts to reify boundaries, youth participate in the struggle of transforming their perspective of symbolic boundaries into an agreed-upon, shared representation of reality, effectively shaping the access to and consequently the outcome of participatory development.

The purpose of this chapter is thus to answer the following research question: How are the motivations and aspirations of young people integrated into the construction and negotiation of access to development programs? This will be accomplished by examining how access and inclusion are framed by both development program organizers and youth participants, and how they are made sense of and negotiated during the entry process using boundary work techniques. By highlighting how local participants are included in or excluded from development programs, the chapter will address different requisites of belonging that both program organizers and youth participants identify as they make sense of access to development programs. By answering this question, the chapter will illuminate how belonging to a collective is constructed and negotiated, highlighting the different types of signifiers utilized in this process. This, in turn, will reveal the extent to which the boundaries of these tiny publics are permeable, illuminating the inclusion and exclusion mechanisms underlying participatory development practices.

6.1 Assessing belonging: defining "compatibility"

In April 2020, the first wave of COVID-19 forced Vietnam into soft quarantine mode, and all gatherings, including those at schools and universities, were cancelled. While waiting for society to reopen, an informant known as Ánh decided to host an online seminar. The purpose of the event was to introduce a variety of Vietnamese development programs to young people who might be interested in them. As part of her preparations for it, Ánh contacted other former participants, asking for their input and inviting a number of them to attend and speak.

Over 70 participants ended up attending this online seminar. Participants were from a variety of geographic locations, including outside of Vietnam. On the agenda for this meeting, the selection criteria for development programs were one of the main topics of discussion. A panel of past participants and organizers was invited to share their insights. In the first part of the seminar, Ánh provided a brief overview of the different programs offered for youth in Vietnam. As she explained the application process to the audience, Ánh shared a PowerPoint slide that outlined four components of a typical application: a CV, a motivation letter, an essay addressing the program's main topic, and a personal interview with the program's organizers.

The list reminded me of the grant application procedure. Upon viewing it, I could not help but imagine the potential competition involved in the admission process for these development programs, since candidates must complete several steps to qualify. This vision was confirmed by the questions posed by the participants during the online seminar, which suggested that many young people interested in development programs were struggling with the application process. A few shared that they passed the written application round but did not pass the follow-up interview, and asked for tips to increase their chances of acceptance.

The perception that these programs are selective spaces was also echoed in the interviews. In a telling example, Hoa (28 years old, female) told me that one of the programs she was admitted to had 400 to 500 applicants, and she was one of the chosen 40. Khánh (23 years old, female) recounted her struggle to get into another development program, for which she failed the interview round and needed to reapply the following year. Minh, an organizer of two development programs, explained that as these programs had limited funds, they must limit the number of participants they could admit; thus, part of his job as a program organizer was to interview prospective applicants to assess their "compatibility." It was in this evaluation of compatibility (i.e., the evaluation of a prospective applicant's belonging to a development program) that boundary work—the focus of this section—took place.

Like Minh, young participants and program organizers frequently used the notion of compatibility when discussing factors that helped an applicant gain entry to development programs. It was quite common to hear references to compatibility in the interviews with previous participants in these programs as they explained why they were successful in their applications. For instance, these informants stated that they "matched well with the program," "shared the same vision," or pursued "the same goals." An organizer also claimed that he was not "looking for the most talented, but the most suitable" candidates.

Exploring what this compatibility entails is key to understanding the boundary underlying the recruitment process. The process involves the gatekeepers of a group (i.e., the program organizers) meeting prospective members and deciding whether they belong within or outside the imagined boundary line of the collective—in other words, whether the applicant falls into the category of "us" or "them." By means of this recruitment round, groups are able to protect their values and maintain their collective identity, thereby preserving themselves as a distinctive entity (Fine, 2021). In the context of development programs, this boundary work also serves to ensure that members feel justified in obtaining their share of the scarce resources. In making claims about what is compatible with the group's vision, the program organizers also make claims about which values the group identifies with, what is antithetical to the group's identity, and what the group determines to be valuable and appropriate signifiers of boundaries. Through this process, they are effectively constructing the meanings, goals, and outcomes of participatory development.

Accordingly, in order to fully understand how boundary work plays out in this process, a critical aspect of my research involves studying the criteria used to determine membership, as well as analyzing how the informants interpret these criteria. By analyzing how belonging is constructed (and negotiated), one can assess the permeability of these collectives, and how both inclusion and exclusion mechanisms operate in participatory development programs.

In the following subsections, by addressing different criteria and motivations deemed necessary to gain access to development programs, I will explore how my informants, both previous participants and program organizers, interpret the notion of compatibility. This analysis serves as a site for observing how these actors construct belonging, as well as how these tiny publics establish and maintain their boundaries. The following subsections will clarify the extent to which the boundaries of these tiny publics are permeable and, consequently, the extent to which these groups can be accessible to a larger public.

6.1.1 When compatibility can be negotiated

At the online seminar, a piece of advice commonly given by both program organizers and previous participants to those interested in applying to development programs was to develop their personal profile so that they would appear attractive to recruiters. A number of informants specifically hinted that they had good CVs and a long list of accomplishments, making them strong candidates for the few available spots. One informant even introduced himself to me, prior to the interview, as having been selected for a prominent newspaper's "30 under 30" list. Having been active in nonprofit networks or holding leadership positions in student clubs was regarded as a strength:

> **Bích (21 years old, female, Program 7):** [Program 7] has a focus on community activities, and I am the vice president of [a student club], so from that perspective, I am an experienced candidate.

> **Hoa (28 years old, female, Programs 2 and 11):** [The recruiters] of [Program 11] looked for someone active in clubs and networks, especially those who held crucial roles in these groups.

Both Hoa and Bích viewed their previous community work as an accomplishment and as their grounds for compatibility with the development programs they managed to enter. Both had been active in community development prior to the time of application (Bích at a student club working on education for low-income children and Hoa in a network pursuing gender equality). They both exhibited confidence in the interviews, highlighting that they were "well-versed" in the subject of community development and thus had the qualifications to partake in these development programs. These excerpts are examples of meaning-making, in which informants believe that their backgrounds in

community work gives them a strong profile to compete against other candidates, and that such a profile gives them legitimacy in terms of entering development programs.

In a similar fashion, Linh (33 years old, female), an established writer, shared that she had no problem being accepted to Program 6, which was described by other informants as "extremely difficult to get into." She explained that her interview lasted only "five minutes," and that the recruiter "would not dare to challenge" her. Her trouble-free experience with the interview process suggests that her background as an established writer, as well as the authority and the symbolic standing bestowed by her writing success, already qualified her to be a member of the group. Without having to construct or negotiate her belonging to this development program like other applicants, she was granted membership automatically, seemingly having already fulfilled the group's criteria.

Building or improving one's profile is therefore a common recommendation for interested applicants. During the online seminar, a participant emphasized that applicants need to do "PR for yourself" in the right way. Moreover, there was a shared discourse that rejection is not uncommon, and that even following rejection, there would be opportunities to work on the self to increase the chance of acceptance in the next round. A program organizer spoke at length about how applicants could improve their chances of getting into these programs as follows:

> **Chi (30 years old, female, Program 2):** "Be yourself," yes, but how do you convince others to select you rather than another "self"? In order for your "self" to have an interesting story, enough to make it stand out from others, then the only way is to enrich that self… such as volunteer or learn how to paint or write poetry or help out a neighbor.

While this organizer began the statement with the idea of "being yourself," what she promoted was in fact strengthening one's profile through crafting an "interesting story" about oneself. To negotiate one's belonging in a group, an investment to build up symbolic capital (see Bourdieu, 1984) is necessary. In this context, what was considered symbolic capital by this organizer was related to fine arts activities (painting, writing poetry) and civic actions (volunteering, helping a neighbor). The emphasis on crafting an interesting story was reinforced again in the latter part of her speech:

> **Chi (30 years old, female, Program 2):** Your own experiences make you who you are. If you imitate someone else, you will never be unique... Only by understanding yourself and understanding the process of growing up, how you grow, what you experience, then you can extract the best story for yourself.

The personal story, as Chi emphasized, is something to be carefully crafted from the various biographical elements of the applicants' history, such as their

experiences, relationships, and emotions. To gain access to participatory programs, applicants must skillfully select relevant elements from their self-repertoire to craft a desirable, "unique" personal story for the recruiters. This requires applicants to have the ability to reflect on their biography and narrate it in a framework that not only they, but also the recruiters, find meaningful. The personal story can enhance an applicant's symbolic status if their "best story" matches the way the recruiters make sense of the world, showing that their epistemologies align.

What we can get out of this organizer's advice is twofold. First, her recommendations suggest that membership in these groups is, theoretically, attainable, as long as applicants put in the effort and invest their time in prepping themselves for the evaluation. Second, it is clear that this membership has a performative dimension: there are a number of specific practices deemed capable of connecting potential candidates with the group's values (writing poetry, for example), thereby making them worthy of the recruiter's acceptance. Through performing and using such activities to "extract the best story," candidates build a narrative of identity that is valued by their target audience—i.e., the recruiters/gatekeepers—thereby increasing their chances of obtaining membership in the group. Through the process of granting candidates membership, the group also solidifies and reproduces its own values and culture.

The data in this subsection have thus suggested that entry into development programs can be difficult but is ultimately obtainable; these programs are guarded, "defended communities," but are not completely impenetrable. An applicant's compatibility with, and belonging to, a program can be negotiated, and the boundaries to these collectives are prominent but permeable. Applicants can negotiate their membership by adopting a calculated approach to personal branding and maximizing their own human capital through a constant reworking of the self and "lifelong-learning." At the online seminar, this was reflected in the shared sentiment of "if at first you don't succeed, try, try again," as program organizers and former participants encouraged new applicants to continue working on maximizing their personal value to improve their chances of being selected.

The finding in this subsection thus illuminates an ideology underlying these development programs, uncovering one of their "requisites of belonging" (Yuval-Davis, 2006), whereby access is contingent upon the applicants' ability to perform self-enrichment. This finding echoes previous investigations into development practices, which have highlighted that the notion of neoliberal subjectivity and the branding of the self increasingly dominate this landscape (Türken et al., 2016; Weidner, 2009). With this emphasis on neoliberal subjectivity, the self is constructed as a source of capital, and individuals bear the responsibility for maximizing this capital to meet the demands of the market (Walkerdine, 2003, 2006). In light of this finding, it is evident that development programs, as tiny publics, can indeed have balkanizing and excluding aspects (Fine & Harrington, 2004): the groups' symbolic boundaries are

drawn between applicants who are able to display neoliberal subjectivity and those who are not, and it is the former who are granted membership into these collectives. This explains why some informants, such as Linh, a successful writer, had an easier time penetrating these tiny publics than others: her self-enrichment was already "proven" through the standing earned from her writing career, thus automatically qualifying her as a "compatible" candidate.

6.1.2 When compatibility cannot be negotiated

Not all recruiters, however, appreciate the "fake it until you make it" approach. During the online seminar, another program organizer spoke passionately about what he looked for in applicants, though he hinted at something different from what the informants featured in the previous section shared:

> **Minh (26 years old, male, Programs 1 and 10):** It's simple: we want you to express yourself in your application and to come to the programs as who you are. We don't want to see applicants following tips and tricks they find on the internet regarding how to write a good CV or how to make a good interview impression. I am sick of those tricks. If you somehow manage to make yourself appear suitable for the program but when you participate, it is revealed that you are not compatible with it, that you are not yourself, it would be similar to… wearing clothes that don't fit your body.

Minh stressed that he valued authenticity, positioning the authenticity of the self against cheap "tips and tricks." He viewed applicants' conscious efforts to produce a good impression in front of the recruiters as trickery and deception, and even expressed disgust toward it. On the basis of this statement, compatibility was not something that could be strategically crafted or managed through techniques of maximizing personal value, as advertised by the informants in Subsection 6.1.1. Minh's speech suggests that membership in his group could not be negotiated or contested.

I had a chance to interview Minh privately a few days after the online seminar. We had a long conversation about what it would take to be selected for the two programs organized by his group, both of which fully fund applicants once they are admitted. According to Minh, the appropriate applicants need to possess not only relevant knowledge and skills but also the "right attitude." When I asked him to elaborate on how he could tell whether an applicant had the right attitude or was just "faking it," he answered:

> **Minh (26 years old, male, Programs 1 and 10):** Simply put, in case someone says they come [to the program] because they really care about social issues, then I look into how much do they care, and what problems do they care about. Have they thought of any solutions? What do they need to help them implement that solution, and what do they think about in the matter of solving the problem? […]

> Actually, there's another way to evaluate their true attitude [laughs]. I know it sounds very abstract, but it takes place as I feel, I observe the expressions they have. Or simply I just close my eyes and listen to the way they answer a question. It's related to my sixth sense, pretty much.

The answer Minh provided identified two techniques for assessing a candidate's suitability. First, Minh described determining a candidate's "attitude" by testing his or her knowledge of a topic that he or she had claimed to be passionate about. The purpose of this method was to determine a candidate's commitment to the field by testing their knowledge of it. The distinction between authenticity and fakeness would be drawn based on one's level of knowledge, making the possession of knowledge (of a specific field) the "requisite of belonging" (Yuval-Davis, 2006) in this selection process. This is similar to what other informants claimed in Subsection 6.1.1.

Minh's second technique for identifying appropriate applicants relied on non-verbal cues, namely facial expressions and emotional displays, which he perceived as indicating the embodiment of compatibility. Minh seemed wary of potential judgment on my part when he described this technique, since he constantly established himself as a rational actor who was aware of how "abstract" or "unprofessional" his words might sound. This insistence shows that Minh perceived his technique to fall short of standardized procedure and worried that it might be deemed irrational; his attempt at rationalization served to legitimize his authority in exercising boundary maintenance. Minh's explanation for his intuitive process of selection echoes the notion of having a "feel for the game" stemming from "deeply buried dispositions, outside the channels of consciousness and calculation" (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 54-55). He ascribed the ability to detect a suitable candidate for these programs as something a recruiter would just know without being able to explain, and indicated that only those with the right dispositions (such as the recruiter/gatekeeper) could detect it in others.

Another interesting point to note: Minh claimed in the interview that only he and a handful of others in his organization had the unique ability to count on their gut feelings to find the right candidates. Accordingly, he reported, the selection of candidates often takes a long time for his organization (the task cannot be "outsourced," so to speak). By distinguishing his recruiting team from recruiters at other organizations who might easily be fooled by cheap tips and tricks, Minh also engaged in group boundary maintenance: groupness, after all, arises when individuals perceive they share a significant commonality that makes them distinctive from others and binds them to one another (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). In this case, claiming that his team had a distinctive ability to assess others served to confirm Minh's feeling of belonging in his group, while at the same time setting himself (and his group) apart from other organizations' recruiters.

Based on this assessment technique, the requisites for belonging to determine membership in the two development programs Minh's team organizes are no longer objective criteria but are subject to the gatekeeper's preferences. Here, the recruiters have even more power to rely on their own epistemologies and ideological preferences to legitimize or delegitimize an applicant's belonging in the collective. The recruiters themselves become the instruments and measures upon which categorical boundaries are being drawn: only applicants whose identities and values most align with these recruiters' assumptions and visions of participatory development are allowed to enter the collective. This echoes an existing concern in development studies scholarship: that designers and organizers of participatory development often have their own epistemologies and preferences that shape their decisions on who can be included in their programs (Sabiescu et al., 2014).

Furthermore, Minh's insistence that he can rely merely on his gut feeling to assess an applicant's compatibility with the programs highlights how "feelings or emotions are not innocent of social structures" (Anthias, 2016, p. 176; see also Ahmed, 2004). Rather, they can be leveraged as signifiers of boundaries (Yuval-Davis, 2006) to legitimize the establishment and perpetuation of symbolic boundaries. While program organizers may rely on shared values and past accomplishments to determine an applicant's compatibility with a program (thereby giving interested candidates a chance to "prove" their compatibility), the assessment of belonging is not limited to such criteria but expands to encompass an affective dimension. In this case, the recruiter's emotions play a significant role in the struggle and contestation of assessing and constructing belonging. Via this process, belonging becomes "naturalized and thus invisible in hegemonic formulations" (Anthias, 2008, p. 8).

The assertion that one would just know if a participant truly belongs to a collective was also present in my interviews with former development program participants. Thanh (23 years old, female, Programs 1, 3, 6 and 8) complimented the organizers of development programs on being so "sophisticated" that they could "correctly read" the personality of the applicants through their applications, suggesting that these organizers have the ability to uncover the "truth" about the applicants. With this claim she established the organizers as appropriate gatekeepers of the collective's membership, portraying them as having the unique ability to defend the collective's boundaries and deter the unfit.

There were, of course, informants who questioned the evaluation ability of the recruiters, although their criticism also alluded to the same notion of an impermeable boundary. Kim (23 years old, female, Programs 2 and 4) suggested that the recruiters "must have made a mistake" in extending membership to certain participants who she believed "were participating for the wrong reasons" and "should not have been there." As Kim explained, those who joined the program for the sole purpose of traveling to the capital city and having fun did not have a valid reason for joining. Her insistence that only

those with "authentic" motivations should be allowed into the collective, as well as her assertion about knowing who truly belonged to the collective, were ways of establishing herself as a legitimate member of the group. Like Minh, she made a sense of compatibility or belonging to these collectives as non-negotiable.

Given that comparing within and among social groups is one of the ways groups differentiate themselves from one another (Fine, 2021; Lamont & Molnar, 2002), Kim's claim serves to consolidate the boundary, secure her membership, and legitimize her own affiliation with the collective. This process of differentiation not only aims to secure her belonging in the group, but also helps "to maintain and achieve superiority over an out-group on some dimension" (Tajfel & Turner, 1985, pp. 16–17). In both Minh's and Kim's statements, superiority is implied based on a dichotomy between the real and the fake.

In this subsection, the data have suggested that applicants who share similar values and ways of seeing the world with the recruiters are more likely to gain access to participatory development programs. Such programs are considered "difficult to get into," not only because there are more applicants than available spots, but also because recruiters act as gatekeepers, drawing boundaries of belonging based on how well applicants match the recruiters' expectations.

Previous literature has warned us of this phenomenon. Since participatory methods are based on assumptions about a unitary local community and what participation looks like, they can only promote the voices and values of those whose identities most align with these assumptions, such as the most articulate, educated, or accessible members of a community (Hayward et al., 2004; Watkins et al., 2012; Mahé, 2018). Voices outside of these preconceived formulations are disregarded, while the illusion of inclusion is maintained. This, in other words, reflects an elite bias in development practices, which unintentionally excludes vulnerable groups from accessing participatory development resources (Cleaver & Hamada, 2010). As the findings of this subsection have illustrated, the recruiters' interpretive strategies and principles of classification show an endorsement of candidates who not only share the same values with them, but also those whose style and embodiment they find "readable" (see Rooke, 2007). This is how "symbolic boundaries" (Lamont & Molnar, 2002) to these development programs are drawn and sustained.

In this study, participation refers to selective membership determined by recruiters' perception of group identity: what these recruiters envision as the identity of the group. The recruitment process, in this context, emerges as a truth-uncovering process in which applicants cannot hide behind a façade. Due to the emphasis on the importance of "authenticity," the data in this subsection suggest that membership is unobtainable for certain segments of the population, showing the impermeability of these tiny publics' boundaries. This analysis demonstrates the mechanism through which power relations are reproduced and refined on the micro-level, highlighting how the practices of

constructing and assessing belonging "produce a 'natural' community of people and function as exclusionary borders of otherness" (Anthias, 2008, p. 8). Furthermore, this finding illuminates how participatory development programs can become balkanizing communities and, accordingly, are sites in which the dynamic interplay between inclusion and exclusion can be observed, given that they simultaneously foster internal cohesion while banding together to deny entry to external others (Fine, 2021; Fine & Harrington, 2004). Last but not least, this subsection has illustrated how symbolic boundaries can be transformed into social boundaries, as recruiter's interpretive strategies are able to effectively determine who gains access to participatory development resources.

6.2 Negotiating belonging

The previous section of this chapter reviewed how a prospective applicant's compatibility with a development program was determined. The argument I have made in this section is that belonging is intimately linked to boundary-making and boundary-maintenance, with recruiters for these programs serving as gatekeepers to the collective, determining the appropriate boundary signifiers.

As Yuval-Davis (2011) noted, the politics of belonging also involves the struggle to define what community membership constitutes, as well as what role particular social locations and narratives of identity play in this meaning-making process. While not all of these narratives relate to belonging to particular groupings and collectivities, they often correspond, directly or indirectly, to the perceptions of what being a member in such a grouping or collective might mean. In examining the politics of belonging, the following subsections will analyze how participants in development programs negotiate their sense of belonging. This analysis will focus on the way they make sense of their motivations for participating, and how they connect these motivations with their aspirations for societal development. This examination will not only reveal what young people perceive as legitimate membership in these tiny publics, but also illuminate "the micropolitics of everyday life where we forge our sense of belonging" (Anthias, 2016, p. 177).

6.2.1 Participation as a means for self-development

Several informants mentioned their marginalized backgrounds when discussing their reasons for applying to development programs. Marginalization in this case could be due to a disadvantaged socioeconomic background, alienation from social norms and expectations, or experiences of oppression as a young person. Development programs were constructed as a means for these individuals to access resources, knowledge, and support that otherwise would

not have been available, giving them an opportunity to break out of their marginalized circumstances.

At the time of the interview, Hùng, 29 years old, was an office worker. He spent his free time managing a study club for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and administrating one of Vietnam's largest forums for nonprofit networking. Hùng had an impressive background in participatory development: he attended several training programs and had, on some occasions, been asked to train new participants. When asked about his first experience in participatory development, Hùng expressed his gratitude to an NGO in his community for offering him a scholarship and access to their development program, which provided him with benefits he would have been unable to access as a young person in poverty. Hùng described his childhood and lack of access to educational materials as follows:

> **Hùng (29 years old, male, Programs 2, 3, 7 and 11):** I grew up in a poor farmer's household. There were many things I wanted then, but they were not possible. Because I lived in a rural area, I had limited access to English books. In terms of education, my parents only graduated from fifth grade and could not help me. They didn't even know how to fill out forms, so from primary school on, I filled out their paperwork. Financial difficulties, lack of guidance, and lack of direction led to limited study opportunities. I couldn't afford reading materials, so I read old newspapers the postman left behind instead.

This account illuminated the impoverished circumstance of Hùng's upbringing. In the interview, Hùng portrayed himself as someone determined to overcome his disadvantaged background and accomplish his educational objectives, having earned a university degree despite the difficulties he faced. Hùng shared that due to the lack of documentation to prove his family's poverty, he was not eligible for a need-based scholarship from the state. One thing that changed his first year at university was receiving a scholarship from a local NGO. The scholarship helped cover his tuition and allowed him to participate in a training program designed specifically for scholarship recipients.

Hùng emphasized that he "did not even know what an NGO was" when he applied for the NGO's development program and scholarship; he was motivated to do so simply because it provided an opportunity that was otherwise unavailable to him at the time. In other words, his reasons for participating in development programs stemmed from a lack of access to educational resources in his daily life, and a desire to improve his knowledge and skills. Hùng has been actively involved with several civil society associations and development programs ever since.

The narrative of overcoming adversity as the pull toward development programs is a prominent theme in my data. Many informants, who came from disadvantaged backgrounds, expressed that their participation in development projects played a role in closing the gap between their underprivileged upbringing and those who enjoyed greater access to resources due to more

privileged circumstances. An informant spoke about his motivation to continue participating in development programs as follows:

> **Quang (30 years old, male, Programs 1, 2 and 6):** So that I gain more knowledge, that's all. I think I need to learn more, because when I talk to my classmates from Hanoi or Saigon, I really don't have much to contribute. I mean I could talk about my life experiences…, but when they discuss something more philosophical, I would not have anything to add to the conversation. I think when I go to those courses, I have a chance to learn and read more books. At home I have very little time to read books. I usually just read information on the web. So if I have a chance to learn directly from the trainers it will be good. It will help me learn more things.

Like Hùng, Quang came from a poor farming household. He lived in a remote, mountainous area in north central Vietnam. When he was growing up, there was no electricity in the area, and his primary school classes took place under the floor of a stilt house. Years later, upon meeting other learners at a development program in Hanoi, he was impressed by their ability to speak fluent English, their skillful use of computer programs, and their rich knowledge of various subjects; these are the skills Quang was slow to develop due to his limited access to a quality education. In the interview, Quang expressed insecurity as he compared himself with other participants he met in these programs, especially those who had grown up in big cities. His narrative revealed an awareness of regional inequality, unequal distribution of educational opportunities, and a desire to bridge this gap as his main motivation for participation. Another informant also hinted at regional inequality stemming from her background growing up in a small province in northeast Vietnam:

> **Khánh (23 years old, female, Programs 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8 and 10):** As someone from a small town, I am very self-conscious about my knowledge. That motivated me to apply to development programs in big cities. After having attended the first program, I've felt motivated to continue signing up for the next one because I realize that what matters is that I have the confidence to dare to overcome the barrier of my background.

In this narrative, Khánh emphasized the importance of transforming her insecurity into motivation. In our email exchange prior to the interview, she expressed concern about the lack of development programs in small provinces, noting that most of them were held in big cities and consequently excluded youth from less privileged regions. She seized the opportunity to apply as soon as one of these programs was announced in her province, which, she explained, was a rare occurrence. For Khánh, that was the starting point for overcoming the limitations of her background: taking the chance to participate and narrow the urban-rural gap.

Also dealing with insecurity related to her background, 21-year-old Bích had a pragmatic approach to participation. She explained what she looked for in choosing a program:

> **Bích (21 years old, female, Program 7):** Previously, I focused on the popularity of the program. Like, I'm from the province, I'm new to the city, I want a program from an organization with a reputation so I can put it on my CV or tell others about my participation there.

Having grown up in a rural province in southeastern Vietnam, Bích initially felt insecure about moving to the city to attend university. In addition to stressing the lack of good education in the region where she came from, she also discussed the benefits of joining a well-known program when transitioning from the province to the city. From Bích's viewpoint, association with a prestigious development program could increase her symbolic standing and compensate for her provincial background (and the insecurity that came with it); thus, she strategically applied to well-known, popular development programs when she first moved to the city, a time when she felt she lacked and needed to build symbolic capital. Throughout this narrative, this informant explicitly used her participation as a tool to deal with the disadvantages of her background. At the time of the interview, Bích had attended several development programs, and she constantly presented herself as a confident, well-established young "global" person, using her participation in development programs as proof of her accomplishment.

The excerpts in this subsection resonate with previous literature on young people's approach to participation: youth feel motivated to participate in development programs because they see participation as an opportunity to improve their lives. Youth have reported learning critical skills that could help them get a good job (Björnsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2018), in addition to gaining knowledge and confidence through participation (Ansell, 2005; Abdou & Skalli, 2018). The impact of participation has been especially notable among youth with disadvantaged backgrounds, who have reported experiencing improved self-worth after participation, with Morgan's (2016) study of street children offering a clear example. In a similar fashion, the youth in this study also view participatory development as a channel for overcoming adversity, a resource for the marginalized, and a tool for self-growth. Through these narratives, these informants also construct themselves as worthy subjects of aid development: as vulnerable yet motivated individuals who are capable of utilizing the gift of aid provided to them (see Zhan, 2016) to improve their futures. By emphasizing themselves as the primary agents of change in their lives, they also affirm their belonging to the development community.

Interestingly, all of these narratives focus on young people themselves, rather than structural barriers, as the unit of change. While these marginalized youth expressed heightened awareness of regional inequality and a desire to

bridge the urban-rural gap, their solution to this inequality was to enhance their own capability through hard work and through participation in development programs, rather than questioning the inequality they experienced on a daily basis. The focus on developing the self, echoing the sentiment of maximizing the self-value (Walkerdine, 2006; Weidner, 2009), formed the core of their motivation for participating in development programs. This, accordingly, also reflects the notion of neoliberal subjectivity (Türken et al., 2016) underlying the ideology of these development programs.

6.2.2 Participation as a means for community development

Many informants explained that their motivation for participating in development programs stemmed from their desire to fulfill their passion for social justice and social change. This motivation was also prominent among those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Perhaps experiences of marginalization made them aware of the systemic problems in their communities and motivated them to pursue appropriate solutions.

In the previous subsection, I mentioned Quang, a young man from a farming family in a mountainous province of north-central Vietnam. As previously discussed, Quang struggled with feelings of insecurity about his background, particularly when comparing himself to fellow learners from urban areas who had enjoyed better educational opportunities. This sense of insecurity led to a desire to enhance his skills, and was one of the motivating factors driving him to continue participating in development programs. Quang spent many evenings teaching himself English and computer skills, trying to catch up with his more privileged peers. The process, however, was not easy. Quang shared about his studying struggles in the following excerpt:

> **Quang (30 years old, male, Programs 1, 2 and 6):** There were many things that made me feel discouraged at times. I was struggling to make sense of the learning materials, it wasn't easy. Sometimes I even wondered why I should spend time studying those things; will they be helpful for me in the future? It wouldn't bring me any money, and I had no idea what I would do after participating in those programs. I had no guarantee that the things I learned from development programs could land me [a good job]. Eventually, I realized that learning helped me change my perceptions and spread good values to my community. So that I could help raise awareness in my community.

In this interview extract, Quang openly acknowledged his previous doubts regarding the practical outcomes of his participation, particularly in terms of securing employment. Nevertheless, he overcame these uncertainties by recognizing the potential for contributing to his community through education. Quang's narrative conveyed his belief that personal gain was not the sole purpose of his learning journey; instead, he emphasized the significance of altruism and community impact. In this excerpt, Quang portrayed himself as an

individual willing to invest considerable effort and dedication, motivated by a commitment to societal development without anticipating any personal rewards. At the time of the interview, he had already returned to the north-central region, where he actively collaborated with his community to establish an empowerment network for Vietnamese ethnic minority citizens.

Having the desire and dedication for social change was reiterated as the main motivation for participation in my interview with Nhật, a former participant in a development program promoting equality for all genders and sexual orientations. This program was also recognized as an ideal platform for young activists in the field to improve their leadership skills and expand their activist network. Nhật himself is now a prominent activist, but at the time of applying to the program, he was, in his words, "a nobody with absolutely no skills or experience [in activism]." He made sense of the reason he was able to get into the program despite his "bare-bones application" in the following statement:

> **Nhật (25 years old, male, Program 9):** There's a difference between the first cohort of the program and the second one. With the first cohort, the recruiters asked tricky questions to select the most talented applicants. It was selective, and the first cohort consisted of highly accomplished activists.... The second application round placed more emphasis on passion than knowledge. It's like as long as you have enough passion for the cause, then you can participate. They measured it. I don't know how, but they measured that "fire" in you. Whoever has more fire can go further [in the selection process]. That's how I got in, even with no skills and a bare-bones application. That year, participating in this program was a lot of fun thanks to this selection. There was such a strong bond between the participants, and everyone remains committed to the cause to this day.

In this explanation, Nhật credited his successful application to a change in recruitment criteria that shifted from a focus on knowledge to a focus on passion. He was able to compensate for his lack of experience and knowledge in the field by emphasizing his strong commitment to promoting gender and sexuality equality. Much like Quang, whose narrative reflected a deep willingness to invest time and effort in driving community development, Nhật's statement portrayed himself and his peers as dedicated agents of social change. Their passion not only helped them gain entry into development programs but also united them into a community of like-minded and devoted activists. Moreover, Nhật established a distinction between his cohort and the previous one: while his group may not have been as "accomplished" or "talented" as the other cohort, they were more persistent in their pursuit of social change.

The notion of viewing not only oneself but also others in the same development program as agents of social change was also evident in other interviews. For instance, one informant shared that she applied to development programs to connect with individuals who shared her passion for the same cause:

> **Thanh (23 years old, female, Programs 1, 3, 6 and 8)**: I did my search and made thorough plans to participate in those development programs. This was in preparation for my project, I wanted to create something to help disadvantaged children in small provinces. I was seeking someone with the same enthusiasm as me to join my team. That person must also be active in the field, should have also been involved in some development programs, so that I could communicate with them easily. I joined [Program 1] specifically to find someone like that.

In this narrative, participatory development programs were portrayed as platforms that bring together individuals who share a strong devotion to a common community cause. Consequently, this young person viewed these programs as an effective networking opportunity for identifying potential collaborators for her own projects. Thanh's motivation also exhibited a pragmatic aspect: she leveraged the selection process of participatory programs as a means to streamline her search for suitable team members. Within this narrative, Thanh reinforced the notion that gaining admission to such programs requires possessing specific personality traits and a genuine interest in a social cause. Reinforcing the boundary between those selected for participation and those who are not, Thanh's narrative, like that of Nhật's, suggests that for these young individuals, dedication to driving social change constitutes one of the "requisites of belonging" to development programs. Both Nhật and Thanh perceived the selection process of development programs as a mechanism that would allow them to connect with a community of like-minded individuals. These potential teammates, in turn, would offer the necessary support and resources to help them realize their aspirations for social change.

Many informants, in fact, reported that they had successfully found good teammates to collaborate with during their participation in development programs. Sang (30 years old, male, Program 5) shared that he had managed to gather a team to collaborate on his community education project in the Mekong Delta after participation, while Hùng (29 years old, male, Programs 2, 3, 7 and 11) collaborated with other participants in Program 11 to create an online forum for nonprofit work in Vietnam's southern regions. Hoa (28 years old, female, Programs 2 and 11) asserted that participation helped her "connect with a wider circle of people and organizations in different regions" and helped her expand her club "outside the limits of the university campus."

Worth noting is that these narratives establish a connection between personal development and societal development. In simpler terms, the motivation of young individuals to improve their knowledge through participation is closely linked to their desire to improve the living conditions of disadvantaged groups in their communities. This connection between the self and the community is highlighted in the following excerpt, in which an informant explained her motivation for consistently participating in several development programs:

> **Khánh (23 years old, female, Programs 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8 and 10):** I want to expand my knowledge and not become narrow-minded. Working in the health sector, I see that those who don't go to these development programs tend to have a partial, one-dimensional view. For them being a doctor would guarantee a good income and power over the patients. They only care about improving their expertise, so that after med school they can start making money and have enough for a well-off life. They have no understanding of other groups. When I participate in these programs, I have a more comprehensive view. With this multidimensional perspective, I can treat my patients better.… They [the patients] may not know their rights when entering a medical facility. Of course, as doctors, we cannot touch the patient's body without their permission, but the patients may not be aware of that. When they come to the hospital, they listen to us, doctors in our white coats, and do everything we tell them to do. They are not aware of their rights; they don't know many things that can be useful when going to a hospital. I realized this after going to a program teaching about human rights.

At the time of the interview, Khánh was in her final year of medical training, completing clinical rotations at a hospital. During this time, she frequently observed the power imbalance between doctors and patients. She elaborated on how participation in development programs provided her with an opportunity to learn from experts in various fields. This experience allowed her to better empathize with patients. Khánh believed that this ability to understand and empathize with patients is crucial for becoming a "good doctor." Her account illustrates how she distinguished her skills acquired through participation from those of her colleagues—a form of boundary work. Additionally, she highlighted the symbolic capital underlying the doctor's role, particularly in contexts where they are perceived as authority figures, suggesting that such authority can potentially be misused by doctors in their interactions with patients. Through this contextualization, Khánh was maintaining that instead of judging, complaining, or assigning blame to patients, a good doctor must make an effort to sympathize with the patients' lack of awareness, inform them of their rights, and understand the link between a patient's economic background and their health. Khánh attributed these realizations to her participation in development programs, which served as a motivation for her to continue applying to more programs. Participation, for her, was a way to become a more ethical individual. This narrative also shows the connection she established between improving her ethics as a doctor and her potential contribution to society.

Throughout this subsection, the narratives have shed light on how young individuals interpreted their motivation to engage in development programs as going beyond self-interest. They perceived these programs as a means of translating their enthusiasm for social change into practical action, thereby positioning themselves as active agents of development and societal transformation. Some informants considered participation to be a means to enhance their own perspectives, subsequently allowing them to raise awareness within

their communities. Others viewed participation as a strategic opportunity to connect with kindred spirits, framing development programs as a tailored networking platform that aligned with their objectives to serve their communities.

While previous scholars have highlighted how participatory programs can be used as meeting places for young people, they found that young individuals often utilized them for subcultural activities and entertainment (Kirmse, 2009; Swidler & Watkins, 2009), or used them to advance their careers (Yabanci, 2019). Extending this existing literature, the narratives in this subsection illustrate that young people appreciate the networking dimension of development programs for more than just the enjoyment it brings or the personal advancement opportunities it offers. They value development programs as effective platforms to nurture collective commitment to community development and social progress. This stems from the way these young people draw boundaries between those who are admitted to such programs and those who are not, with the former portrayed as having a strong passion and commitment for community development, and thus, capable of being trusted as potential collaborators. In essence, by emphasizing development programs as a meeting place for like-minded individuals with a shared dedication to social change, these informants are making statements about the collective identity of the groups as well as the requisites of belonging to development programs, thus consolidating the boundaries of these tiny publics.

6.3 Concluding discussion

This chapter has delved into the issue of access to participatory development programs. The analysis has explored the extent to which these programs are accessible to local communities, as well as the extent to which the boundaries of these programs can be negotiated by young applicants.

The first section of this chapter revealed the highly selective nature of these programs, with program organizers functioning as gatekeepers to the participation process. Since they have the authority to control access to development programs, these organizers play a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. While each program employs its own unique methodology and ideology for the application process, they all seek to maintain boundaries between those deemed legitimate occupants of the space and those who are not via the recruitment process. By sorting applicants into groups and determining whether they can gain access to participation, program organizers engage in boundary maintenance work: they draw symbolic boundaries between people (Lamont & Molnar, 2002), in the process defining and reproducing what it means to belong to the group. By making claims about "the differences that count" (Anthias, 2016, p. 173) to keep out the seemingly unqualified, these organizers solidify the notion that those deemed to belong to development programs are legitimate members worthy of program resources.

Membership, or belonging to a program, is made sense of in two ways. Many applicants believe that they can increase their chances of admission by demonstrating skills and accomplishments, or by highlighting their personal stories to make themselves seem "interesting." Hence, this approach focuses on improving youth applicants' human capital: building their brand and constructing themselves as achieving, self-improving individuals. There is an implicit understanding here that development programs' boundaries are permeable, as long as young applicants do their best to enhance their human capital. Through strategies of self-branding and self-optimization, these applicants, as well as recruiters for development programs, further reproduce the neoliberal ideology that views individuals as being responsible for their own success (in this case, success is managing to gain entry to highly selective development programs). Previous studies have suggested that subjectivity development and self-branding are increasingly dominant in development practices (Türken et al., 2016; Weidner, 2009), and the findings of this section confirm that notion.

As gatekeepers for development resources, program organizers can also ensure that the boundaries of these programs are impermeable by allowing only those with compatible tastes, styles, and dispositions to enter. Given that development practitioners often come from higher social strata than their beneficiaries (Peters, 2016), entry assessments solely based on the vision and epistemology of program organizers or recruiters could result in a biased selection in favor of elites. In Vietnamese development programs, this stratification is clearly evident in the application process: recruiters—many of whom have received some form of training or educational qualifications from the West and are knowledgeable about international development terms—represent an "elite" group with specific political values and visions. Determined to find participants whose epistemology and styles reflect their own, these recruiters are more prone to endorse candidates who already possess social, cultural, and cosmopolitan capital (see, e.g., Weenink, 2007) for entry and give them access to limited development resources. For these candidates, the application is just a matter of formality: they are automatically granted membership given their display of qualifications and possession of symbolic capital.

Furthermore, the highly professionalized nature of the application process also reinforces this elite bias. As my empirical data have showed, the entry process for these programs resembles a grant or university application. This means that only those with appropriate qualifications, educational capital, and a professional manner of presenting themselves are allowed to participate in this professionalization-driven system. The professionalization of development practices has long been problematized by scholars (see, e.g., Kothari, 2005); this chapter has shown that the uncritical application of professionalization in development programs can lead to the exclusion of those who are already marginalized from societal resources. Development practices, here, can result in the reproduction of social boundaries (Lamont & Molnar, 2002), and development programs like these can function like elite membership clubs

where participation and all the prestige and benefits that come along with it are reserved for a select few.

While this chapter has acknowledged the gatekeeping role development practitioners play in providing access to resources, it has also explored how young people can negotiate their belonging in development programs through the ways in which they make sense of their motivation to take part in such programs. In the chapter's second section, I demonstrated that the motivations of youth can be construed in two ways. The first type of motivation relates to self-development; this motivation is prevalent among youth who identify themselves as coming from less privileged backgrounds. They see participation in development programs as an opportunity to improve their lives: through participation, they gain skills and resources that their everyday context does not provide. Thus, many see participation as an opportunity to contribute to self-development and success in competing with others who come from more privileged backgrounds. Through these narratives, young informants construct themselves as active agents in their own development and transformation rather than passive recipients of aid. By constructing themselves as the primary agents of change in their lives, they also affirm their belonging to the development community. In other words, by establishing themselves as hardworking individuals who are willing to invest in themselves to overcome adversity, they present themselves as worthy recipients of development resources, consolidating their membership in participatory development communities.

The second type of motivation involves a strong sense of purpose and responsibility for the community. Here, the informants view participation as a means of contributing to their communities and achieving their goals of social change and development. These young people strategically utilize participatory programs as networking platforms to meet like-minded people who share their goals and values in terms of social change and justice. In doing so, they construct the selective application process as a filter to find participants who are genuinely interested in and dedicated to social development. They also utilize the mentorship and guidance provided by the program organizers, which gives them tools and knowledge to pursue their social justice causes. Through development programs, these informants build a sense of community and solidarity rooted in their social justice pursuits.

By highlighting these motivations, young people make sense of and justify their belonging to development program communities, either by presenting themselves as individuals focused on self-improvement in line with neoliberal ideals, or as individuals genuinely committed to community development. By means of this emphasis, they not only identify the "requisites of belonging" (Yuval-Davis, 2006) to development programs, but also consolidate the boundaries that distinguish them from non-participants. These accounts also suggest that development programs are unique spaces that facilitate tangible improvements in self-capability and self-awareness, as well as the pursuit of

youth visions for social change. This raises questions about the precise nature of participation in development programs and how such experiences shape young people's perceptions of their civic responsibilities and contributions to society. This inquiry will be explored further in the subsequent empirical chapter, which answers the study's second research question.

7. Framing participation: transformative space and transformed self

Chapter 6 has explored how access to development programs is determined and the potential factors that bar young applicants from participation. As demonstrated in Chapter 6, many young informants view development programs as a gateway to resources and opportunities that would otherwise be beyond their reach. Additionally, they perceive these programs as arenas in which to strategically learn new skills and find teammates for collaboration, thus enabling them to make meaningful contributions to their communities. In light of these motivations, young people are driven to apply to development programs, even if it entails going through a rigorous selection process whereby the organizers, acting as gatekeepers, ensure that the boundaries of the collective remain intact.

The findings in Chapter 6 also shed light on the prospect that youth can utilize development programs as networking hubs to establish smaller, more focused groups. This hints at the potential for development programs to promote the formation of additional youth groups, a notion in line with Fine's insights on tiny publics (Fine, 2014, 2021; Fine & Harrington, 2004). Fine has maintained that small groups, as tiny publics, serve both as the cause and the context for civil society. This stems from the framing and mobilizing functions of small groups, which, as Fine has asserted, are necessary to promote civic engagement among group members. This, ultimately, enables these groups to "create citizens" (Fine & Harrington, 2004, p. 344).

Building upon this theoretical framework, this chapter will explore the intricate web of practices, norms, and values cultivated within development programs to shed light on their framing and mobilization functions. It seeks to unravel the embedded norms and practices within these programs that foster social awareness and inform young individuals' perceptions regarding their contributions to society, thereby shaping their sense of agency and civic engagement.

Consequently, this chapter will address the second research question posed by this study: How do the experiences of young people in development programs contribute to their civic engagement? The answers to this question will illuminate how groups function as "vehicles through which people and resources are mobilized into action" (Fine & Harrington, 2004, p. 344). Through this investigation, the study elucidates how participation in development

programs can contribute to the cultivation of active citizens, thus playing a vital role in the growth of a vibrant civil society.

7.1 Narratives of safe space

When young people were interviewed about their experiences and emotions regarding development programs, a prevailing narrative emerged that portrayed these programs as more than just opportunities for skill acquisition or community engagement. Rather, development programs were described as safe havens in which the age-based hierarchy and societal judgments could be dismantled, allowing youth to experience freedom from normative expectations. This section delves into the common thread woven through these narratives, exploring the types of practices and designs in development programs that lead to youth framing participation as entering a "safe space." The following subsections will illuminate young people's narratives that construct participation as a space of equality, inclusion, and freedom.

7.1.1 Equality

Traditionally, age has carried significant symbolic value in Confucian settings. Interactions within this context are intricately bound by the notion that everyone should know "his or her proper place in society" (Park & Chesla, 2007, p. 303), which is heavily governed by age. In Confucian societies, age is considered "an asset, not a liability" (Trương et al., 2017, p. 80). Within this cultural framework, the elderly are considered superior and are revered for their wisdom, knowledge, and experience, while the younger generation is expected to obey authority figures and elders (Trương, 2013). Age profoundly shapes Vietnamese social interactions, permeating various aspects of life, including family dynamics and education. The adherence to these cultural norms means that older adults seldom entertain young people's opinions or critiques, perceiving them as subordinate within the Confucian hierarchy (Ashwill & Thái, 2005). An informant described this hierarchy in interaction as follows:

> **Quang (30 years old, male, Programs 1, 2 and 6):** Age matters. At local neighborhood meetings most participants are older than me. I must address them as "uncle" or "grandfather." So when I speak, regardless of how relevant my opinion may be, I still feel that these people don't really listen to me. [This differs from] when I participated in development programs.

Quang's narrative, which illuminates how age permeates every aspect of Vietnamese social interactions, requires a sociocultural level of analysis. Unlike English, which uses neutral pronouns such as "I" or "you," Vietnamese

pronouns[4] and terms of address reflect embedded social hierarchies, requiring people to constantly situate themselves in terms of age, gender, and status in relation to others (Scott et al., 2005). In this linguistic practice, age dictates not only the appropriate pronouns, but also the manner in which honorifics are applied, reflecting the importance placed on respecting the age-based social hierarchy. At neighborhood meetings, when Quang was required to address the other attendees as "uncle" or "grandfather," he had to address himself as a "child" or "grandchild." Being positioned as a "child" (i.e., in an inferior position) when interacting with others diminished his authority as a speaker, and consequently discouraged him from fully participating in these meetings, as he predicted his opinions would not be appreciated.

In referencing the age hierarchy, Quang's narrative explicitly links the diminished sense of agency he previously experienced at neighborhood meetings to a larger set of social structures and norms that both dominate and disregard youth in Vietnam. This narrative locates the "symbolic violence" (see Bourdieu, 1990) that young people experience in their interactions with adults as emerging out of and being reinforced by cultural norms and social structures that embrace an age-based hierarchy. An age-based hierarchy is understood in this narrative as the foundation for adults' domination over youth, leading to a failure to see young people as equal contributors to the conversation. Moreover, the narrative implies that contexts in which youth are not perceived as inferior, or where age does not pose a barrier, can significantly affect their sense of agency, and contribute to a sense of liberation.

As Quang made sense of the difficulties he faced in neighborhood meetings, he contrasted this with his participation in development programs in which he could "freely speak" his mind. This sentiment was shared by many informants, who found that participating in development programs offered them a safe and welcoming space to express their opinions and feelings. This was evident in their use of two different sets of pronouns to address two different groups of actors. Specifically, they adopted sibling-related pronouns ("anh" [older brother] or "chị" [older sister]) when referring to individuals working in civil society organizations, such as those organizing development programs. Meanwhile, they addressed people affiliated with state institutions with pronouns associated with "bác" [uncle] or "ông" [grandfather]. At first glance, this variation in language might appear to reflect a simple age difference. The data, however, clearly indicated that this use of language extended beyond a literal age distinction. In the excerpt below, Hoa, a high school

[4] Vietnamese speakers address each other using the same pronouns they would use for family members. One addresses a slightly older female person as "chị" (bigger sister) and a slightly older male person as "anh" (bigger brother), while referring to oneself as "em" (younger sibling). If there's a significant age gap between the two speakers, pronouns such as "cô/dì" (aunt), "chú/bác" (uncle), "ông" (grandfather), "bà" (grandmother) will be used to refer to the older speaker and, correspondingly, "con" (child) or "cháu" (niece/nephew/grandchild) to refer to the younger one.

teacher who frequently participated in CSO's development programs and state training programs, highlighted the differences between the two contexts:

> **Hoa (28 years old, female, Programs 2 and 11):** Most development programs I've been to have young organizers, only two or three years different from me. I later became a colleague to some of them. It's a friendly environment, I like that. In general, I find the "older brothers" and "older sisters" who work in civil society organizations very youthful and active. Even when they are 20 years older, they speak in a friendly manner, and I don't feel any age gap with them. They don't speak formally like people in state organizations. Whenever I participated in government training, I found it extremely boring. As opposed to this, programs organized by civil society organizations always carry a youthful energy, which I appreciate.

In this response, Hoa first indicated that the actors involved in development programs were predominantly young, which explained her ease around them. This observation aligns with previous research on participatory development, which has highlighted the use of peer learning or peer facilitation as a common technique (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2015; Gilbertson, 2021). In this model, members of a group (such as young people) receive training to gain "expertise" in a specific subject and become youth facilitators to spread their knowledge throughout their networks. Applying this model, development programs often incorporate volunteers and peer trainers who are former participants and employ trainers who are in their twenties. Thảo (21 years old, female, Program 4) shared that having organizers who were the same age as participants helped, as "everyone opened up to each other, and there was no distance."

With peer learning, significant age gaps between organizers and youth participants in development programs seem to be rare; however, Hoa's words above suggest that even when this gap exists, it does not foster hierarchical relationships. Using the pronoun "siblings" to refer to staff who are two decades older than herself, Hoa showed that the actual age difference was less significant than how it was acknowledged and addressed. Hoa identified the friendly and informal language and communication style adopted by development program organizers as being key to shaping a youth-oriented atmosphere, regardless of age differences between the actors involved. In contrast, she described state training as a "formal" and "rigid" sphere in keeping with age norms and hierarchies, hinting at the unequal power relations between the (old) organizers and (young) participants.

Hoa and Quang's observations highlight the power implications associated with Vietnamese pronouns: their use can inflict symbolic violence on youth as much as it can foster inclusion and meaningful participation. This also means that certain pronouns can be strategically utilized in interpersonal interactions to show resistance to the normative age-based hierarchy. As the observation data show, trainers and organizers of these programs consistently address the younger participants with the pronoun "bạn" [friend/peer], a

linguistic choice that emphasizes equality among everyone involved. This effectively produces and sustains the construction of these programs as a non-hierarchical, youth-oriented space.

Another practice that some development programs have employed to foster the impression of a non-hierarchical, youth-oriented space is including youth in the program's design. An informant expressed her appreciation for being included in this process in the following excerpt:

> **Tuyền (23 years old, female, Programs 1, 2 and 10):** In other programs, we would have to follow the plans that the organizers have drawn. There are certain activities we must do. But in [Program 1], I could just freely speak, it didn't feel restricted at all. So it felt like our own experiences were the priority rather than the program script. It made me feel treasured.

Further inquiry revealed that participants in Program 1 were invited to engage in a collective decision-making process regarding which activities to do during the three-day program together. They discussed each day what would benefit them and what suited their energy levels, and then adapted their activities accordingly. Having this shared authority to shape the program's direction significantly changed Tuyền's perception of her role as a participant. In this new role, she identified herself as a partner who contributed to the participatory process rather than a follower. Compared with her previous encounters in programs or meetings where pre-established agendas were mandated, this reflects a significant shift in power dynamics and a newfound feeling of ownership in the participation process, in which she was recognized as an equal partner and stakeholder. A program organizer explained the principle behind this design as follows:

> **Minh (26 years old, male, Programs 1 and 10):** Here's a funny anecdote. Applicants often ask us [organizers] what Program 1 will be like, and we playfully tell them that we're just as clueless as they are [laughs]. That's because we believe in a collaborative approach in the program, where participants work together to co-design each day's activities. We want our participants to feel the spirit of co-ownership of the space.

Minh humorously suggested that the organizers were equally uncertain about the program's outcome, highlighting their commitment to an egalitarian participatory model. This commitment was further emphasized by the program organizer's constant use of phrases such as "collaborative," "working together," "co-design," and "co-ownership" in the interview, demonstrating that he viewed young participants as equal partners. Evident from this response is a commitment to creating an environment of collaboration and mutual responsibility in which participants are encouraged to voice their opinions and their contributions are acknowledged. Furthermore, embedding the participants' input and ideas into the program design reinforces the notion that participation

is a collective experience owned by the participants rather than something imposed on them by the organizers.

Within development training contexts, Minh's approach was not unique; most informants described their involvement in development programs as immersing themselves in an environment of equality in which their contributions were valued. Of course, the level of influence these young people had on the process would vary from program to program. As the interview data showed, most development programs gathered feedback daily, enabling real-time adjustments. One program tailored its activities based on the collective preferences of participants, which were determined using a democratic voting process. A couple of others employed teambuilding activities that invited participants to reflect on their life experiences and emotions, giving them a platform to share what they have learned. Program 7, where this study's participant observation was conducted, asked participants to jot down their expectations on sticky notes. Afterward, these notes were attached to a whiteboard to illustrate a "tree of expectations," and became the criteria for collectively assessing whether participants' expectations had been fulfilled.

In contrast to unilateral decisions by organizers, these models employed by development programs promote the idea of participants and organizers working together. While not all of these models change the program's content in significant ways, they nonetheless provide a venue for facilitating discussions and reinforcing the framing of development programs as participant-centered, jointly owned, and collaborative. Such practices, together with the strategic use of pronouns that undermine the age-based hierarchy, position youth as proactive contributors and equal partners in the participation experiences, where their insights are acknowledged and respected.

7.1.2 Inclusion

In addition to choosing friendly pronouns and inviting youth to contribute to the program's setup, organizers and trainers in development programs also interact with their young participants in ways that blur the traditional boundaries between authority figures and youth often seen in Confucian cultures. One informant's account vividly illustrates how the trainers' treatment of the participants contributed to her perception of development programs as non-hierarchical spaces. When asked about what impressed her the most about Program 2, Khánh responded that it was "the spirit of the lecturers," and shared the following story:

> **Khánh (23 years old, female, Programs 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8 and 10):** That day the program concluded at 6 PM. When the trainer, a staff member from [an INGO], was waiting for her ride home, we (the students) came to ask her a few more questions. In the middle of the discussion, her ride arrived, and we thought she would leave, but she told the driver to leave and that she would catch another

> ride later. She stayed with us until 10 PM to answer our questions and share with us her experiences working in the public policy field. I remember myself thinking, "wow, this is the first time someone with so much knowledge has dedicated their time to speak to us, just a bunch of random ordinary students." That memory helped change my perception of people with high degrees, like professors or PhD holders. I realized that they can be friendly and open to us students.
>
> **Yên (interviewer):** Does that mean you used to think professors or PhD holders are unfriendly?
>
> **Khánh**: Yes, I used to. At the university, we students find it difficult to speak to our teachers, especially those who hold PhD degrees. They are not friendly. Usually, we only get to speak to teachers with a master's degree, but not PhD holders.

Khánh's description highlights another constructed dichotomy between development programs and traditional institutions. From Khánh's perspective, the INGO lecturer's approachability, her friendly attitude, as well as her willingness to extend support outside the classroom setting, significantly reduced the traditional hierarchy between her and the young participants. Meanwhile, Khánh's depiction of her university experiences shows a different dynamic characterized by hierarchical relationships and symbolic distinctions based on academic achievement. Khánh believed this hierarchy contributed to social distance and lack of contact between students and higher academics. Another informant, Linh (33 years old, female, Program 6), agreed with this observation making the following remark: "Normally, [Vietnamese students] don't have the opportunity to interact with people who are decades older, who are experts in their field, so development programs seem like a very good opportunity." This statement reinforced the contrast between development programs and normative institutions: the former emerged as spaces for youth to interact with authority figures without being impeded by hierarchies, while the latter were perceived as excluding them.

Many development programs, in fact, are designed in such a way that the organizers and trainers are easily accessible to the participants. Informants often expressed their enjoyment at having the opportunity to engage in informal discussions with the trainers during mealtimes, or were delighted that the organizers joined them in informal activities, such as playing games. This aligns with the participant observation data, which showed that the organizing team and trainers had lunch with the participants and were readily available to offer career advice during breaks. Like Khánh, other informants also interpreted the approachability of trainers and organizers in development programs as a demonstration of dedication and commitment to treating youth with kindness and patience. These accounts illustrate how the interactions between organizers and participants can influence whether youth perceive a space as

"welcoming," and whether they feel they are being respected in that space. This sentiment is illustrated in the following excerpt:

> **Quang (30 years old, male, Programs 1, 2 and 6):** When I attended [program 6], everything was brand new to me. There were also difficulties. The other participants were from Saigon, Hanoi, and Hue [the three largest Vietnamese cities]. Most of them excelled at English. When they spoke English, I didn't understand a word. The lectures were in Vietnamese but sometimes the trainers and other participants used some English words, like "leader," or something like that, which I didn't understand. At first, I didn't dare to ask what those words meant. At the end of this training day, we were encouraged to discuss what we found difficult about learning. When the trainer asked if we had any difficulties, I replied that I didn't understand the English words. After that, everyone agreed they would learn from this experience and provide a Vietnamese translation next time after using English. When participating in development programs, I felt respected. I felt I could say what I wanted to say. There was no constraint.

Quang used the above example to explain why he felt more comfortable speaking up in development programs than in neighborhood meetings. Specifically, he interpreted the decision of Program 6's organizers and learners to take into account his limited English as a sign of respect and inclusion. This was especially useful for Quang, who came from a disadvantaged background and often expressed insecurity in the interview about his knowledge compared to others. When his learning limitations were recognized and included in the participation process, Quang felt accepted and respected. This is clearly in contrast to how he perceived participation in neighborhood meetings, where his opinions as a young person were often disregarded.

Other informants also praised the friendly and kind treatment they experienced during participation in development programs. They portrayed the organizers and trainers as respectful and attentive, often going the extra mile to ensure participants felt comfortable throughout the entire process. Through these narratives, development programs emerged as safe spaces where youth could express vulnerability, feel accepted, and gain support. Another informant offered an anecdote echoing this sentiment:

> **Nhật (25 years old, male, Program 9):** The organizers were really kind. They paid attention to little details. Back then my financial situation was tough: I was homeless, recently kicked out of my family, so I didn't have any money. When everyone decided to get drinks and snacks in the evening, we had to chip in what was a small reasonable amount but to me was huge, because 20,000 VND to me at that time was a lot. There was a mentor who noticed I looked uneasy and checked in on me. I told him I was afraid I didn't have enough money to contribute and be a part of the occasion. Then he said, no problem, let him take care of it… Or there were moments when, you know with teenagers, our emotions were like a roller coaster [laughs] and the mentors would be there to talk about our feelings with us.

In this excerpt, Nhật fondly acknowledged the compassionate and kind actions of the mentor at Program 9, which left a significant impression on his young and vulnerable self. Having to deal with a level of financial insecurity in which what was a seemingly trivial expense for others posed a significant burden for him, Nhật expressed appreciation for the mentor who he portrayed as going the extra mile to ensure his inclusion in the program's activities. Nhật's narrative underlined his participation in this program as entry into a safe haven where unwavering support was offered to vulnerable youth. Moreover, Nhật used the metaphor of a "roller coaster" to reflect on the emotional turmoil experienced by adolescents, and portrayed the mentors as reliable figures who provided a comforting presence and were able to guide youth through turbulent moments.

This excerpt thus exemplifies the role of development programs as secure and inclusive spaces that protect and embrace youth who face difficulties and are in need of support. Additionally, this narrative suggests that the interactions within these development programs are characterized by a certain degree of emotional labor undertaken by the organizers and trainers. This is on par with previous literature, which has shown that emotional management is strategically employed by development practitioners to cultivate trust in local participants (O'Reilly, 2011), helping ensure their participation in development projects (Eversole, 2003; Chandrasekhar, 2012).

Nhật's and Quang's accounts in this subsection show interesting parallels, both following a common narrative structure. These stories begin with the protagonists' struggles: Quang with comprehension difficulties and Nhật with financial insecurity. In the course of their participation, these struggles surface and serve as barriers that could exclude them from meaningful participation: Quang's inability to understand English made him unable to follow the lecture, while Nhật's financial constraints could bar him from group extracurricular activities. The narratives reach a pivotal point when the program's trainers acknowledge and address these informants' struggles: Quang was aided by English-Vietnamese translation, while Nhật's participation in the extracurricular activity was facilitated by a mentor's economic support. This storyline progression echoes the classic hero's journey, in which the protagonists (the Heroes), initially burdened and confined by their circumstances, receive aid and guidance from benevolent, empathetic figures (the Guides). This assistance at critical times enables them to overcome their personal challenges and continue moving forward. Khánh's narrative at the start of this subsection also exemplifies the empathetic Guide archetype: she interpreted the INGO lecturer's decision to stay late to share her experiences with "random ordinary students" as a display of dedication and commitment to sharing knowledge and wisdom.

These narratives are examples of meaning-making in which the informants construct their participation as akin to receiving assistance from figures with greater power. Despite hierarchical or personal adversities, these young

people find themselves included in the learning process within the context of development programs. They portray development programs' organizers and trainers as supportive figures who propel vulnerable youth toward overcoming challenges and transforming their circumstances. These accounts collectively illustrate the empowerment and inclusion fostered by these programs, further affirming the framing of development programs as a safe space for youth.

7.1.3 Freedom

Beyond their role as safe havens for marginalized youth, development programs are also designed to serve as unique and distinct spaces, setting them apart from conventional norms. Within these programs, young participants experience a sense of liberation, feeling unburdened by societal expectations and conventions. Here's how one informant articulated the feeling of liberation she experienced from participation:

> **Tuyền (23 years old, female, Programs 1, 2 and 10)**: After returning from [Program 1], I felt like I was in a dream. That's the first feeling I had when I stepped onto the returning boat; you see, we travelled by boat to reach that place, returning the same way. As I stepped onto the boat, we passed through the botanical garden, surrounded by trees and foliage, with no sounds of vehicles around. It's as if the moment we set foot on the boat, the previous days transformed into a dream-like memory… When I was there, I felt as if I had lost my sense of time and space. All that I knew was the people I was with. It felt like I really didn't need to think about what I was supposed to do, like all of my obligations had been taken off my shoulders.

Development programs often take place in secluded locales over a specified period of time. A program organizer explained to me in an interview that this would enable participants to focus on the subject matter without the distractions of everyday demands. Like Program 1, which took place in a botanical garden situated far from the bustling capital city, two other development programs took place at a hotel nestled on the outskirts of a suburban district. Location is chosen deliberately to separate the participants from the ordinary humdrum of their daily lives.

Certainly, not all programs can be hosted in remote locations. This is contingent upon logistical variables, including the type of funding secured and permissions granted by the state. For instance, one development program that explored transparency, a particularly sensitive subject in Vietnam's political landscape, took place in a government guesthouse and featured state officials in specific lectures. In these cases, although the venues were not as remote as the organizers might have liked, the intentional assembly of participants for collaborative learning and communal living still serves to enhance the perception of a distinct time and space.

In Tuyền's narrative, the program's secluded location was central to her "dream-like" experience and the feeling of being unburdened by conventional responsibilities and routines. Constructing these programs as separate realms where participants could fully immerse themselves, she drew a link between her participation and the feeling of liberation gained from the detachment of the self from societal expectations and obligations. In her interview, Tuyền also pointed out that the use of games, arts, and interactive activities in this development program enhanced her feeling of "being in a dream." Tuyền's narrative showed how participation could be seen as an opportunity to escape normative expectations. This notion was also highlighted when Tuyền shared her view on the program's organizers:

> **Tuyền (23 years old, female, Programs 1, 2 and 10):** After the program, they became like idols to me. It's because they seemed to have no obligation to anything. They were free to express themselves, to express their personality, they knew how to express their emotions. I admired them because they were able to be so comfortable with themselves. They laughed when they were happy, cried when they were sad, they didn't feel embarrassed or shy or anything.

The notion of being free from normative obligations was emphasized again in Tuyền's description of the organizers. Tuyền attributed her idolization of them to freedom of expression, portraying them as autonomous agents completely liberated from normative expectations. She described the staff as able to express how they felt without pretense and without being bound by any rules concerning their emotions. Tuyền's example sheds light on the "feeling rules" (Hochschild, 1979) underlying collectivist cultures, in which emotional expression is an integral part of fulfilling social obligations, and collective harmony takes precedence over personal needs and desires (Luo et al., 2019; Eid & Diener, 2001). In collectivist societies, the notion of "self in relation to others" is focal in guiding social behaviors, and people's "pervasive attentiveness to relevant others" can lead to consistent regulation of sadness and anger (Raval et al., 2007, p. 93). Expressing these emotions, whether through crying or yelling, is frowned upon in collectivist societies because such acts convey a discomfort with the social world, and are thus perceived as harmful to an individual's relations with others as well as disruptive to collective harmony. Given this cultural backdrop, the program organizers' choice to express their emotions regardless of normative expectations can be seen as a challenge to collectivist norms and an attempt to form an autonomous self-hood. In doing so, they reinforce the construction of development programs as a distinct space where youth can be free from normative expectations.

Tuyền's portrayal of program organizers as figures of wisdom adept at breaking free from conventions and restrictions also echoes the archetype of the Guide in the narrative of the hero's journey. In the above interview extract, these organizers were presented as role models for their emotional resilience

and ability to express their feelings openly. Their acts of self-expression were portrayed as empowering, inspiring the young participants to challenge societal norms and liberate themselves from their own limitations. As a role model, the Guide offers a unique way of navigating emotional territory and defying societal expectations. Aspiring to becoming like these "idols," Tuyền shared that she "cried every day" during her participation in this development program, portraying the ability to cry in a semi-public context as something empowering she learned from the program's organizer.

Tuyền's perspective underscores the transformative potential of development programs, as participants witness firsthand how to break free from the feeling rules of collectivist culture. This sentiment was also highlighted in another informant's interview:

> **Thư (23 years old, female, Programs 7 and 9):** In general, it was during that time that I learned how to express emotions. Before that, I didn't know how. I used to think it was horrible to express sadness. And I never showed my sadness to anyone, I usually just hid my sadness away. When I engaged in "The Mirror" activity with others, the other participants and I cried a lot. Crying to the point that I couldn't stop. But nobody tried to stop me from crying, they just said, "just cry, cry, cry as long as you want to, there's no need to hold back."

Thư shared that participation in development programs allowed her to express sadness without restrictions, attributing the shift in her perception of appropriate emotional expressions to her involvement in an activity called "The Mirror." In this activity, participants were instructed to mimic the facial expressions and gestures demonstrated by the facilitator. By encouraging participants to imitate these expressions and gestures, the activity allowed them to explore emotional expressions in a structured manner. Thư's experience of "crying to the point that [she] could not stop" during the activity and not facing any discouragement from those around her reflects how the activity created a safe space for emotional release and freedom.

With her acknowledgment of her past tendency to conceal sadness, Thư showed an awareness of the collectivist norm that dissuades outward manifestations of negative emotions and requires individuals to maintain calmness in all situations. This parallels Tuyền's discussion about conventional emotional expectations, which she observed that the program organizers were able to break free from. And much like Tuyền, Thư also linked her newfound capacity to articulate emotions to a valuable lesson derived from participation in a development program. Both narratives construct participation in development programs as an opportunity to break free from conventional expectations, including various feeling rules (Hochschild, 1979) prescribed by the collectivist culture in which they live.

This section has explored narratives from young individuals who constructed participation as a safe space. For many young participants, engagement in development programs meant entering a space beyond normative institutions, in which cultural norms that often restrict young people's sense of agency could be challenged. Participation emerged from these accounts as a domain that disrupts the Confucian culture's hierarchical structures, subverting the typical placement of youth at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Within this context, program organizers navigate practices that erode age-based power dynamics and cultivate equitable relationships, fostering a perception of youth as equal contributors to the participation process.

Furthermore, these narratives have revealed that participation in development programs could cultivate a deep sense of inclusion for young people, particularly those dealing with educational or economic difficulties. Young people portrayed these programs as environments where individuals with different capabilities and personal challenges could be acknowledged and respected, rather than being looked down upon or ignored. Often marginalized in conventional educational settings, these young individuals found themselves in an environment that valued their unique strengths and perspectives, fostering a strong sense of belonging. Youth declared that they felt like "a priority" and felt "respected" in these spaces.

Lastly, these narratives constructed development programs as unique platforms allowing young people to explore emotions without the burden of judgment or societal pressure. Young people made sense of this departure from the normative world as an essential opportunity to challenge conventions, breaking free from everyday obligations and constraints to freely express themselves and their emotions. In this way, participation was specifically framed by these young informants as breaking free.

These accounts strongly reflect the "sustainable pleasure" (Efird, 2015, p. 1152) that youth have reported experiencing from their engagement in participatory development. In alignment with prior research, the findings of this section show that young individuals perceive development programs as a unique opportunity to break free from the constraints of everyday expectations. This liberation has been shown to contribute significantly to an enhanced sense of autonomy and self-confidence (Kirmse, 2009; Björnsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2018; Morgan, 2016). The emotional benefit derived from participation, as Fine and Corte (2017) noted, not only contributes to a sense of belonging in the group but also helps encourage further engagement. As these narratives have illustrated, youth draw inspiration from their engagement in development programs' activities and their interactions with program organizers and trainers on an equal and inclusive footing. This enables them to explore new perspectives on the world and adopt alternative ways of living within it.

The findings of this section, thus, have demonstrated precisely how these small groups can evolve into "gravitational centers of civic life" (Fine &

Harrington, 2004, p. 346). The activities and practices employed in these programs not only establish youth as equal contributors and challenge the generational hierarchy, but also encourage youth to find freedom from the feeling rules of the collectivist culture in which they live. The pleasure of feeling "like a priority" and "respected" that these young individuals experience, in turn, can become a resource for mobilizing youth's future participation and civic engagement.

7.2 Narratives of self-transformation

The previous section explored the narratives shared by youth informants, who framed participation in development programs as gaining entry to a safe, non-hierarchical space. Several informants indicated that organizers and trainers used friendly, informal language when talking to youth, and praised the inclusive atmosphere, which enabled youth to more easily interact with those who are normally seen as having a higher social status. These practices can be seen as a challenge to the age and power hierarchies embedded in Vietnamese culture, which is heavily shaped by Confucianism and situates youth at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

The fact that young people do not feel they are treated as inferior can also have a positive impact on how they perceive their own agency. This forms the focus of this section, which examines the narratives that construct participation as a turning point in the lives of youth. The young people in this study frequently made strong assertions about changes in the way they viewed themselves or acted after attending development programs, highlighting how participation was central to their self-transformation and sense of agency. In these narratives, participation in development programs was framed as a unique opportunity that enables youth to develop self-efficacy, as well as to become self-aware and self-reflective.

7.2.1 From passivity to self-efficacy

Many informants recalled a sense of passiveness when reflecting on their behavior prior to their participation in development programs. This passiveness manifested itself in various ways, from a reluctance to voice their opinions due to fear that their input would not be well-received, to their tendency to defer to authority figures for decision-making. Within these narratives, their prior selves were constructed as insecure and lacking confidence. They depicted their past selves as "timid" (Phong, 30 years old, male, Program 5), "nervous about sharing opinions" (Tuyền, 23 years old, female, Programs 1, 2 and 10), or "believ[ing] in whatever the authority claims" (Quang, 29 years old, male, Programs 1, 2 and 6). This can be seen in the following excerpt:

> **Nga (26 years old, female, Program 6):** In general, I feel that my participation in the program was also the time I learned that I can voice my opinion and I get to practice it in that environment. Prior to that, I felt like I was nervous every time I shared my opinion. Perhaps it can even be said that I was afraid to speak up. Then gradually after each session in the program, I got a response from my classmates after I expressed something. It began at that level first, then I learned to respond to what others were saying. This type of feedback-giving gradually becomes a kind of open exchange that others can also join in, meaning it's no longer a one-on-one, and everybody can participate and give feedback. Then I began to adopt that habit [of speaking up/giving feedback].

In this excerpt, Nga shared her struggles with speaking in a public context and pointed to the development program she attended as the space where this struggle was overcome. Nga portrayed herself before participation as harboring a deep-seated apprehension about public speaking, which led her to remain silent. She attributed the cause of this deep-seated fear to the lack of practice, criticizing the university she attended for "not having any procedure" allowing students to practice this skill set. She identified her participation as the turning point, where speaking in public, initially a struggle, was transformed into a habitual practice. In the interview, Nga provided a detailed account of the program's ongoing interactions and feedback mechanisms, describing how this gradual and methodical process trained her to, step-by-step, overcome her fear of public speaking. In other words, Nga attributed this transformation to her participation in the development program, emphasizing the "plentiful space for discussion" as well as the "non-judgmental environment" that encouraged her to speak up.

Nga's criticism of the university is a common observation in educational contexts shaped by Confucian heritage. In Vietnamese classrooms, the teacher assumes a position of authority, and students not only are expected to adhere to the teachers' guidance without challenging their opinions, but also to see teachers as models of correct behaviors (P. M. Nguyễn et al., 2006). In this educational context, students are allowed to speak only when invited to do so, and they rarely dare to question their teachers. Challenging the teacher's perspective is not only seen as a disruption of collective harmony but also a sign of disrespect toward authority (Trương, 2013; P. M. Nguyễn et al., 2006). Moreover, because teachers' words are often perceived as absolute truths given the unquestioned authority they hold, the teaching style in this cultural context is predominantly lecture-based, with knowledge passed down from teachers to students (Trương et al., 2017). Consequently, opportunities for student discussions and interactions, as Nga pointed out, are not often integrated into Vietnam's traditional educational structure. This lack of practice results in the limited capacity of students to express themselves effectively.

Nga's reflection shows how youth informants see their involvement with development programs as useful in filling the void left by traditional education. Her interview paints development programs as learning spaces where

young people are not only encouraged but are provided with a toolkit to turn speaking and feedback-giving into a habit. Through structured exercises and routine interactions, participants like Nga move from fear and apprehension to confident articulation. Thus, it can be argued that development programs provide a "cultural toolkit" (Swidler, 1986) for youth to cultivate a habit of active engagement rather than behaving as passive recipients of knowledge, positively impacting how these young people see their role in society. This is particularly illuminated in the following excerpt:

> **Quang (30 years old, male, Programs 1, 2 and 6):** Before [participation in development programs], I was a simple guy. I just stayed at home, took care of the farm, normal everyday stuff, and I would always believe whatever people in authority positions or people holding doctoral degrees said. I believed that what they said is true, that it is absolute and I must follow whatever they say. But after the programs, I felt that I have a voice, and I can talk about things like corruption or human rights, stuff like that. Before, when I heard about corruption, I thought it had nothing to do with me. I thought big criminal cases only happened in big cities like Hanoi, that they would never come to my peaceful village. There are many development projects on roads, for example, where people can take a little away from the budget to gain some extra money for themselves. Now I feel I need to speak up about these local issues. In the past when these projects took place, I would simply think the roads belong to the state and they could do whatever they want. Now I realize that the money spent on these projects comes from taxes, and the taxes come from us people. Now I understand that taxes are what I pay every day. Electricity bills, VAT, when I buy a box of milk I pay taxes. So I find it is necessary to speak up. My community should have a say and reject the wrongs.

In this excerpt, Quang depicted his previous self (before participation in development programs) as obedient, passive, and uncritical. This description is commonly seen in studies of young people growing up with the Confucian ethic of filiality, who display "unquestioning acceptance" of the information provided by authority figures and avoid conflict to ensure collective harmony (e.g., Murphy, 1987, p. 43; P. M. Nguyễn et al., 2006). Quang characterized his previous self as not only quiet and timid, as other informants described their former selves, but also as naïve and easily manipulated, lacking interest in matters outside of his immediate sphere. When encountering social problems or potential misconduct, this previous self appeared to be detached and unbothered, seeing no connection between himself and the issues in question. In addition to portraying his previous self as "confined and limited" in vision, Quang also attributed to this limited perspective his feeling of detachment and, accordingly, inaction in regard to community issues. By contrast, he portrayed his current self (post-participation) as someone who felt a sense of urgency and responsibility for the larger society, emphasizing the many times he had to raise his voice and fight against misconduct by those in authority.

In this narrative, Quang made sense of his self-transformation as an increased recognition of citizenship and belonging: while Quang once thought of himself as an isolated individual, he now perceives himself as someone with a duty to the larger nation. Quang reasoned that his payment of taxes would grant him the right to assert a voice in community matters such as "human rights" or "corruption." This example shows how development programs provide the framing resources for young people to make sense of their civic duty, motivating them to take action through the recognition that they are part of a larger whole. In Quang's narrative, we see a revision of what it means to be a good citizen: a good citizen here is no longer someone who obeys authority without questioning, but one who stands up against the wrongful abuse of power when necessary. This narrative frames Quang as a transformed actor: he has gone from someone who did not see himself as part of the solution and did not think beyond immediate necessities—something frequently observed in marginalized youth (Börner et al., 2021)—to someone who is active and responsible in matters relating to his life and community. This framing also establishes a link between the idea of self-advocacy and a recognition of moral responsibility, with the informant viewing the change in his capacity as intertwined with his desire to act for the betterment of his community.

Also evident in Quang's narrative is the notion that the transformative effect of participation can extend beyond the limits of development programs and into everyday life. In Quang's case, this transformative effect caused as significant change in the trajectory of his life: after participation, he became an active member of an empowerment network for Vietnamese ethnic minority citizens. Another informant alluded to the same sentiment in the following excerpt:

> **Phong (30 years old, male, Program 5)**: Before participation, I was very timid, I didn't dare to say anything in public. But after the program, I got the confidence to nominate myself for the student union election at my university. The program gave me a sort of environment to stand up and speak for myself. If I hadn't attended this program, I probably would still be timid, I wouldn't have had the courage to step up and ask people to vote for me.

Identity transformation involves "a dramatic change in identity" and corresponds to the process of "biographical reconstruction" (Snow & McAdam, 2000, p. 52). This can be observed in Phong's narrative, in which a contrast between the "timid" self before participation and the "courageous" self after participation was painted. Phong credited the supportive environment of the development program for empowering him to assert himself. Using the example of running in the student union election at his university, Phong made the case that he was transformed into an active, capable, and confident actor who was willing to step forward through participation. Like Quang's portrayal of himself, this narrative depicted Phong as a transformed person who moved

from passivity and timidity to self-efficacy and self-advocacy, proactively engaging in important matters in his life. At the time of the interview, Phong was himself an organizer of a development program. He made sense of his decision to continue his involvement with development programs as a social mission: he wanted to help other disadvantaged students receive the same life-changing opportunity.

Phong's narrative of self-transformation from timidity to self-advocacy exemplified how youth constructed their participation in development programs as transforming the self. Phong made sense of his participation as an experience of self-change and self-improvement; the program was viewed a transitional stage that provided the context for engaging in self-advocacy and finding that his voice mattered. In these sorts of narratives, the informants drew a connection between the voice they gained from participation and concrete actions in their daily lives, demonstrating that such transformations did not end with self-improvement but also contributed to an increase in attention to civic duty and a desire to contribute to the larger society.

In response to my questions regarding the skills training offered by the development program he attended, Phong listed teamwork, communication, project management, and presentation skills as the key areas of focus. This curriculum resonates with the observations of Swidler and Watkins (2009), who identified similar content in training workshops for young people in the Malawian context. These authors, however, expressed bewilderment upon learning that their informants found these workshops enlightening, considering such skills to be nothing more than "elaborate formalizations of what would otherwise be common sense" (Swidler & Watkins, 2009, p. 1190).

The narratives presented in this subsection shed light on this apparent puzzle by demonstrating that what is considered common sense in one societal context may not be in another. Skills that scholars from more liberal societies might perceive as "common sense"—such as expressing opinions, questioning authority, or effective communication—may be absent from the everyday practices of young individuals living in cultures that promote an unquestioning acceptance of authority. Recognizing the influence of cultural contexts enables researchers to gain a deeper understanding of why young people find educational value in these development programs. Furthermore, this contextualization allows for an analysis that reveals the potential of these programs to shape young people's capabilities, effectively transforming their self-perceptions and sense of agency. This recognition should compel scholars to consider the social norms, historical legacies, and systemic challenges in the Global South that may fundamentally constrain the self-perception, practices, and aspirations of youth. To elevate an analysis beyond the confines of "common sense" requires a careful consideration of the local dynamics, historical trajectories, and cultural nuances that continue to dominate the reality of youth living in marginalized regions.

In this section, I have examined youth narratives that framed participation as self-transforming and turning them into more agentic, capable actors. These narratives used the emplotment device of narrative telling to engage in a biographical reconstruction, contrasting the self prior to participation to the self after participation. The former self was constructed as someone who was passive, willing to adopt a follower role, and obeyed authority unquestioningly. Against this construction of the former self, these informants drew a link between their participation in development programs and a transformed self characterized by increased confidence, a strong sense of agency, and motivation to pursue social justice and the betterment of their community. These narratives presented participation in development programs as precisely what these individuals needed to emerge from the shadows of passivity and become the "heroes" in their own stories.

Interestingly, the shift from passivity to self-advocacy underlying these narratives echoes what Fine (1995) has identified as the "happy stories" of social movements. As Fine maintained, this type of narrative focuses on the benefits that occur as a result of participation, which serve to boost morale and compel members to remain involved with the collective. The trajectories of these informants also reflect this desire for continued involvement: at the time of the interview, Quang was an active member in a network pursuing equality and human rights for minority citizens, while Phong had become an organizer of a development program aimed at helping disadvantaged students.

The findings of this subsection have illuminated how participation in development programs contributes to a change in youth's perceptions of themselves, their capabilities, and their contributions to society. Furthermore, these findings align with previous scholarship on youth participation, showing that the pleasure stemming from increased knowledge and confidence (Ansell, 2005; Björnsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2018; Abdou & Skalli, 2018) can serve as a powerful motivator for youth to extend their participation beyond the program's immediate setting. In this study, the powerful impact of personal transformation can be observed in the life trajectories of the informants. Accordingly, these findings have revealed that participation in development programs not only informs youth's sense of agency but also contributes to the growth of civic engagement (Fine & Harrington, 2004).

7.2.2 From ignorance to self-awareness

When the informants were prompted to recall memorable moments from their participation, a noteworthy pattern emerged: several informants recounted group exercises or team-building activities that resulted in intense emotions, and thus held a special place in their memories. These activities were interpreted by the informants as having a profound impact, playing a significant role in their self-discovery journeys, and helping them make sense of their own limitations and potential.

One such activity commonly deployed in development programs was "The River of Life." This activity was developed based on the notion that the path of a person's life resembled the flow of a river, and that every milestone or misfortune would be an inherent aspect of the journey. The River of Life activity consisted of two tasks: participants first drew their life path and important events on a piece of paper, then presented the story of their life to either a small group or the entire gathering. In the following excerpt, an informant offered her reflections about this activity:

> **Tuyền (23 years old, female, Programs 1, 2 and 10):** I had never had a chance to sit down and tell someone about my life. It was also the first time someone offered me their thoughts about my life. I was amazed that they could figure out so many aspects of me just by listening to my story. The experience was worthwhile… I'm the type of person who doesn't share much with people. There are times that I feel really stressed and all I could do was to write my thoughts down in a diary, that's how I release stress or negative feelings. When I was able to speak out, I realized that I actually can share my emotions with others, and that makes me feel relieved.

In this narrative, Tuyền recounted The River of Life as an exercise in which the participants were encouraged to express their feelings openly to the public others, and these feelings (whether negative or positive) were treated with acceptance. Through this depiction, Tuyền constructed the activity as a novel and transformative encounter that facilitated profound self-discovery. She made the connection between her participation in the activity and a transformation in her self-perception, particularly in terms of her capacity to express her emotions before a social audience, an ability she had previously lacked. Tuyền's narrative painted her engagement in this activity as encompassing more than superficial involvement; rather, the activity was seen as an exercise in self-reflection through which insights into previously unexplored facets of the self can be gained. Tuyền constructed the exercise as central to a significant transformation in her understanding of her own identity and her perceived limitations as well as potential.

Through its visualization of life's journey, The River of Life invited youth participants to confront the transient nature of circumstances and reflect on the dynamic nature of their lives. For Tuyền, engaging in this activity meant engaging in a reflective process in which she learned something new about herself and transformed the way she made sense of her identity and her capabilities. She described an emotional breakthrough that left her in awe following her participation in The River of Life, connecting an epiphany about the self to her participation. In this way, Tuyền's account provides a framing of participation as a vehicle for learning about oneself and enhancing personal growth and self-awareness. This sentiment resonates with another informant's reflections on a similar activity:

> **Quang (30 years old, male, Programs 1, 2 and 6):** What I like the most about the program is an activity called "The Hero's Shadow." There was a storyteller, and everyone sat down in a circle in silence. We turned off the light and lit the candles. Then we closed our eyes and the storyteller guided us back to our childhoods. It made me remember my past, my childhood. I cried. It was a memorable activity. I think the purpose is to help us understand ourselves more. I always thought of myself as a tough man who never cries or shows vulnerability, but that activity made me cry and helped me see myself more clearly. After the activity, I realized there are many things about myself that I need to fix to become a better person.

Like The River of Life, The Hero's Shadow had a built-in analogy in its name, constructing the participants as "heroes" with their own hidden struggles. By framing youth as heroes, the activity enabled its participants to engage in a biographical reconstruction in a more empowering way, drawing a connection between themselves and their responsibility toward their communities. The activity required the participants to engage in a process of retrospection in which they revisited their histories, thus establishing a link between the past and the present, moving from the perspective of "remembering my childhood" to "seeing myself more clearly." These exercises also bore a resemblance to certain therapeutic techniques: while The River of Life functioned based on a support group setting, The Hero's Shadow resembled regression therapy, in which the activity moderator used hypnosis to enable participants to recall past events and access deeply buried memories. Like the task of sharing one's personal history in The River of Life, the task of recalling one's past in The Hero's Shadow was perceived by participants as purposeful, making a concrete impact on their self-identification. Moreover, both activities involved the sharing of personal stories, capitalizing on the inherent relatability stemming from a "common ground in human experience" (Fajer, 1992, p. 528). This, in turns, helped elicit emotional resonance among young participants.

Quang made sense of his experience by recalling past events through the lens of self-discovery, claiming he managed to discover aspects of himself he was previously unaware of. He related the emotional exploration involved in the activity to a greater understanding of his strengths and weaknesses, as well as a need for self-reflection and self-change. The example he offered to illuminate the self-discovery moment was his relationship with vulnerability, contrasting his previous perception of self ("a tough man who never cries") with his action (crying) at the end of the activity. This signified a portrayal of himself transformed into a different man after the activity, now unafraid to express vulnerability. Moreover, in this framing he aligned the expression of vulnerability with greater clarity about the self, as well as motivations for self-improvement. This same experience of epiphany and becoming aware of previously hidden aspects of the self was apparent in another informant's interview:

> **Linh (33 years old, female, Program 6):** After that lecture, I sat down to reflect on my actions during the class discussion and realized I had used some power mechanisms to dominate the discussion. I mean I wasn't aware of this type of behavior before, but [the trainer's] lecture helped me realize what I was doing. It was a moment of epiphany, when I learned something about myself.

As in Quang's depiction of the epiphany he experienced in The Hero's Shadow, Linh reported experiencing a moment of epiphany that changed her self-perception and the way she interacted with others. In this narrative, Linh described a revelation that left her in shock and prompted her to confront negative aspects of herself. She attributed this moment of epiphany to her participation in a lecture, establishing a contrast between a previously ignorant self who "wasn't aware" of her own problematic behaviors, and an enlightened self who became not only reflective but also remorseful. Linh made sense of this newfound awareness as being an outcome of the lecture, which offered her a "toolkit" that enabled her to reflect on her actions. By framing her experience in this way, Linh highlighted the transformative potential of participation, drawing a link between participation and increased awareness and personal growth, as well as an earnest willingness to address one's flaws.

Worth noting is that the narratives featured in this subsection echo the classic "stories of acceptance" that Fine (1995) has identified as common heroic narratives in social movements. In such narratives, the individuals are initially portrayed as flawed and lost; they encounter challenges and make mistakes, ultimately finding redemption and personal growth under the guidance of the movement. Quang and Linh's stories both mirror this storyline: they faced their own "shadows"—their negative aspects—and through the enlightening guidance of development programs, achieved a profound transformation, emerging as more self-aware and self-reflective individuals. In the same way the Heroes benefit from the wisdom of their Guides, Quang and Linh's narratives emphasize the role of the development program as a guiding force, "a savior of the self" (Fine, 1995, p. 137) in their journeys of self-discovery and self-improvement, helping them gain moral standing in the process.

This section has presented narratives that established a link between participation in development programs and self-transformation. Youth made sense of this experience in two primary ways.

First, participation was credited with transforming youth from a state of passivity into self-efficacy. In these narratives, the informants portrayed their former selves as timid and passive, in contrast with the more agentic self that emerged after participation. In this framing of the transformed self, young people also exhibited a shifted vision of their relationship to the larger society: no longer passive followers, they characterized themselves as empowered citizens and active contributors to society. The framing underlying these

narratives thus highlights the potential mobilizing function of development programs with regard to forming a sense of civic duty in youth participants.

Second, participation was linked to a heightened understanding of the self, helping youth move from ignorance to self-awareness. The informants drew a connection between their participation in development programs and increased awareness of who they are, their capabilities, and their limitations. Through these narratives, youth made sense of their participation in development programs by comparing it to an epiphany that reveals truth about the self, leading to a willingness to address personal flaws and improve their behavior.

The boundary drawn between the self prior to participation and the self after participation can also be observed here: the former was depicted as unaware or misguided, while the latter was enlightened by deep reflections about limitations and morality. By drawing boundaries between who they were (prior to participation) and who they are (after participation), informants reinforced the notion that participation is a catalyst for change. Moreover, such framing evidently contributed to the boundary-making distinguishing the participant from non-participant status, with participants of development programs constructed as enlightened, "developed" subjects through participation, while non-participants were seen as ignorant and unenlightened.

7.3 Concluding discussion

The purpose of this chapter was to examine the different meanings young people attached to their participation in development programs and how that contributed to their civic engagement. The analysis has revealed several recurring themes that formed a coherent framework for understanding their involvement in these programs.

The first section examined accounts that depicted participation as an opportunity to access a nurturing, safe space for young people. Participation in these initiatives meant stepping outside the confines of conventional institutions, where cultural norms and normative expectations could function as barriers to youth agency. These informants portrayed participation as a sphere that disrupted the age-based hierarchy ingrained in Confucian culture that placed young people at the bottom. They considered development programs to be a sphere that promoted equality and encouraged their participation in equal terms. Inclusion was another prevalent theme evident in this first section, especially for those faced with educational challenges or other adversity. Here, program organizers and staff were constructed as compassionate and empathetic figures who helped vulnerable youth overcome their personal obstacles and enabled them to participate fully in the process. Moreover, the narratives portrayed development programs as unique platforms that allowed individuals to explore their thoughts, emotions, and ideas free from judgment and societal pressure. The informants regarded these spaces as liberating

realms where they could express their feelings openly, unburdened by everyday constraints.

In the second section of the chapter, narratives that established a causal link between participation in development programs and self-transformation were examined. These accounts illustrated how participation fostered transformative experiences that influenced self-perceptions and capabilities. Interestingly, the narratives often demonstrated a direct link between insights gained from these programs and personal growth. Frequently, young people drew connections between the teachings in programs and their development into responsible citizens who actively pursued social justice and community involvement. Additionally, the section presented narratives that attributed to participation a deeper understanding of self-awareness and self-limitations. These narratives presented a stark contrast between young people's former selves (prior to participation) and current selves (after participation), characterized by a shift from aimlessness and ignorance to epiphany and enlightenment.

Within these narratives, a distinctive boundary-making pattern has come into focus. A clear divide emerged between state institution representatives and civil society members. The former were seen as upholding a Confucian hierarchy that stifles youth engagement, symbolizing a form of symbolic violence. In contrast, trainers and organizers of development programs were portrayed as autonomous, inclusive, and youth-oriented, transcending normative expectations. Furthermore, boundary-making can also be observed in the self-transformation narratives, which differentiated between program participants and non-participants. These narratives emphasized the crucial role development programs played in shaping an individual's sense of self, transforming them from passive followers into active agents of social change.

Examining tiny publics and their role in fostering civic engagement and citizenship, Fine (2014, 2021) asserted that small groups generate the identity as well as the socialization processes involved in creating citizens. Extending Anderson's (2006) notion of "imagined communities", Fine (2014) suggested that small groups, as sites for the construction and reproduction of national narratives, emotions, cognitions, and cultural artefacts, can represent a nation in microcosm (Johnston, 1991; Scheff, 2015). In these informants' narratives, the collective framing that serves to connect the individual to society can be observed. Through story-telling, these young individuals illustrate not only their journey of participation, but also how they perceive themselves and their roles in society. Their stories follow a compelling narrative arc characterized by distinct character roles, echoing two common narratives— "happy endings" and "stories of acceptance"—identified by Fine (1995) as often found in social movements. At the heart of these stories are the young people themselves—the protagonists who transform from passiveness to become agentic Heroes. In this transformative journey, development programs' staff and organizers embody the role of the Guide or "savior of the self" (Fine, 1995, p.

137), providing the necessary assistance and support to enable them to overcome life obstacles and participate meaningfully. This narrative structure serves as a framework for the informants to make sense of their experiences by connecting their participation with personal growth and self-transformation.

This chapter, accordingly, has not only provided insights into how youth make sense of their participation in development programs, but also how community narratives can operate as a shared sense-making resource for members, facilitating both external mobilization and internal cohesion. In these shared narratives, development programs are characterized by notions of equality, inclusion, and freedom, and their impact on youth is portrayed as self-transforming. This construction and transmission of values helps reinforce a shared sense of collective belonging (Polletta, 2006). Furthermore, via participation, youth see themselves embarking on a journey guided by compassionate civil society actors, a journey that helps transition them into being the Heroes of their own stories. Through these narratives, youth reconfigure the past, endowing it with meaning and continuity, and project a sense of what will or should happen in their futures. This shared narrative framework not only credits development programs with the cultivation of youth's sense of agency and civic duty, but also frames civil society activities as the main driver behind individual and collective transformation in society.

8. Framing development: barriers to and visions of progress

In the previous chapters of this study, the dual nature of development programs, with their exclusionary and inclusionary mechanisms, has been highlighted. While access to these programs is subject to gatekeeping and requires youth to negotiate belonging, those who manage to gain access find participation to be a transformative experience characterized by equality, inclusion, and freedom. Moreover, these young people highlight how participation in development programs enhances their sense of agency, motivating them to align their actions with broader social development.

The impact of youth participation does not end within the confines of these programs. As demonstrated in Chapter 7, many informants continue to remain actively engaged in the development sphere after their involvement in these programs ends. They may become organizers of similar development programs or utilize the networks and resources they have gained from participation to grow their own development projects and networks, pursuing their own visions and practices in the realm of development work.

Acknowledging this plurality, this chapter focuses on young people's visions and practices in terms of development work following their participation in these programs. It uses as a starting point the recognition that development programs, as tiny publics (Fine, 2014), can serve to stimulate the emergence of new groups and initiatives. The benefits members derive from their participation in these small group settings can serve as sources of inspiration, create the conditions for collective identification, and offer practical models for further engagement on a larger scale. In this way, the impact of these programs can extend beyond the immediate context of participation and beyond youth's perception of self-transformation. Instead, these programs can become the "gravitational centers of civic life" (Fine & Harrington, 2004, p. 346), leading to the formation of more spin-off groups and contributing to vibrant growth in civil society.

The plural character of groups has been recognized in the civil society literature. As several scholars have shown (e.g., Foley & Edwards, 1996; Calhoun, 2011; Ekiert, 2019), civil society is not a monolithic entity; rather, it comprises a diverse and dynamic sphere characterized by a myriad of perspectives, ideologies, and approaches. In this heterogeneous sphere, groups coexist "sometimes together, sometimes apart, sometimes together against the state,

sometimes alone against each other" (Kopecky & Mudde, 2003, p. 9), as they embrace their visions of what public good entails.

Recognizing this vibrancy and heterogeneity of approaches and visions in civil society, this chapter will illuminate the diverse visions and practices in the realm of development work following youth participation in development programs. Acknowledging the role of development programs in informing young people's approach to doing development, this chapter sets out to answer the following research question: How does participation in development programs inform young people's visions and practices in the realm of development?

To unravel young people's heterogeneous perspectives on doing development, the concepts of "diagnostic framing" and "prognostic framing" proposed by Snow and Benford (1992) will be employed. These analytical tools allow for an examination of how these informants comprehend and interpret the nuances of development practices, ranging from how they identify problems and barriers that hinder the development process, to how they seek to resolve them. Through the lens of diagnostic framing, this chapter examines how young individuals articulate their understanding of the challenges and problems within the Vietnamese development landscape, offering a glimpse into their perceptions of the root causes and issues that need to be addressed in their pursuit of effective and impactful development work. Meanwhile, the concept of prognostic framing provides insights into these informants' forward-looking visions, illuminating the strategies, goals, and aspirations these young people envision for development initiatives and their roles within this evolving landscape.

Using this focus, the chapter will shed light on how young participants, armed with their experiences and newfound sense of agency, navigate the complexities of the development landscape. Moreover, this analysis will establish the connections between young people's previous involvement in development programs and their current contributions to civil society, ultimately highlighting the transformative power of youth participation in shaping the trajectory of societal development.

8.1 Framing the problems

By the last day of January 2020, the fear of COVID-19 had spread across the country. It was as apparent as the streets almost empty of vehicles, an unusual sight in a crowded city normally characterized by the screeching rumble of cars, buses, and motorcycles. At that point in time, Vietnam had only five confirmed cases, but its border with China and the continued acceptance of Chinese tourists was enough to spread panic across the country. People avoided leaving their homes; those who did could often be found at pharmacies trying to purchase every last box of masks and bottle of hand sanitizer.

Medical masks ran out that same day. Rumor had it most of them were being transported to China to be sold at a higher profit, leaving Vietnamese nothing for themselves. On the evening news, the government urged citizens to remain calm and assured them more medical masks were being produced, while also condemning pharmacies who sold them at a steep price.

Almost immediately, small, unconnected "free mask giveaway" movements popped up all over the major cities in response to the panic. The target group varied: the poor, students, children, those who worked in crowded environments such as factories or supermarkets, or simply anyone who happened to pass by the giveaway location without wearing a mask. Mask giveaways became the new symbol of doing community development, praised by both the media and the government as a sign of solidarity during a time of crisis.

But that was only the beginning of the crisis.

When the Vietnamese border with China was closed to halt the spread of the virus, the impact was felt by many. The border gate at Lạng Sơn had historically been a busy trading place for agricultural products; unable to cross, traders were left watching their exported produce rot at the closed border (Minh-Chiến, 2020). Many drove back to the cities, selling their tropical fruits for five to eight times less than the usual price. Almost-exported produce soon flooded the domestic market. The desperation of traders and farmers gave birth to another chain of community movements, all framed under the umbrella of "food rescue missions," such as "rescue watermelon" or "rescue dragon fruit" (S. Lâm et al., 2020; Nguyễn-Trí, 2020). These missions kicked off with individual buyers purchasing an extra kilogram or two to show support; soon, however, community groups and local businesses began purchasing large shipments of produce to be given away for free. These practices managed to alleviate some of the economic consequences of the border closure.

This portrayal of local movements involving free mask giveaways or food rescue missions paints a lively image of community work in Vietnam, with countless local movements blossoming in response to whatever was perceived as a community need at the time. Many of these movements were driven by youth groups, who used social media as the main channel for raising resources and spreading their message. The movements were usually short-lived, and while they may have helped alleviate some financial hardship (as in the case of the food rescue missions), they were obviously inadequate to provide a sustainable solution to the main issue at hand: the collapse of an export economy with Vietnam's main trading partner, China.

It was these sorts of small, short-lived movements that one informant, Hùng (29 years old, male, Programs 2, 3, 7 and 11), criticized. Having been active in the field of community development for almost 10 years, he was skeptical of the approach taken by the youth groups initiating these rescue missions or free mask giveaways. Hùng asserted that these spontaneous actions not only did not help in the long run, but also complicated the funding scene by

increasing unnecessary competition between different nonprofit groups. In this critique, he made a clear distinction between doing meaningful community development work and following a "trendy" development movement for fame or popularity.

Hùng was not alone in his assertion. My interviews with various informants revealed a recurring theme: an emphasis on pursuing the "right" type of development while critiquing others who did not adhere to the same principles, whether in terms of techniques or ethics. While not all informants shared the exact vision presented by Hùng, they all expressed a sense of confidence in their understanding of what would constitute an effective development process. Here, the concept of diagnostic framing can provide a relevant lens to understand how the informants made sense of the problems and challenges facing development work in Vietnam. As Benford and Snow (2000) have described, "diagnostic framing" involves the way collective-action organizations articulate the issues they aim to address and assign blame or causes for these problems. In this study, we see diagnostic framing being applied when the informants speculate about the challenges facing development efforts and discuss problematic issues within the development landscape. By framing these challenges diagnostically, the informants identify what they find problematic, the actors they deem responsible for such issues, and the methods for effectively addressing them. Moreover, the assigning of blame also reflects how these informants make sense of development practices in terms of what should be done and who is capable of getting it done. Using this framing, the analysis will reveal how the informants conceptualize effective development approaches, while positioning themselves as critical observers and actors in the unfolding of Vietnam's ongoing development process.

This section examines three factors that the informants identified as being to blame for the challenges in Vietnam's development landscape. The ambivalent attitude of the state with bureaucratic obstacles, ill-informed charity work, and the proliferation of community projects leading to funding competitions were all identified as key issues hindering the realization of successful development initiatives.

8.1.1 The ambivalent state

Divergent viewpoints regarding the state's capacity to guide development practices emerged from the interviews. While a majority of the informants agreed that the state played a pivotal role in development, they tended to disagree on how capable the state could be in this endeavor. Broadly, the interviews shed light on a framing of the state as an ambivalent actor in this pursuit—an entity capable of promoting development progress, which most of the time hindered it instead.

Phát (31 years old, male, Program 11) was involved in multiple development programs and workshops. At the time of the interview, he ran two

nonprofit organizations. One of them was a social enterprise that aimed to help people with hearing and speech difficulties achieve financial stability through skills training. Phát spoke extensively about the long, difficult process of registering his organizations in the following excerpt:

> **Phát (31 years old, male, Program 11)**: It takes, on average, about two years to register as a nonprofit organization in Vietnam. Significantly more than the time it takes to register a business, which is just one to two weeks. To open as a nonprofit, you have to prove all sorts of things, and if it involves foreigners then there is even more scrutiny.
>
> **Yên (interviewer)**: How was it when you registered your organization?
>
> **Phát**: It was a nightmare… When I tried registering as a nonprofit, it took me three months just to explain to the authorities my "motive" for setting up this organization. It was frustrating. Then I pondered setting it up as a business and seeing how long it would take. Turns out it took only two weeks with that model.

In this interview, the state was framed as a bureaucratic, suspicious actor that hinders the path of development groups using legal means. Phát's experiences with the long registration process, which does not favor nonprofits, reflect the general development scene in Vietnam, where registration is typically a convoluted and dispiriting process (Rydstrøm et al., 2023). Pallas and L. Nguyễn (2018, p. 166s) attributed this difficulty to meeting the technical requirements: the rules say that an organization must have "a minimum of five university-educated staff, a certain level of cash holdings, and a physical office" in order to register as a technical organization overseen by VUSTA (see also Chapter 3). Phát's narrative reveals a different perspective on this difficulty, wherein heightened attention from state officials probing his "motives" formed the core of the "nightmare" experience. It is noteworthy that the term "motive" (In Vietnamese: "động cơ") was employed by Phát, as this very term is frequently used by the Vietnamese state to denote the "malicious intent" of "reactionary" groups that pose a threat to its legitimacy.[5] Thus, Phát's narrative underscored a framing of the Vietnamese state as hypervigilant against any endeavor that could be exploited to undermine its political system. His decision to pursue commercial registration, a solution embraced by many other

[5] An example can be found in this piece issued by a state-led newspaper, Công An Nhân Dân [Citizen's Police], which criticizes and discredits organizations that have accused Vietnam of violating human rights: "Với việc vi phạm các quy định luật pháp quốc tế về nhân quyền, hoạt động có mục đích, **động cơ** xấu, chống phá, can thiệp vào nội bộ nước khác bằng thủ đoạn bóp méo, xuyên tạc sự thật về nhân quyền, những tổ chức này không có tư cách để nói về nhân quyền, đánh giá và cáo buộc về nhân quyền." (B. Nguyên & T. Sơn, 2021, p. 1) [Translation: Given their violations of international law provisions on human rights, activities with malicious **motives** that sabotage and interfere in the internal affairs of other countries by tricks and distortions of the truth about human rights, these organizations are not qualified to speak about, evaluate and make allegations about human rights.]

nonprofit groups (K. G. Nguyễn & Q. T. Nguyễn, 2018), could be interpreted as a statement that his intentions were devoid of a political agenda.

In another interview, the state was depicted as a complex, multifaceted apparatus characterized by intricate layers of approval processes:

> **Nhật (25 years old, male, Program 9):** Usually the authorities find LGBTQ events "too sensitive." Organizing Pride is always difficult. Sometimes the police come to shut down a Pride event even though we have already applied for a permit. In 2016 when I was working at Pride's kick-off night, the police came to the party and forced us to shut down.
>
> **Yên (interviewer)**: Had you obtained a permit then?
>
> **Nhật**: Yes, we got a permit to organize Pride from the city officials, but the police said we hadn't received the permit from the district officials yet, hence they shut us down.

Nhật explained that despite securing a permit from city officials, the event was eventually blocked due to the lack of district-level approval. This scenario exemplified the difficulties Vietnamese civil society actors face as they attempt to mobilize and carry out their development projects within complex and restrictive bureaucratic state frameworks, having to navigate various levels of state authorization. In this narrative, the state was also constructed as a block to development progress, not due to its suspicious nature but to its convoluted administrative procedures. Phát, quoted at the beginning of this subsection, spoke about this maze of bureaucratic approvals as follows:

> **Phát (31 years old, male, Program 11):** Another challenge for nonprofit work in Vietnam is the legal scene, which has absolutely no incentives for these types of projects and in some cases even destroys them. A friend of mine founded a project that teaches computer skills to orphans. He needed the district's permission to run the program in that district. The district officials refused it, saying that the orphans already had enough, so there was no need for help. I suspect there are reasons why they refused our assistance. Maybe they're afraid it may affect their district performance if they have something to do with the nonprofit sector, or there's something non-transparent about those orphanages so they don't want outsiders to enter. Whatever their reason was, they completely shut the door, and the project failed to reach that district.

In his reasoning and in making sense of the situation, Phát revealed his deep mistrust toward state officials. Rather than accepting these officials' statements at face value, he looked for the underlying reasons for "their rejection" of "our assistance." By highlighting the lack of transparency behind this refusal, he hinted that corruption might be at play. Additionally, Phát suggested that these officials refused to collaborate with civil society actors because such interactions might not align with the image they were trying to project. Both of his explanations revealed a deeper skepticism about state authorities'

motives and actions, hinting at a climate of mutual mistrust between state and civil society actors. This mistrust is exacerbated by the fact that in Vietnam, state actors often refuse to provide detailed explanations for their decisions, leaving civil society actors in the dark and making it difficult for this sector to operate (Hướng-Thiện, 2023). Evident in this narrative is the strong antagonism that characterizes the interactions between "us" (civil society actors) and "them" (state officials).

In a similar fashion, Nhật (25 years old, male, Program 9) made sense of the rationale behind the police presence and their accompanying the 2019 Pride parade as "it was not so much for protecting us but mainly for maintaining public order." By explaining the state's actions as driven primarily by the aim to preserve its own legitimacy, rather than genuinely safeguarding Pride parade participants and, by extension, endorsing civil society activities, Nhật expresses his lack of trust in the state. This statement also framed state and civil society actors in antagonistic terms, in which state actions, even when aligned with civil society activities, were still scrutinized through a lens of suspicion.

Using the same antagonistic depiction, Liên (29 years old, female, Program 11) characterized the state as lacking the capacity to handle development initiatives compared to civil society:

> **Liên (29 years old, female, Program 11)**: There are societal issues that the state cannot solve effectively and that require the expertise of nonprofit organizations. In areas such as education, social security or capacity building, the nonprofit sector does a much better job than the state. For example, recently the state issued a policy to support prostitutes who want to "reform" themselves. The problem is that the prostitutes themselves do not see their job as a crime that requires them to reform... For issues like this, it must be a nonprofit organization that works on social affairs, that has measures for psychological support, to be capable of providing consultations for these groups. Nonprofit organizations can instill trust in these people.

In this excerpt, Liên criticized the state's approach to development. Citing the problematic language employed in a recent state policy regarding prostitution, she portrayed the state's approach as lacking nuance and perpetuating the stigmatization of vulnerable groups. This criticism revealed a diagnostic framing attributing problems in Vietnam's development practices to the state's inability to comprehend and address complex social issues. As Liên pointed to the necessity of having civil society organizations engage in social affairs and provide marginalized groups with relevant support and consultation, she depicted civil society actors as having distinct expertise that goes beyond policymaking and can address the multi-dimensional needs of vulnerable communities. Liên maintained that this expertise enables nonprofit actors to cultivate trust within these marginalized groups, which may be apprehensive or skeptical about state intervention. In an antagonistic manner, Liên's statement

portrayed nonprofit organizations as adept problem solvers while simultaneously highlighting the state as incapable, ineffective within the realm of social development.

Diagnostic framing essentially involves how people construct the narrative around the problems they seek to resolve (Snow & Benford, 1992). In this section, this framing entails assigning accountability to the state, constructed as a hypervigilant and ambivalent actor. In their assessment of the state's role in development, the informants attributed the state's constant suspicion and lack of transparency as stumbling blocks that hindered development progress and made it impossible for civil society actors to assist vulnerable groups. Citing the state as a significant barrier to civil society's initiatives, these informants showed a deep mistrust in the state's motivations, even when state actions might seem aligned with civil society activities. In addition to highlighting the state's vigilant nature or desire to protect only itself, the informants also pointed to instances in which the state wishes to engage in development efforts but lacks the expertise, inadvertently causing more harm than good. In doing so, these informants depicted civil society and the state in an antagonistic light: the former was depicted as driving development, while the latter impeding it. Civil society, in these discussions, emerged as the only actor that could bring about meaningful change in Vietnam's development landscape.

8.1.2 Ill-informed charity

Almost all informants referenced ill-informed charity as the cause of stagnation in development. This can be seen as an indication of the pervasiveness of shared framing resulting from participation in development programs. When conducting interviews, I frequently encountered the assertion that doing charity does not equate to doing development. Many informants criticized philanthropic groups or corporations doing charity in vulnerable areas without closely examining local needs:

> **Kim (23 years old, female, Programs 2 and 4):** Currently the Mekong delta region is facing the problem of sea water rising [salinity] and drought, so there are some businesses going down there and making a huge event where they give presents to the local community. So they have an entire group going there, it's all boisterous, taking a lot of photos and videos. Then they give the presents, the local officials give a speech, and that's it. For me, to make an effective change they would need more time to do surveys in that local area, they would need to talk to the local people to see what their needs are.… I really believe that Vietnamese businesses have the capacity to assist community development, since they have a lot of financial resources to do those things. What matters is how effective their approach is.

In the example provided, Kim effectively contrasted superficial acts of charity with meaningful contributions to sustainable development. Vietnamese

corporations' charity efforts were characterized by her as grand displays marked by flashy, yet ultimately insubstantial gestures. A diagnostic framing that portrayed charitable initiatives as disconnected and disassociated from actual local needs, thus failing to achieve significant and lasting change, can be observed in this account. Kim portrayed corporations as entities that have resources but lack the expertise to effectively contribute to development progress. Moreover, she framed the choice of doing charity not only as a waste of resources, but also as morally questionable.

Another informant agreed with Kim's point that pursuing effective development initiatives requires an in-depth understanding of the needs of the target communities. Criticizing charity projects, she stated:

> **Liên (29 years old, female, Program 11):** We must understand the needs of the beneficiaries rather than just standing outside, observing and making assumptions about what they need. There are organizations that run projects without having distributed surveys to assess what the beneficiaries need, or they lack the methods and tools to assess those needs. If people are in need of warm clothes and you offer them instant noodles, that wouldn't help. Hence it is vital to improve the capacity of nonprofit organizations. You have to find out the conditions of the localities in question, and you have to make sure that the tools and methodologies you employ are rooted in theories of community development. That's what matters.

Liên emphasized the importance of understanding beneficiaries' needs rather than assuming them from an external perspective. She drew attention to organizations that initiated projects without conducting surveys to assess the genuine needs of the beneficiaries, or without the necessary tools and methodologies for such assessments. Liên's example of an organization offering food (when the target group actually needed clothes) illustrated the mismatch that could result from ill-informed initiatives.

Moreover, this excerpt showed Liên's emphasis on professionalizing development efforts. She stressed the importance of having experts who fully understand the needs of the people they are trying to assist, and who are trained to develop tailor-made solutions. In other words, Liên cited the assumptions underlying charity projects as a result of a lack of professionalism, which she believed gave rise to pointless, misguided initiatives. She drew a boundary between the development organization she was employed by, with its rigorous methodologies "grounded in theories of community development," and other groups that engaged in more perfunctory and ill-informed charity work. In line with Kim's viewpoint, Liên criticized initiatives that appeared disconnected from beneficiaries' actual needs, emphasizing the importance of informed and thoughtful approaches. Both informants featured here expressed their opposition to giving away resources without properly understanding the beneficiaries. They pointed to the disconnect between these charity endeavors and the actual needs and dynamics of the communities they intended to support,

making sense of the lack of progress in development as the outcome of this misalignment.

Expanding on their concerns, Thư, a student majoring in social work, remarked that charity work conducted by corporations often led to dependency in beneficiary communities:

> **Thư (23 years old, female, Programs 7 and 9)**: Every business has to fulfill its corporate social responsibilities (CSR), but their method was mostly doing charity. They would travel to temples or poor villages to give presents and money. From a social work perspective, this type of charity is not sustainable and can even disincentivize the beneficiaries, who accept the money and no longer want to get out of poverty.

In this excerpt, charity projects were portrayed as not only disconnected from the communities they intended to serve, but also potentially exacerbating issues within those communities. Particularly, Thư identified the problem of dependency as an outcome of ill-informed charity, which would cause individuals to rely on short-term assistance rather than strive for sustainable change. This situation could lead to beneficiaries not actively seeking positive changes in their lives and, as a result, remaining in poverty. Thư's concern is not unfounded, as dependency has been reported as a problem in development practices (e.g., Sahoo, 2013). In essence, Thư attributed the perpetuation of dependency to uninformed charity. By framing the issue in this way, Thư portrayed these projects as not only ineffective but also counterproductive for development. She highlighted a paradox in which well-intentioned acts could inadvertently hinder progress and worsen existing challenges. Moreover, by legitimizing her response using her "social work perspective," Thư also emphasized the need for a systematic and informed approach in development initiatives, reinforcing the notion that development endeavors would benefit from professionalization and systematic knowledge, just as Liên (quoted previously) insisted.

In this section, informants attributed the problems of development to ill-informed charity projects. Charity, in their view, only provided temporary relief without addressing the root causes of issues. They hinted at an unsettling consequence of certain charity projects—the potential to exacerbate problems by inadvertently causing beneficiaries to become complicit in their own dependency. They highlighted that such projects could, unintentionally, create a cycle in which beneficiaries seek short-term aid rather than sustainable change, hindering their motivation. Through the framing of ill-informed charity as a hindrance to development, these informants also advocated for the professionalization of development practices.

8.1.3 When "hundreds of flowers bloom"

As already discussed, certain informants in this study had reservations about the food rescue missions that emerged during the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. One of the most vocal critics of this trend was Hùng, an administrator of an NPO networking forum where individuals and groups engaged in development work could converge, exchange resources, and seek advice. Since Hùng played a pivotal role in the forum and had extensive connections within the realm of development practices, he often received inquiries and proposals from smaller youth groups seeking assistance in promoting their missions. He was particularly selective in deciding whether to support or disseminate their initiatives.

The interview data clarifies Hùng's concern about the proliferation of groups engaged in development practices. In an interview conducted at the onset of the pandemic, a time when food rescue missions were popular, he expressed strong opposition and skepticism toward these missions:

> **Hùng (29 years old, male, Programs 2, 3, 7 and 11):** When I said "competition," I mean there are movements that rise up from trends and people want to find fast solutions. Just look at the situation with the medical masks now. These movements actually add fuel to the fire in the problem of scarcity of masks. These groups don't know the roots of the problem, what the virus is like, whether wearing masks would help, or how much it costs to produce these masks, etc. *That* they don't know. They just saw it on the internet and thought "okay I will just donate 100 million VND to buy 100,000 masks and give it to this group and that group," that's all. Then someone else saw it and thought, "alright I'll do it too!" So that would start a movement.
>
> In the past weeks, there was a guy who kept posting on the NPO forum about [food] rescue missions. His posts caused a lot of controversy. We gathered and discussed the effectiveness of these missions, and I said that is not a problem for community work. Why would NGOs work on these matters? Doing it would just cause market manipulation, and abundance would cause price fluctuation. Solving this issue requires changing the structure—it's not that simple. Now you want to rescue this produce, but how long until the rescue is done? What about the old existing issues, such as children's welfare or public health? The [rescue] model is like a bubble, it suddenly inflates and trivializes all other issues, but these issues still exist. When the bubble bursts, the other issues still remain. Let's say, today they rescue pigs, tomorrow chickens, then cows, and then what? [laughs]

Notably, Hùng characterized Vietnam's dynamic development landscape as a "competition." This use of terminology indicated his less than favorable perspective on the diversity and proliferation of development approaches. In his critique, Hùng took issue with rapidly emerging trends that sought immediate solutions. He portrayed these groups as lacking a comprehensive grasp of the root issue yet reacting promptly to the evolving pandemic context.

Characterizing their responses as impulsive, he assigned accountability to these groups for causing a domino effect of similarly ill-informed groups to emerge on the development scene. Using a figure of speech to describe the rescue mission model as a "bubble," Hùng underscored its fragility and superficiality. In implying that this model may expand from rescuing produce to rescuing livestock, he pointed out that there would be no destination and ultimate goal for such a model, portraying it as a pointless endeavor.

In the above statement, Hùng drew a boundary between the realm of responsibility for civil society actors and that which lies beyond their immediate scope or concern. He firmly placed food rescue efforts, particularly those aimed at goods stranded at the Vietnam-China border due to the pandemic, within the context of situational fluidity. With this statement, he established a distinction between "temporary" problems stemming from COVID-19 and the "old", "pre-existing" issues that should merit deeper consideration. Central to his skepticism toward food rescue missions was not only their inherent inability to offer long-term sustainable solutions, but also their diversion of community resources away from what he perceived as more meaningful endeavors. Hùng clarified his skepticism in the following excerpt:

> **Hùng (29 years old, male, Programs 2, 3, 7 and 11):** Many groups now work on rescuing food and all that. When the business sector jumps in to buy the goods, these groups would appear on TV as [successful projects helping out farmers] and that would give the impression that doing community development is so simple or that it's so easy for a mission to become successful. Then all of a sudden, we have many rescue groups showing up, and of course there will be competition. There are groups that are willing to contribute their human resources to aid businesses in these rescue projects, they are willing to do everything just to gain fame, for example. Of course, this will lead other groups to be abandoned by [businesses/donors].

There are many things to unpack in this quote. First, Hùng unveiled a scenario in which the development landscape was flooded with small development projects, which he believed would exacerbate the difficulty of allocating resources and securing donors. Hùng maintained that when undeserving projects diverted resources away from those with legitimate and impactful aims, it amplified the complexities within the development landscape. In essence, he attributed the Vietnam development scene's problems to the intense competition engendered by the proliferation of groups, leading to decreasing support for worthy and impactful initiatives.

Second, in this quote Hùng drew distinctions between his way of doing development and that of other groups. By claiming that the other groups fostered a distorted perception of community development, and by characterizing the motivation behind their projects as fame-chasing, Hùng not only portrayed these groups as ill-informed and disingenuous, but also made claims about what a legitimate approach to development would entail. Likewise, by

portraying their projects as rash and insignificant, he declared his perspective on development work: as a long-term process requiring patience, endurance, and diligence. Through these claims, he also constructed the image of a legitimate development practitioner: someone who made informed decisions about development and genuinely sought altruistic goals, and thus, would be a worthy recipient of donor funding.

Third, Hùng's interview offered insights into how he interpreted Vietnam's development landscape through the lens of neoliberal principles. When analyzing the proliferation of groups following catastrophic events like the COVID-19 pandemic, he interpreted it as a result of individuals pursuing rapid recognition and joining the trend of fashionable development aid initiatives, rather than perceiving it as a reflection of people's desire to assist their communities. By framing this flood of groups as potentially detrimental to development progress in terms of diverting resources from more worthwhile initiatives, he offered a clear indication of his concerns about funding constraints and competition. It did not occur to him that the proliferation of groups could be an opportunity for collaborative efforts, nor did he acknowledge the labor contributions made by the many people engaged in development projects. This narrative therefore echoed a consistent and prevalent embrace of neoliberalism as the paradigm that shaped this informant's perspective on the development landscape.

Echoing Hùng's sentiments, other informants also acknowledged the proliferation of groups engaged in development-related pursuits; their concern, however, did not focus on whether the allocation of resources went to deserving initiatives. Nhật, an activist working on LGBTQ equality, drew attention to the intricate interplay between the proliferation of groups and the challenges of fostering collaboration within the LGBTQ advocacy space:

> **Nhật (25 years old, male, Program 9):** Developing too fast means too many organizations spring up and the scene becomes diluted. Tons of organizations, but most fail to tackle the problem substantially. Instead of having too many organizations working on LGBTQ, it would be more helpful to have groups who work extensively on homosexuality issues. And we still lack organizations working on intersex or queer issues. We also lack groups working for transgender men. Those working on transgender women's issues only focus on health and neglect the aspect of human rights.
>
> **Yên (interviewer):** Why don't these organizations work together?
>
> **Nhật:** It's difficult because "nine people, ten opinions." Not that I don't want to. I'm still upset about what happened with the Gender Discrimination Law Campaign. Back then we were pressed for time, so I suggested that everyone work together to make the campaign more fruitful. Nobody agreed. They said it would be too difficult to cooperate, which I thought was ridiculous, since our most successful campaign was Tôi Đồng Ý [I Agree], and that was because everyone united. Tôi Đồng Ý gained support from bisexual organizations,

> transgender organizations, celebrities, media outlets, legal professionals, medical practitioners, and so on. We used to cooperate and that created a huge impact. Now so many want to "cross the river" as quickly as possible yet refuse to collaborate. If we worked together, we would be able to "cross the river" safely and efficiently. It's really frustrating.

In this quote, Nhật expressed disappointment in the lack of cooperation between groups, which he believed led to a stagnation in the progress of LGBTQ advocacy in the past five years. At first glance, Nhật's perspective seemed closely aligned with the sentiments expressed by Hùng, who highlighted the concerns stemming from the proliferation of groups. However, Nhật introduced a different angle on the issue. Unlike Hùng, Nhật did not view the proliferation of groups as an unequivocally negative phenomenon. He recognized it as a natural consequence of the evolving development landscape. Nhật posited that the abundance of LGBTQ-advocacy groups could potentially be harnessed positively, provided that these groups were willing to collaborate. He stressed the need for collective efforts to address LGBTQ issues comprehensively. To illustrate his point, Nhật cited a previous successful campaign for marriage equality, and attributed this campaign's success to the unity among various groups and stakeholders. Nhật employed this example to demonstrate that collaboration not only was feasible but also could yield significant outcomes.

In addition to using the figurative speech "cross the river" to indicate achieving a common goal, Nhật employed a common Vietnamese idiom, "nine people, ten opinions" [in Vietnamese: "chín người mười ý"], to explain the reluctance to collaborate. This use of the idiom implies that the challenge of effective collaboration has intensified due to the surplus of inputs and the prevalence of disagreements within the current landscape. Furthermore, by speaking in the past tense when referring to collaboration ("we used to collaborate"), he subtly suggested that, in contrast, there had been a time when the presence of fewer groups resulted in a more unified approach.

This perspective hints at a significant aspect: the proliferation of groups appears to be intimately linked to the emergence of multiple viewpoints, hindering the attainment of cohesive social development. As a result, the capacity to reach consensus and work harmoniously toward common goals has become more difficult.

Nhật's statement highlights the potential for both positive collective action and the obstacles arising from differences in approach. It suggests that while the growth of advocacy groups is essential for raising awareness and fostering change, the inherent complications arising from a surplus of perspectives can hamper the effectiveness of their collective efforts. In other words, this informant attributed the intricate interplay between the rise in the number of groups and the increasing divergence of opinions to be the root cause

hindering progress in social change. Sharing the same viewpoint as Nhật, an NGO staff member articulated her observations as follows:

> **Liên (29 years old, female, Program 11):** There is a lot of controversy and disagreement on the NPO forum. Although we all work in development, we have different visions on what it means, and disagreements become inevitable. Disagreements hinder cooperation. The consequence is that we have "hundreds of flowers blooming" at the same time, yet it's unsustainable. If we collaborated—for example each organization works on an aspect of development, such as one on health, another on environment and another on social security in the same locality—wouldn't that be great? The reality is we have many organizations that address the same aspect of development, just in different localities. So we have "hundreds of flowers blooming" and then fading on their own. Can't bloom for long without collaboration.

Liên humorously employed the familiar phrase "hundreds of flowers blooming" (in Vietnamese: "trăm hoa đua nở") to vividly depict the development landscape. Historically rooted in China's Hundred Flowers Campaign and now a popular expression in modern Vietnam, the metaphor usually signifies prosperity and the emergence of diverse ideas. However, Liên reshaped this metaphor to highlight its transient nature. By juxtaposing "blooming" with "fading," she conveyed that while the scene was indeed bustling and vibrant, it was also transient and unsustainable due to the absence of collaboration.

This narrative deepened the understanding of the challenge posed by the proliferation of groups. It provided a prognostic framing that identified the diverse perspectives and strategies resulting from the proliferation of small groups as the main barrier to the effective implementation of development objectives. Liên's statement echoed that of Nhật: both informants emphasized that the core problem hindering development progress was not solely the sheer abundance of groups, but rather the subsequent divergence of strategies, missions, and methodologies. Both narratives characterized civil society as a heterogeneous sphere, where competing ideas about progress and visions of development coexist, in the same way that Kopecky and Mudde (2003, p. 9) once described the heterogeneity of civil society and how various groups, in this heterogeneity, can coexist "alone against each other."

Another aspect to consider is that all the narratives featured in this subsection indirectly pointed to the impact of neoliberal tendencies on shaping civil society dynamics. For instance, Liên and Nhật described the development landscape as one in which various groups prioritized realizing their own visions rather than collaborating with others, even if they shared the same interests or focus. In this characterization, these informants highlighted the core principles of individual autonomy and personal initiatives inherent in neoliberal practices. Similarly, when Hùng blamed the proliferation of groups for the diversion of resources and framed people's engagement in development as driven by the pursuit of recognition and success, he essentially portrayed

development work as a competitive arena in which participants competed for funding to achieve personal success. These informants collectively implied the presence of a neoliberal ethos underlying Vietnamese civil society landscape, promoting individualism and competition rather than collaborative cohesion.

This section has addressed what the informants deemed as the cause of development problems in Vietnam. The problems they identified in the realm of development work served as points of concern for the informants, shaping their perspectives on which approaches would be effective, and which not. The findings in this section illuminated the complex challenges and debates within the development field in the country, reflecting the diverse views and opinions of those actively engaged in shaping the future of development.

When discussing the reasons behind the failure of development efforts in Vietnam, the informants pinpointed three problems. Applying the concept of diagnostic framing, this section highlighted these three barriers to progress in Vietnam's development landscape. The first barrier the informants identified was the ambivalent attitude of the state, which failed to supply sufficient support and erected bureaucratic obstacles that hindered the progress of development initiatives. Ineffective charity work was framed as another hindrance: the informants saw charity as counterproductive and perpetuating dependency on aid rather than addressing the root causes of the problem. Finally, they critiqued the proliferation of development projects, with many groups working independently rather than collaborating. This competitive approach to funding, they insisted, would dilute the development landscape, and pose challenges to sustaining these initiatives in the long run.

8.2 Framing the solutions

In the preceding section, I have employed the concept "diagnostic framing," as proposed by Snow and Benford (1992), to analyze how the informants perceive the root causes of problems in the development landscape. The previous section primarily delved into the actors or factors to which these informants attributed accountability when elucidating the ongoing obstacles impeding Vietnam's development progress. The factors identified by these young individuals included: an ambivalent state that could either hinder civil society actors; the absence of professionalism in charitable efforts; and a competitive environment shaped by neoliberal ideologies in which the proliferation of groups intensified competition and diminished funding for impactful initiatives.

This section will place the spotlight on the concept "prognostic framing" to highlight how these informants conceptualize solutions to development issues. "Prognostic framing" provides insights into these young people' forward-looking visions, illuminating the strategies and aspirations they envision for

development initiatives. Through the use of this concept, the way in which these informants construct their roles in this endeavor can also be observed. As emphasized by Snow and Benford (1992), there is a correlation between the "diagnostic framing" and "prognostic framing" of a problem. In essence, the identification of specific issues and their underlying causes tends to limit the scope of viable and rationalized solutions and strategies advocated (Martin, 2003). The subsequent sections will shed light on how these young individuals seek to resolve the challenges of development. Their strategies include efforts to enhance capacity, the promotion of individual responsibility, and the fostering of collaborative engagements.

8.2.1 Capacity-building

An interest in capacity-building was very prevalent among the informants, most of whom were active in some types of community education projects at the time of data collection. Perhaps this stemmed from the fact that these informants were involved in capacity-building development programs themselves, and perceived such experiences as having a positive impact on their lives. This was also how they envisioned development, believing that raising people's capacity through education would be the path to a developed society.

An example of this meaning-making is provided in the following statement from an NGO staff member, who spoke passionately about the programs he organized for youth and the visions he had for them:

> **Minh (26 years old, male, Programs 1 and 10):** Basically, for our organization, young people are the resources, the forces—they are a group with a lot of potential. We don't think youth is the future of the country, we assert that young people *are* the country. And if young people are trusted, supported with resources, given opportunities, they will be able to achieve great things. That's why we commit to dedicate all of the resources we have mobilized to young people, with all of our ability. We try to meet their needs. If they lack knowledge, we create programs to provide them with knowledge. If they lack experiences, we create programs to foster experiences.

Minh's organization ran two development programs featured in this study: Program 1 provided a networking platform for youth active in different development projects to come together, exchange ideas and collaborate, while Program 10 trained youth in leadership and critical thinking skills. In this statement, Minh shared the mission of these programs: to provide young people with what they previously have not had access to in the belief that young people are capable of driving social change. With this assertion, this program organizer was maintaining that through capacity-building, society could develop. He framed youth as the agent of societal change, capable of bringing positive development.

This view of young people as the root of change in society was echoed in my interview with Sang, a former participant of a development program. At the time of the interview, he was running his own nonprofit group to provide after-school education to children in a small province in the southwest region of Vietnam. He gave his reasoning for choosing this method as follows:

> **Sang (30 years old, male, Program 5):** Our group's previous method was to offer scholarships to poor children, to motivate them to go to school, but after graduation, they still ended up unemployed, which made me feel rather guilty [laughs]. I decided that our [nonprofit] group needed a different path. Instead of giving scholarships to children in remote areas, now we would train children who live right in town, those who already have a stable background. If these children can develop, then Vietnamese society will flourish and we would have more chances to help everyone. So it's different compared to our previous method, which was simply giving out scholarships. There was no development then. Now we can build an academic community to develop our society.

In this statement, Sang drew a boundary between his previous model of doing development (giving tuition scholarship to low-income children) and his current project (providing children in his vicinity with additional educational resources). Framing his previous project as merely charity, he seconded the narratives featured in Subsection 8.1.2, which asserted that charity involving solely monetary contributions could not effectively contribute to societal development. This narrative also emphasized the notion that capacity-building, with a focus on academic skills, would be the solution for Vietnam's development, and that this process should begin with raising capacity in young children. In distinguishing between what he had done then (providing tuition to low-income children to go to public school) and what he was doing now (providing after-school services), he implied that his education project could offer students the knowledge and skills unavailable to them in the public education system.

Interestingly, as Sang interpreted unemployment as a type of challenges that charitable efforts could not adequately address and recommended after-school education as an alternative approach, his narrative revealed an individual-level prognostic perspective on the problem of unemployment. Specifically, this perspective established a connection between the absence of academic skills and the difficulty in finding employment. The focus here was on individuals and their lack of skills, rather than on how social structures constrained them from finding relevant employment, despite having received help from a charity that aided them in attending school.

My interview with Phong (30 years old, male, Program 5) revealed a similar mindset. Phong first participated in a development program when he was an 18-year-old college student. At the time of the interview, he was an NGO staff member responsible for organizing and running this very program. As outlined in the Appendix, this development program specifically looks for

students from economically-disadvantaged backgrounds with good academic records. The selected students receive a scholarship to help with their college expenses and are invited to an all-expenses-paid one-week capacity-building camp. Phong shared that he found his participation in this camp to be extremely beneficial; as a result, he decided to return to the camp each year—first as a volunteer to help with logistics, then as a trainer, and finally as an organizer. Now, as a full-time staffer, Phong became the NGO's public face, handing out certificates and taking photos with selected students at scholarship ceremonies. He explained his reasons for committing to working with this program as follows:

> **Phong (30 years old, male, Program 5):** I realize that by working in this [NGO] I have the opportunity to help. Each of my activities has a great impact on others. Take, for instance, a student: as they enhance their skills, their chances of securing employment increase. Then, upon graduation, they can attain well-paying jobs, lift themselves out of poverty, and help their families escape from impoverished conditions. That is because, the program teaches the students many things that can change and enlighten them. Through learning, they can understand what they want, what to do next, and have a different vision. Such educational opportunities like this are very rare, and without access to this kind of knowledge and way of thinking, students will remain confined as ordinary students. I find this kind of education very sustainable and impactful. I believe in it because I have seen how it manifests in reality. I have also seen what it did for me in the past—I see that I myself have changed a lot.

In this narrative, Phong emphasized the importance of education and labeled it as life-changing for an individual's life trajectory. Phong's answer implied that the type of life-changing education is not available in the public school system, which would only produce "ordinary students" incapable of escaping poverty. He emphasized that there were certain results, such as reaching some forms of enlightenment or acquiring important skills, that could only be achieved by participation in development programs. He described development programs as having a sustainable impact on the learners, implying that this effect, or the opportunity to change one's life for the better, was nonexistent in Vietnam's public education system.

What's interesting about this statement is the distinction Phong established between "ordinary" students and those who had the opportunities to participate in development programs. This echoed what Khánh in Subsection 6.2.2 previously stated regarding how participation gave her a more holistic view and allowed her to become a better doctor. By drawing this distinction, Phong claimed that state education could not adequately provide students with the necessary skills to succeed, and only through development programs that this capacity could be cultivated, thereby helping youth from disadvantaged backgrounds improve their lives. Phong relied on his own personal background—as a student from a low-income household who experienced the transformative impact of participatory development—to argue that societal development

could be achieved through enhancing capacity in young people. He praised the method of "teaching a man to fish" (Swidler & Watkins, 2009, p. 1182) to help people improve their lives and, subsequently, contribute to society. Note that the solution here is to change the capacity of young students by providing alternative learning models for them, rather than changing the conditions under which they learn in their "ordinary" lives. This prognostic framing speaks volumes about the type of civil society participation Phong and other informants in this study pursue: as service-deliverers filling a gap that public education fails to bridge, rather than as advocates for concrete changes in the public education system.

When I asked Phong about the types of skill-training this camp offered, he pointed to "soft skills," namely teamwork, communication, project management, and presentation skills. Phong saw these skills as necessary to help students improve their overall capacity and, accordingly, their odds of securing employment after graduation. Another informant who engaged in capacity-building projects also agreed that teaching communication and presentation skills, which might not take a long time to acquire, would be key in helping people from disadvantaged backgrounds improve their life circumstances:

> **Phát (31 years old, male, Program 11):** When working at [a consultant company], I noticed that foreign companies choose to come to Vietnam because of cheap labor. These companies always look for a source of cheap labor, as well as countries with flexible rules. One of the questions I often had to answer was "Which province has cheap labor?" or "Which province makes it easy for us to do business?". My job was to advise them on how and where to find people to do basic jobs for them, such as working the assembly lines or operating machines… When I left the consulting firm, I decided to start an education company. I wanted to solve the big question, which is how to raise the value of Vietnamese labor in the global supply chain. And I discovered that only three to six months of training can help workers double their incomes. For instance, for the workers working at factories that belong to the supply chain for Nike, knowing English and good communication skills can get them promoted into a supervisor position, which would improve their salary from, say, 6 million to 10 million. What's required is not even complicated English, just enough so that they can communicate with the owners and the office employees. Obviously, there are skills that require only three to six months of training to acquire yet can help people move to the next level. That's the reason I founded my social enterprise: to provide workers with these skill sets.

Compared to Minh and Phong, Phát's approach to capacity-building projects appeared to be motivated less by ideological and personal experiences and more by practical pursuits. Having a background working at a consulting company, he was aware of Vietnam's attractiveness to foreign investors as a source of cheap labor. This formed his motivation to found his social enterprise, which focused on teaching communication skills to factory workers. He did not conceive of these workers as agents of change like Minh, nor did he

see these skills as contributing to enlightenment, as Phong suggested. Rather, he saw potential in these skill sets to improve people's economic circumstances, which he believed to be fundamental to development.

This excerpt was characterized throughout by a prognostic framing that correlated the improvement of individual capacity with an improvement in life circumstances. As in other narratives featured previously, it did not engage with the idea of questioning external factors that perpetuate the cycle of poverty. Specifically, Phát seemed noticeably unconcerned with Vietnam's role as a global hub for cheap labor and the potentially exploitative labor practices that often accompany outsourced industries, or the absence of sufficient state safeguards to ensure fair wages for factory workers. Rather, he framed the solution as improving these workers' skills and capacities in order to ensure a better living wage. Phát's narrative exclusively centered on economic indicators as the primary measures of development. This pinpoint focus on increasing workers' salaries is a reflection of a depoliticized approach to development that, as Waisbord (2008) has noted, tends to fixate solely on economic factors, while neglecting the broader issues that profoundly impact people's overall quality of life. As evident in Phát's narrative, this depoliticized approach to development fails to critically engage with existing global inequalities, as well as to acknowledge the questionable labor practices that often accompany industries drawn to cheap labor markets.

This subsection has shown that the informants often frame capacity-building as the key to Vietnam's development process. Specifically, they promote the notion that development programs can provide young people with certain skills and resources that are absent in the public education system. It is through building capacity in young people or in those from disadvantaged backgrounds that these informants envision Vietnam's development process. This resonates with what these informants previously shared about their experiences in development programs; as Chapter 7 has revealed, these young individuals perceive participation as an experience of becoming a better version of themselves, whether in terms of skills, knowledge, or self-awareness. Furthermore, the findings in this subsection also echo the cultural values embraced in Confucianism, which views learning and improving one's knowledge as a way of changing one's life circumstances.

The findings in this subsection, moreover, has revealed an overarching tendency toward individually-focused interventions. The solutions proposed here do not address the external factors that underpin and reinforce the cycle of poverty. This is characterized by a prognostic framing that shifts the focus from tackling systemic issues to enhancing individual capabilities, and a noticeable detachment from addressing broader societal concerns. While the skills taught within development programs, such as communication, public speaking, and leadership, may hold value in empowering young individuals (as illustrated in Subsection 7.2.1), they do not serve to inherently challenge

the broader systemic issues that persist, and their impact remains at a micro, individual level. This prognostic framing, in other words, fails to grapple with the complex web of structural issues that contribute to the reproduction of social inequality, both within domestic contexts and on a global scale.

8.2.2 Everyday actions and individual responsibility

Another solution the informants propose for achieving effective development can be found in narratives concerning the choices they make in their daily lives. This calls into question the boundaries between activism and everyday lives, broadening the discourse to encompass day-to-day routines and implicit forms of activism (J. Horton & Kraftl, 2009). These narratives suggest that development can be achieved through changes in individual actions and individuals exercising their responsibility.

One of the clearest pieces of evidence for this prognostic framing can be found in the data collected from my participant observation in Program 7. Organized by a Vietnamese interregional youth network, this development program focused on sustainable development goals (SDGs), targeting youth leaders in different community development projects.

A few days before this program began, the organizers sent out an announcement regarding lunch, specifying that it would be held at the program site and attaching meal order forms for all participants. If participants did not want this arranged lunch, they could bring their own food from home. Two things in this announcement caught my attention: first, participants were asked to bring their own eating utensils ("spoon and chopsticks") to use at lunch in order to cut down on the use of single-use plastic. Second, the organizers underscored that they "**do not take responsibility for and disagree with** those who buy food outside or order food delivery for lunch" (Facebook post, June 3, 2020; my translation; emphasis in original). The announcement provided a brief explanation, stating that these behaviors would produce plastic waste, which would not be consistent with sustainable development values.

To understand the full context behind this announcement, it is important to address the infrastructure of modern Vietnamese food culture, in which consumption of plastic is prevalent and often entrenched as a habit (Makarchev et al., 2022). Take, for example, sugarcane juice, a popular product sold by street vendors in various corners of Saigon. When customers order a cup of sugarcane juice to go, the seller pours the juice into a plastic cup, seals the cup using an automatic plastic cup-sealing machine, places the sealed cup in a small plastic bag, and adds a plastic straw to the bag, before handing it to the customer. The use of plastic is just as popular in the sale of food: styrofoam containers are used whether one buys sticky rice, baozi, or summer rolls. The styrofoam container is also placed inside a small plastic bag with plastic cutlery. This heavy usage of plastic is intensified by the development of technology and the blossoming of food delivery applications, with food often served

in plastic cups and styrofoam boxes to make clean-up easy for the customer. Disposable plastics make up more than 50% of the plastic consumed daily in Vietnam (Châu et al., 2015), helping explain why plastic consumption per capita in Vietnam has increased rapidly from 3.8 kg/year/person in 1990 to 41 kg/year/person in 2015 (X. T. Trần, 2017).

In this context of ubiquitous plastic use, the organizers of Program 7 emerge as actors going against the grain by setting out clear lunch rules, with concrete definitions as to what they consider to be acceptable or appropriate lunch behaviors. They pre-ordered lunch at a nearby restaurant, which was delivered to the venue in reusable trays. After the meal, the organizers collected the trays and returned them to the restaurant. While participation in this pre-ordered lunch was optional, the organizers also discouraged participants from leaving the venue to purchase their own lunch and from using food delivery apps. Their lunch announcement and lunch practices highlight an emphasis on individual action and responsibility in protecting the environment. These practices start from the belief that individual actions can have an impact on the environment, and that everyone must make an effort to contribute to a healthier environment. In the Vietnamese context, this means taking a stand against a habit that is widely embraced by mainstream society, namely using single-use plastic for the sake of convenience.

The interview data resonate with this notion. On numerous occasions, my informants mentioned that participation in development programs required them to think about their environmental footprint. These programs usually enforced concrete rules regarding how individuals should conduct themselves, irrespective of whether sustainable development was the focus of the training. An informant outlined the different rules she had to follow during participation in development programs as follows:

> **Lam (22 years old, female, Programs 1 and 3):** When I attended Program 1, the organizers said we could not bring single-use plastic products. That was when specific actions regarding the environment began to take place in these programs. After that, I participated in Program 3, and the rule was that the products we brought with us must be natural and environmentally friendly. So, no synthetic soaps or detergents. In general, we had to be mindful of how we used resources.

Like Program 7, the two programs Lam spoke of laid out specific rules to encourage participants to act in a manner perceived by the program organizers as responsible and environmentally conscious. These development programs regulate behaviors that center on green consumption and individual responsibility, highlighting how individual behavior is intertwined with the health of the environment and emphasizing shared accountability for individual consumption choices. In Program 7, these rules were written in capital letters on a white board that was visible to all participants: "REDUCE – REUSE – RECYCLE." In Program 1, this was highlighted through an announcement

displaying aversion to plastic use. Program 3 elevated this point by alluding to a hierarchy of products: only products labelled "natural" and "eco-friendly" were considered acceptable. The consumption of synthetic soap or detergents was constructed as an ignorant choice, something to be frowned upon and even implying moral inferiority.

Through the enforcement and regulation of such rules, these programs indicate that some behaviors are more acceptable and morally sound than others. In terms of the environmental crisis, these programs suggest that the solution can be found in green consumption, namely a list of behaviors undertaken with the intention of taking accountability for one's consumption and promoting positive environmental effects (Sachdeva et al., 2015; Moisander, 2007, 2000). In this ideology, certain behaviors are labelled as being more socially conscious and more socially responsible than others, and are an outcome of personal ethical orientations or a set of pro-environmental personal values and attitudes (Sharma & Joshi, 2017; McEachern & Warnaby, 2008). The purchase of eco-friendly products, for instance, is constructed as a means toward reaping larger-scale environmental benefits via systemic policy change, and as possibly acting as a gateway to more significant and more committed pro-environment behaviors (Thøgersen & Noblet, 2012; Thøgersen, 2004).

The interview data also suggest that what these programs offer is not just an ideology but also concrete rules leading participants to adopt this ideology in their everyday practices. The rules they enforce extend their effect beyond the physical domain of participation. Another informant spoke about concrete changes in her lifestyle after participation in the following extract:

> **Thanh (23 years old, female, Programs 1, 3, 6 and 8):** In 2017, I was living alone and generally consumed a lot of plastic. Then I attended [Program 3] and saw how mindful everyone was—that changed me. I read a lot about how to minimize my impact on the environment afterward. That program showed me how changes could be done in a systemic and sustainable way. Now it "irks the nerves in my body" [in Vietnamese: "cảm thấy ghê người"] when I use plastic bags, and I rarely use disposable items. In general, it has completely changed my lifestyle. I have become mindful and always think about the environment.

For Thanh, participation in development programs offered her not only the chance to meet with an environmentally conscious community but also concrete tools to make a green lifestyle possible. Thanh perceived her participation as a turning point when she learned that as an individual, she could make an impact on the environment through simple alterations to her lifestyle. In this narrative, development programs emerged as sites that provided a cultural repertoire to inform strategies of action (Swidler, 1986), shaping the way these informants think, feel, and act as responsible consumers.

Interestingly, this narrative shows how Thanh drew a link between her individual actions—i.e., her choice to "minimize impact on the environment,"

to "always think about the environment," and to "rarely use disposable items"—and changes occurring on a larger scale. In other words, Thanh made sense of social change through responsible, mindful, everyday consumption. This narrative thus exemplifies a prognostic framing of individual actions as the means to achieving "systemic" and "sustainable" societal change.

Another informant shared a similar sentiment as he explained his choice to maintain green consumption practices when going out with friends:

> **Việt (21 years old, male, Programs 1 and 3)**: After the program, I bought a Starbucks thermal cup and have continued to use it. I bring it with me whenever I go to coffee shops. I also use straws made from bamboo. There was a period that habit attracted attention, people were staring at me for using those bamboo straws—that was uncomfortable. The staff at the coffee shops were also not fond of my habit, but if you take the first step, then sooner or later someone will join you. You just have to endure and not mind the mean words or gossips coming at you. Let's just say I make that sacrifice first.

In this narrative, the choice to engage in green consumption was depicted not only as a trade-off but also as a form of "sacrifice" aimed at making social change happen. Việt established himself as someone willing to withstand external "gossip" and ridicule for the sake of doing the right thing, drawing a link between his actions today and changes on a larger scale tomorrow. In other words, this quote also exemplifies a prognostic framing of micro, individual, everyday actions as the key to macro social change.

Like Thanh and Việt, many informants shared (some also showed) that they continued to follow these "green consumption" rules after participation in development programs. They spoke about using alternatives to replace plastic products, such as bamboo straws, glass jars, thermal mugs, and fabric totes. Thảo (21 years old, female, Program 4) brought a thermal mug to the coffee shop where the interview was conducted, while Xuân (25 years old, female, Program 7) specifically asked to have her interview at a coffee shop that did not serve drinks in plastic containers. Through their daily actions, these young people embraced the shared belief that fostering individual responsibility in consumption would contribute to a more sustainable environment.

Addressing environmental pollution by framing it as a matter of individual behavior change, these narratives suggest that individuals play a critical role in enhancing the environment's well-being. Such a perspective places the responsibility on individuals to tackle a macro-level issue, as opposed to relying on states with their policies or corporations with their CSR initiatives. This prognostic framing of attaching responsibility to individual actions and consumption choices reflects a responsibilization trend in development practices (N. Rose, 1999) in which the focus is on creating "responsible, ethical, and/or sustainable consumer" (Goodman, 2010, p. 105) or "responsible citizens" (Morgan, 2016, p. 179). By emphasizing the capacity to effect transformation through everyday choices and actions, this framing contributes to the creation

of a "moralized" market rooted in the principles of neoliberal ideology (Shamir, 2008), whereby consumer choices are infused with virtuous responsibility (McEachern & Warnaby, 2008).

Worth noting is that the framing of individual actions as the solutions to societal development can also be found in matters beyond the environment. My interview with Kim (23 years old, female, Programs 2 and 4) was relevant in this sense. In her reflections, Kim characterized herself as becoming "khó ở" (rough translation: "difficult to deal with") after participating in a development program.

When I asked her to elaborate on what she meant by "khó ở," Kim answered that after participating in a program which highlighted the importance of transparency and integrity, she began to demand the same principles from herself and others. To illustrate her point, Kim told me a story about her struggles in a previous job, a position that she used to see as a "perfect fit" for her background and interests. In this job, Kim witnessed a system of petty corruption that led to months of internal struggle for her, as letting go of the job not only would mean losing her economic livelihood but also losing social support. In the end, Kim chose to resign despite the economic uncertainty and despite being seen as "overreacting" by her family. Kim made sense of the situation as one that required her to be willing to sacrifice her own livelihood in order to prove a commitment to her proclaimed values. Evidently, the imperative of being coherent meant reshaping her career path to bring it in line with the values she adopted from participation. To be coherent, Kim resigned from a job that was her only means of livelihood at the time; in other words, quitting became a choice in which Kim sacrificed both economic and social wellbeing in exchange for an intact, coherent, ethical sense of self. She reflected on this decision in the following extract:

> **Kim (23 years old, female, Programs 2 and 4):** That's why I told you I've become "difficult to deal with." There are people who see me like that, and they hate it. They think I'm showing off, that I attended these development programs and now I act all strange. But I think value is not something easy to pursue. If I want to embrace these values, I have to make sacrifices, I have to fight negative influences around me. Well, I think it's worth it. Over time, as people understand what I'm after, they will respect me more. And I believe it's a way to spread these good values, making an impact in silence. I don't need to be vocal about it. I find that naturally over time people will understand why I do what I do, and they will see the merit in it too.

In this narrative, Kim made sense of her decision as something that caused ostracization in the moment but would contribute to change on a wider scale later. Her characterization of her everyday actions as something that "makes an impact in silence" shows a prognostic framing of everyday actions as the answer to bringing about social change. In this case, she perceived such actions as the answer to fighting corruption. Kim's decision to stop working at

a morally ambiguous workplace despite the economic uncertainty it caused reminds us of Việt's characterization of making a self-sacrificial choice when using green products in public. Both informants made sense of these events through the frame of responsible actors making moral decisions despite inconvenient trade-offs and external judgment. They perceived their individual actions as threads in a web of larger change and societal development.

Interestingly, both Việt and Kim's narratives echo what Fine (1995) has identified as "war stories" in social movement narratives. The term "war stories" refers to the type of narratives shared by members of a movement when reflecting on their experiences of challenges faced by the movement. At the same time, this kind of narrative helps reinforce the message that the movement is righteous and morally justified. This can be seen clearly in both of these informants' assertions that, while they have to face ridicule or a lack of understanding from other people because of their decisions, the choice to "spread these good values" and "make an impact in silence" is ultimately worthy. In other words, by adopting this narrative framework, these informants reinforce the notion that making a change in their everyday lives is indeed the key to achieving large-scale social change. By infusing their decisions and practices with moral values, these individuals elevate their actions from mere everyday choices to virtuous responsibilities. Through this meaning-making they view their actions as inspiring others to follow suit and fostering a collective ethos of responsible consumption and ethical living. Social change is, in these narratives, envisioned through individual action, rather than engaging with the root causes of the problems or the prevalence of these problems on a larger, macro scale.

This subsection has shown a prognostic framing of approaches to development through everyday actions and individual responsibility. The narratives featured here foster the belief that individual lifestyle choices can (and should) collectively produce fundamental systemic change. For these young people, participation in development programs has provided them with an ideology and moral framework that not only guides their attitude and actions, but also shapes the way they make sense of these actions as contributing to larger social change. Kim's narrative shows that she establishes herself as a moral actor defending values of transparency by removing herself from a workplace affected by petty corruption, while Thanh and Việt's reflections on their consumption choices highlight the importance of placing environmental concerns above one's own convenience. In these narratives, the informants highlight their commitment to the ideology adopted from participation by showcasing how they maintain responsible consumption routines, even in the face of external judgments, or how they are willing to sacrifice their economic well-being to embrace these values.

In addressing the pressing issues of environmental pollution and corruption, these narratives adopt a prognostic framing that places a significant

emphasis on individual behaviors. This framing suggests that the root of the problems lies in individual consumption patterns or individual choices, which implies that changing individual behaviors is the most effective way to address these societal problems. Through this lens, the proposed solution centers on individuals as the primary agents of change for a macro-level problem, sidelining the potential impact of state policies or corporate accountability. Furthermore, this prognostic framing promotes a boundary-making mechanism: these individuals can differentiate themselves as being more responsible and, by extension, more morally upright than others who do not carry out the same practices.

8.2.3 State-civil society collaboration

In the previous subsections I have demonstrated that informants conceive of the solution to development in terms of capacity building and changes in individual behaviors. Both of these approaches highlight the notion that societal development begins with individual development, drawing a link between the self and the collective. These narratives have formed the majority of the interviews, with informants embracing the idea that through their development projects, which bring education to communities and raise social awareness, development can be achieved.

Of course, not all informants shared this viewpoint. A small minority of the interviewees had a different perspective on how development could be achieved, highlighting instead the role of the state in this process. Interestingly, these informants were usually the people who had the most experience working in the civil society sector. Perhaps their experience working in this sector has showed them that civil society is more restricted in its activities than it might appear, and thus without the state's support, development may just be a pipe dream. While these informants previously framed the ambivalent state as an obstacle to development, the state also appeared in their prognosis framing of solutions for development. As much as the state was seen as a barrier to the development process, it was also constructed as a key player in the solution. For instance, Hùng, who opposed food rescue missions (see Subsection 8.1.3), identified the state as the solution to such problems:

> **Hùng (29 years old, male, Programs 2, 3, 7 and 11):** People like doing start-ups, for example, creating a product or an app to sell and rescue melons to help the farmers. But this kind of problem should be solved by the state [laughs]. Businesses or NGOs do not handle that problem. The problem of rescuing produce is not a problem for development workers to solve. It is an economic problem, a macro issue involving state regulations.

In this excerpt, the informant highlighted that some problems could only be solved by the state and were beyond the jurisdiction or capabilities of civil

society actors. His statement emphasized the state as a legitimate actor that should be involved in development projects, and pointed to the state's ability to address infrastructure-related problems on a macro scale. Another informant who was vocal about the state's lack of ability to deal with marginalized groups explained her views about the state's role in development in the following excerpt:

> **Liên (29 years old, female, Program 11)**: The state has a vital role in development. An open state makes it easier for the nonprofit sector to do its job… Many localities in the southwest region are willing to cooperate with the nonprofit sector for development. In Sóc Trăng or An Giang, people still have difficulties accessing electricity, water, and social security, and nonprofit organizations must present their projects to the communes and local officials before they can actualize anything. Obviously, the nonprofit sector needs the support of local officials in order to provide information and resources to these local communities. If the officials are welcoming, then nonprofit organizations can work effectively… The state may not be able to do [development], but they must have a plan to open the doors for others to step in and fill the gap, for civil organizations to do their jobs. Just like LGBTQ issues, if the legal frameworks did not change, we wouldn't be able to achieve the same accomplishment as we do now.

This perspective acknowledges that while the state may have its strengths, it may not possess all the necessary resources, expertise, or mechanisms required for comprehensive development. In this interview extract, this NGO staffer refrained from completely dismissing the state's role but underscored the collaborative nature of development, suggesting that a partnership between civil society actors and the state would collectively contribute to more effective outcomes. Citing the example of LGBTQ advocacy and the recent change in the law that recognized LGBTQ rights, Liên presented a prognostic framing of collaboration between different stakeholders as key to achieving social change and development.

In Liên's interview, the state was constructed as both central to the problem (in hindering development efforts) and central to the solution (in paving the way for development efforts). The state was thus present in both her construction of barriers to development and solutions for development, highlighting how she envisioned the impact of the state in this process. Her assertion depicted the state as potentially a great collaborative partner for CSOs once it shed its doubt and suspicions about civil society activities. The same sentiment could be found in my interview with Tường, a journalist who had previously worked in the NGO sector:

> **Tường (27 years old, female, Program 4):** The state is quite important; that is, the state's voice and power can influence civil society activities. The state can support NGOs by enacting regulations that permit them to operate. Besides, in my experience working in the INGO sector, this line of work involves many state agencies, like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of

> Education, the Ministry of Industry and Trade—many agencies at all levels. If those agencies don't support or create conditions for you to work, then nothing will be done.

As was the case with Liên, Tường's narrative indicated that the effectiveness or the reach of civil society is conditioned by and contingent upon the state's approval of its activities. This statement framed the state as an undeniable partner in the development process: without the state, civil society's hands would be tied. In a way, this statement illustrates the limited power of civil society in authoritarian contexts, in which even their role as service deliverers is both severely constrained by the state and dependent upon its approval.

Both Liên and Tường noted that the state can contribute to the development process in indirect ways, such as by allowing civil society actors to do their jobs. Another informant, working for an NGO specializing in wildlife conservation, shared the viewpoint that the state is central to the development process; she differed from other informants, however, when it came to assessing the state's contributions and capacities:

> **Vân (30 years old, female, Program 6)**: Having worked with state officials, I think they are highly knowledgeable and capable. And pretty sharp. The stagnation lies in the system, not in a lack of capabilities. People tend to be disparaging about state officials, but I believe in the end meaningful change can only be achieved in collaboration with the state. I will choose to work with the state, because it doesn't matter how much awareness an NGO can raise—in the end, if the law doesn't change, nothing will be changed… It's important to work with state officials rather than criticizing them. We need changes in laws and law enforcement. The decline in drunk driving and the enforcement of mandatory helmets are two great examples.

Vân was one of the very few informants in this study who praised state officials' capacity. She leveraged her decade of experience in the NGO sector to emphasize that the perspective asserting the central role of civil society actors in driving social change is a somewhat biased view. Instead, she viewed the state as the legitimate stakeholder and contributor in this process. Moreover, she highlighted that raising awareness or capacity—an approach adopted by many informants in this study—would be futile if it was not accompanied by concrete changes in the law. In saying so, this informant refuted the notion that development could be achieved solely by increasing people's capacity or by individuals changing their everyday actions. Rather, she framed the prognosis for development as requiring structural changes to the system and framed the state as a legitimate contributor to this process.

This subsection has presented the minority voices in the interviews who framed the state as central to the development process. Some of these informants even recognized the state rather than CSOs as the main legitimate contributor that is able to make a difference in this endeavor. The fact that these

narratives came from people who have worked for a long time in the civil society sector suggests that the notion that civil society is the driver of change, or the watcher of the state's activities, may not be applicable in an authoritarian setting such as Vietnam. Moreover, a "we're all in this together" discourse can be observed in these narratives, implying that development is a goal shared by various stakeholders, and that collaboration between different actors with different powers and capacities is the key to achieving development.

8.3. Concluding discussion

This chapter has used as its starting point Fine's (2014, 2021) thesis that participation in small groups can lead to the proliferation of more groups and contribute to the formation of a vibrant civil society. Acknowledging this heterogeneity, this chapter has been dedicated to portraying the pluralism within the context of Vietnam's development, highlighting distinct approaches the informants have employed in their strategies of pursuing development. This examination has not only shed light on how they frame the underlying issues within development but also on how they diagnose the pathway to achieving development. Using the two concepts of "diagnostic framing" and "prognostic framing" (Snow & Benford, 1992; Benford & Snow, 2000), I have illustrated the multifaceted nature of Vietnamese civil society, which encompasses an array of groups with diverse interests, methodologies, and justifications.

The first section of this chapter, which applied the concept of diagnostic framing, brought into focus the ways the informants comprehend and contextualize the challenges and barriers that riddle Vietnam's development trajectory. Within these narratives, three primary issues were brought to the fore: the complex and ambivalent role of the state, which often acts as an obstacle rather than a facilitator; the inefficacy of resource allocation in ill-informed charitable efforts; and the proliferation of groups, which contributes to a competitive funding landscape.

In the second section, the spotlight turned to examples of prognostic framing within the data. These narratives offered a glimpse into the vision and strategies the informants pursue for propelling Vietnam's development journey. The informants identified three main approaches to achieving this objective: through raising the capacity of individuals, through cultivating responsible consumption and ethical behaviors in everyday practices, and through collaboration between civil society and state institutions.

A key finding in this chapter was the existence of a shared approach to social change among youth participants that underlines a tendency to avoid grand-scale solutions or overt challenges to prevailing systemic issues. Their efforts are instead directed toward altering individual behaviors, with a particular emphasis on becoming responsible citizens themselves. In these narratives, social transformation is constructed as a process that begins with the

individual, and the notion of creating social change is deeply entwined with the idea of bringing about change within oneself. In addition to promoting responsible consumption, these informants advocate for educational initiatives to enhance individual skills and knowledge. This prognostic framing, which attributes responsibility for societal development to individual actions and consumption decisions, highlights a notable trend of responsibilization (N. Rose, 1999; Kipp & Hawkins, 2019) and the making of "responsible consumers" (Goodman, 2010, p. 105) or "responsible citizens" (Morgan, 2016, p. 179) in development practices. This trend is characterized by the framing of individual consumers as the solution to international development issues, shifting the focus away from collective and systemic approaches to addressing development challenges (Kipp & Hawkins, 2019). In essence, by positioning individuals as the unit of change and emphasizing their capacity to shape social transformation through their everyday choices and actions, this framing contributes to the creation of a "moralized" market rooted in the principles of neoliberal ideology (Shamir, 2008). Such neoliberal discourses, which deeply pervade international development, can lead to uncritical acceptance of neoliberal values (Kwitonda, 2017). Furthermore, the emphasis on individual behavioral change may lead to a depoliticized narrative that constructs marginalized youth as being responsible for their own circumstances (Berckmans et al., 2012; Morgan, 2016).

Another noteworthy observation is the contextual backdrop of this study, which helps explain why the informants tended to emphasize their personal capacities and behaviors over structural issues. This emphasis may be rooted in their awareness of the authoritarian nature of the state. Faced with constrained avenues for participatory involvement and systemic change, young people's strategic focus on changing individual behaviors, such as adopting more responsible consumption patterns, can be viewed as a pragmatic alternative. The belief that their impact is most tangible at this micro level might stem from a practical acknowledgment of the limitations imposed by the state's structures and authority. This collective framing also reflects the approach to social change taken by development programs organized in authoritarian settings. In such contexts, maintaining a harmonious relationship with the state is often a priority, leading these programs' organizers to adopt an orientation that promotes change while avoiding contentious issues that could lead to strained relationships with state authorities (see, e.g., Faludi, 2016; Morgan, 2016). This measured approach is likely adopted to ensure these programs' continuity. In other words, framing social change as stemming from individual responsibility and engagement in practices like responsible consumption reflects not only the pragmatic assessment of young people living in an authoritarian state but also the strategic positioning of development programs within this complex environment.

By illuminating how development is framed in terms of challenges and visions, this chapter has shown how civil society actors advocate for change

within existing authoritarian structures. Their focus remains on pragmatic solutions and individual change rather than overtly problematizing structural problems or challenging state policies. In this sense, these narratives are aligned strategically with the complexity of the political context within which they operate, showing an acknowledgment of the delicate interplay between state authority, civil society initiatives, and the pursuit of meaningful development outcomes.

9. Discussion and contributions

The aim of this research was to explore and analyze how practices in Vietnamese participatory development shape young people's civic engagement, visions, and aspirations toward the development process. It set out to answer the following research questions:

1. How are the motivations and aspirations of young people integrated into the construction and negotiation of access to development programs?
2. How do the experiences of young people in development programs contribute to their civic engagement?
3. How does participation in development programs inform young people's visions and practices in the realm of development?

In the concluding discussions of Chapters 6, 7, and 8, the answers to each of these questions have been provided. Accordingly, my intention in this chapter is not to repeat these summaries. Rather, I want to highlight how each of these answers contributes to the overall narrative of youth participation in development programs in the context of Vietnam. Identifying this common thread offers further insights into what participatory development looks like in practice, as well as its implications for youth's civic engagement in an authoritarian context.

Given this focus, this final chapter will not discuss the research questions separately. Rather, a discussion of the findings will be structured based on the core dimensions of the study. Following this, the chapter will highlight the main contributions of this study, both empirically and theoretically, and conclude with my final reflections.

9.1 Discussion of the findings and their implications

The study began by zooming in on the "participatory turn" in international development practices (Chapter 2). It started with an acknowledgment of the underlying problems in participatory development, consisting mainly of assumptions about local communities. Thereafter, the question was raised as to how local participants—in this case young people—experience this process,

and whether being invited to participate in development programs is of any benefit to them or leads to any meaningful outcomes in their lives. This is an issue that has produced mixed evidence in the literature on participation.

The purpose of this section is to highlight the key insights that have emerged from this exploration. It engages with existing research in the field to explain how the study's findings can be applied to future knowledge development and scientific research. Accordingly, this section is not intended to be a summary or repetition of the findings, but rather to serve as both a research exercise and a contribution to the ongoing debate on the subject of "participation". Specifically, I will highlight four core ideas that this study has addressed and how they can be developed in future investigations, namely: motivations for participation, outcomes from participation, problems with participation, and potential of participation.

9.1.1 Motivations for participation: bridging self and society

One question that has puzzled previous scholars when examining participation is whether local participants are genuinely interested in the process or are simply "dragged into partaking in operations of no interest to them" (Rahnema, 1992, p. 116). This dilemma raises a fundamental inquiry: Why do local actors engage in these activities, and how do they rationalize their involvement? Using this dilemma as a starting point, this study acknowledges that motivation, as noted by Eversole (2003, p. 792), remains "one of the least-understood areas of development practice." The findings in this study not only unveil the motivations of young individuals for engaging in participatory development but also uncover how they strategically utilize this process to advance their aspirations in the realm of development.

A direct response to the question of whether young people are interested in participatory development can be found in Chapter 6. As highlighted in this chapter, even when participation in development programs necessitated a competitive application process, young applicants were willing to invest substantial time and effort in applying and, if necessary, reapplying. Moreover, most informants in this study engaged in multiple programs. For youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, development programs served as a venue to bridge the rural–urban divide, offering them access to quality education, and consequently enhancing their job prospects. This finding aligns with prior scholarship, which has demonstrated that young individuals can strategically employ participatory development to advance their careers, showcase their skills and virtues, as well as cultivate essential networks (Kirmse, 2009; Yabanci, 2019).

However, for many young people in this study, the motivation to engage in participatory development transcended mere self-interest. The data show that their motivation encompassed an altruistic cause, as they established a strong link between personal growth and community development. Enhancing one's

individual capacity was perceived as intrinsically linked to contributing to the community, whether by being able to speak out against social misconduct or by advocating for ethical ways of living (Chapter 8). Furthermore, the study has revealed that young people viewed participatory development as a strategy to advance their aspirations for social progress and community development (Chapter 6). In these narratives, the concept of the self was intricately intertwined with the community, echoing the larger collectivist culture rooted in Confucianism and Taoism, which emphasizes social harmony, solidarity, and a moral duty to one's community and nation (Chapter 3).

This connection between the self and the collective was further emphasized when young people contemplated the path forward for Vietnam's development process (Chapter 8). While articulating their strategies for advancing Vietnam's development trajectory, young people identified solutions through the lens of enhancing individual capacities and instilling responsible behaviors in everyday lives. From their perspective, development programs provided an effective platform for self-improvement and an increased sense of agency (Chapter 7). They leveraged the positive experiences gained through participation as a foundation to conceptualize how community development should be pursued. Following their participation, many returned to development programs as volunteers and trainers, or created their own capacity-building programs for others. Their narratives and actions underscore the belief that changing oneself will lead to sustainable change within the community. In this manner, their practices resonate with the idea of generating "responsibilized subjects" (Ward & England, 2007) and align with the development mantra of "teaching a man to fish" (Swidler & Watkins, 2009) as the solution to poverty and disadvantage. The emphasis on knowledge and education as the pathway to the citizenry's development also mirrors Vietnam's history and culture: not only because education is highly esteemed in Confucianism, but also because it was envisioned by Vietnamese activists during the French colonial period as a critical anti-colonial resource for achieving national liberation.

Addressing the question of motivations, this study has provided insight into what Kelsall and Mercer (2003, p. 299) meant when they emphasized that people are "not passive subjects waiting for development to be done for them." Whether they are advancing their own careers or working toward their individual social development goals, the young individuals in this study are proactive actors who strategically navigate their participation in development programs to access vital resources and networks. Through this process, these young people propel participatory development initiatives forward, serving as significant contributors to the process. In other words, the findings have shown that youth are not passive recipients of participatory development; instead, they are active contributors and facilitators of the development process. Moreover, in this cultural context, youth perceptions and practices are intimately informed by collectivist norms that bind them to the larger society:

their aspirations for self-improvement are closely linked to their desires to make meaningful contributions to their communities.

9.1.2 Outcomes from participation: neoliberal ethos in development practices

Another question outlined in the literature review was whether local beneficiaries would be granted more agency and ownership in the process of participatory development (Chapter 2). Scholars have also asked whether participatory development can truly tackle power distribution issues (Cooke & Kothari, 2001), or if the involvement of people into these projects is merely symbolic (Mikkelsen, 2005). The answers to these questions are nuanced and multifaceted.

Chapter 7's findings emphasized that, from the perspective of youth, participatory development could indeed yield positive outcomes. Young people felt heard, respected, and included in the process, and gained a sense of pleasure from feeling liberated from normative constraints and generational hierarchies. Moreover, young individuals shared about the transformative outcomes of participation, which changed the way they perceived their role in society and enhanced their awareness of their own potential and limitations. Additionally, the participation process fostered trust and a sense of belonging, which were important resources for sustaining civic engagement. This aligns with Fine's prediction of an intimate link between participation in "tiny publics" and sustained civic engagement, through which a vibrant civil society is constructed. The fact that many informants returned to contribute to development programs in different roles or even established similar programs themselves (Chapter 8) serves as evidence of this.

However, while young people appreciate that development programs enhance their sense of agency, it is clear that these programs do not address structural issues, or provide space for questioning authoritarianism or structural inequality. This might be due to the programs' reluctance to be seen as a troublemaker in a context in which direct confrontation with the state's legitimacy can be problematic (see also Morgan, 2016). Consequently, their approach to development, later adopted by the young participants themselves, aligns with the broader neoliberal shift in international development practices. In this framework, the self is perceived as undergoing a process of refinement, similar to an object that accrues value over time. It becomes an individual's responsibility to maximize their self-value. This line of thinking is rooted in the belief that disadvantaged individuals are "the authors of their own misfortune" and "active agents in the fabrication of their own existence" (N. Rose, 1996, p. 59). The proposed solution is to transform these individuals into "entrepreneurial subjects who may be motivated to become responsible for themselves" (Ward & England, 2007, p. 13; Pyysiäinen et al., 2017).

Throughout this study, the impact of this neoliberal shift on individual subjectivity was evident on various fronts. First, it surfaced when young people constructed their sense of belonging in development programs (Chapter 6). Their motivation to participate increasingly centered around self-improvement and crafting a distinctive self-image, portraying the self as autonomous and individualized, akin to a form of capital to be maximized. This "neoliberal turn" was also apparent in how informants described the transformative effects of their participation on their capabilities and self-awareness (Chapter 7). They positioned themselves as improved and transformed actors, evolving into responsible, ethical, and empowered agents contributing to societal development. Finally, this neoliberal turn also influenced how informants envisioned the development process (Chapter 8), promoting individual responsibility and everyday actions as means to achieve development goals. Their approach mirrored the prevailing trend in international development practices, emphasizing empowerment and capacity-building for disadvantaged groups as the key to ending the cycle of poverty.

It is important to acknowledge that the alignment of development work with neoliberal principles can sideline broader political issues, relegating them to the background. This can undermine collective political mobilization and lead to disengagement from political reflection (Eliasoph, 2011; Waisbord, 2008). In the study, this was reflected in an absence of critical discussions on issues of social justice, inequality, and structural transformation when informants spoke about development initiatives. Instead, development initiatives were only framed in economic terms. Furthermore, the prevailing neoliberal narrative of "empowerment" within development programs might inadvertently transfer the responsibility for development from the state to the individual. This could have the unintended consequence of placing the burden of progress squarely on the shoulders of disadvantaged groups, effectively holding them accountable for their own development.

This study, in other words, has demonstrated positive outcomes from participatory development, particularly the increased agency experienced by young individuals. However, it simultaneously raises pertinent questions regarding the potential drawbacks associated with the neoliberal approach to development, namely that the pursuit of the neoliberal ethos in development practices may inadvertently shift the burden of responsibility to those least equipped to bear it. Moreover, this approach may sideline broader political issues and lead to a failure to engage with structural inequality.

9.1.3 Problems with participation: professionalization as a mechanism of exclusion

Another recurring concern in the participatory development literature pertains to whether this development practice inadvertently perpetuates inequality by

allowing elites to dominate the process (Coelho & Favareto, 2010; Watkins et al., 2012; Mahé, 2018). The findings of this study provide a nuanced perspective on this issue, revealing a discernible trend toward professionalization. This adoption of professionalization offers an explanation for the coexistence of inclusion and exclusion within the realm of participatory development.

The trend toward professionalization can be seen in different places in this study's findings. First, it was apparent in the entry process, as the study illuminated how young people made sense of access to development programs (Chapter 6). The application process—which resembled a grant application with its requirements of an impressive CV and demonstrations of skills and development knowledge through essays and interview rounds—pointed to the increasing adoption of seemingly neutral administrative, managerial practices such as evaluating, reporting, tracking, monitoring, and planning in the NGO sector (Girei, 2016; Sanders, 2015). Second, professionalization was echoed in the ways informants made sense of hindrances within Vietnam's development scene and their proposals for achieving development goals (Chapter 8). In both their diagnostic and prognostic framing, the informants' narratives reflected an increased demand for a particular kind of professionalized, formal, technically-skilled expertise on development subjects. They dismissed charity and food rescue missions, seeing these initiatives as ill-informed and misguided due to the lack of expert knowledge involved. They advocated for building capacity in order to increase expertise on subject matters, which they perceived as crucial to making development initiatives more impactful. The findings thus reflect a current trend in international development, characterized by professionalism, a focus on funders' priorities, reliance on experts, and policy orientation, rather than being directed toward radical transformation (Roy, 2015). Scholars of the field have referred to this phenomenon as "NGOization" (Alvarez, 2009) or "project-think," noting that it is shaped by "a diverse web of discourses, technologies, and practices that portray social problems as matters of effective management" (Zencirci & Herrold, 2021, p. 548).

The unquestioning embrace of the professionalization paradigm carries profound implications, especially in its exacerbation of exclusionary mechanisms. Within the recruitment processes of development programs, these exclusionary mechanisms become glaringly apparent. They are manifested in the stringent gatekeeping practices that disproportionately favor participants with similar class backgrounds to the recruiters, who are predominantly development professionals (Chapter 6). This selection process largely overlooks individuals who may be less educated or less articulate, echoing established literature that has underscored the disconnect between the epistemologies, meanings, and values of development practitioners and those of local communities (see Sabiescu et al., 2014).

The pursuit of professionalization is also intertwined with youth's boundary-making narratives, with a recurring theme revolving around the distinction

between development practices labelled “ill-informed” or “inadequate” and those deemed “knowledgeable” or “competent” (Chapter 8). In essence, the pursuit of professionalization has transformed participation into a space where hierarchies and tensions between “professionals” and grassroots workers become evident (Roy, 2019). This can disempower those in the field who are not professionalized, thereby contributing to the creation of small, hegemonic elites (Hodzic, 2014; Gupta, 2014). Furthermore, as Chapter 8 highlighted, this can contribute to a lack of collaboration between groups, thus disempowering a civil society despite its abundance of human resources.

Another problem that follows this binary categorization of “ill-informed” versus “well-grounded” development practices is the inadvertent reinforcement of existing power dynamics that privileges certain approaches over others, often reflecting a bias toward established Western frameworks. Within such constructs, we witness the replication of authority in determining what constitutes legitimate knowledge and legitimate approaches to development. As argued by Sharma (2008) and Mindry (2001), the epistemic politics and organizational hierarchies of NGOs—marked by terms like “development” or “empowerment”—often rest on ethnocentric and imperial categories. Such terms and practices categorize the beneficiaries as marginalized and oppressed, shaping and perpetuating the notion of the “local” (Peters, 2016) as deficient and in need of external (Western) intervention (Thornton et al., 2015). Such dynamics inadvertently deepen the divide between the Global North and Global South by functioning under the assumption that the local understanding of development is inferior to that imported from international sources.

In essence, the rigid application of professionalization as a development model is not without unintended consequences. This model can worsen the existing disparities between the haves and the have-nots, contribute to the creation of a hierarchy of knowledge, and lead to fragmentation among groups in the development landscape. The findings of this study thus highlight the crucial importance of critically evaluating the undiscriminating adoption of professionalization and understanding its far-reaching implications, particularly in terms of perpetuating global imbalances in knowledge and influence. This is vital for addressing the unintended consequences of professionalization and ensuring that the benefits of participatory development are accessible to a broader and more diverse range of individuals and communities.

9.1.4 Potential of participation: bridging assistance and resistance

While participatory development certainly has its pitfalls, the findings of this study also shed light on its potential contributions to the growth of civil society. This potential is twofold, offering insight into how participation can serve

as both the cause and context for civil society (Fine, 2014, 2021; Fine & Harrington, 2004).

The first potential contribution of participatory development to the growth of civil society becomes evident through youth's accounts of the "sustainable pleasure" (Efird, 2015, p. 1152) derived from participation. As discussed in Chapter 7, young individuals perceive development programs as unique opportunities to liberate themselves from the constraints of everyday expectations. This liberation significantly enhances their sense of autonomy and self-confidence (see, e.g., Kirmse, 2009; Björnsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2018; Morgan, 2016). These emotional benefits, as observed by Fine and Corte (2017), not only foster a sense of belonging and inclusion within the group but also motivate further engagement. The findings illuminate precisely how these small groups can evolve into what Fine and Harrington (2004, p. 346) described as "gravitational centers of civic life." The activities and practices employed in these programs not only establish youth as equal contributors but also produce a sense of pleasure that sustains their engagement in similar development endeavors. Accordingly, participation becomes a resource for mobilizing youth's civic engagement and continued involvement in civil society initiatives. This serves as the foundation for the proliferation of civil society activities and the pluralism of civil society, as suggested by the data in Chapter 8.

The second potential contribution of participation to civil society can be observed in youth narratives detailing how development programs have not only informed their sense of agency, but have also laid out concrete rules and practices they have incorporated into their daily lives. While development programs primarily support the "self-organization" function of civil society (Young, 2000), which is considered the more acceptable function of civil society in authoritarian contexts, the impact they have on young people's sense of agency and subsequent life choices (Chapter 7) can lay the groundwork for strengthening the "public sphere" function of civil society. In this sense, Horatanakun's (2023) study provided a pertinent example, illustrating how Thai youth activists strategically utilized youth training programs as meeting spaces to form networks and share collective action repertoires. These initiatives eventually evolved into the mobilizational infrastructure of the 2020 Thai youth movement. Horatanakun's work shed light on the dynamics of operating a political network within an authoritarian state hostile to democratic political activism. These networks, while appearing to be non-oppositional from an external viewpoint, play a significant role in driving transformative change by diverting resources from established structures toward new formations from within. Likewise, this study has outlined how youth strategically utilize their participation in development programs to advance their own development objectivities, whether by gaining essential resources through participation or seeking like-minded individuals (Chapter 6). This finding demonstrates that youth, as subversive actors, can adeptly work within existing constraints to

significantly contribute to the growth of emerging social movements and act as essential agents of change in an environment in which traditional avenues of political engagement are restricted.

Furthermore, this finding resonates with A. N. Vũ's (2019) observation that civil society organizations in authoritarian contexts can inspire social movements behind the scenes in subtle ways. Adopting an approach of "not blaming but assisting the government" (Dai & Spires, 2018, p. 75) does not necessarily imply that these CSOs are not pursuing their own democratization agenda. The potential of participatory development to contribute to civil society lies in the fact that while development programs may not overtly challenge the authority of the state, they can inspire their participants to form their own ideas of "respectful resistance" (see Laine et al., 2018, p. 58). Within this realm, norms of hierarchy and traditional obedience to authority within Vietnamese culture can be contested (Chapter 7). The promotion of social change can take covert forms in which young people utilize the knowledge and discourse gained from development programs to frame their actions.

In summary, development programs can contribute to the growth of civil society by facilitating the formation of networks among like-minded individuals and providing a venue for individuals to question authority and norms. By means of these functions, they can both assist the state in areas such as education, and at the same time lay the foundation for potential public sphere resistance. The findings of this study illustrate precisely the "complex dance" (Hannah, 2007, p. 124) that CSOs perform when operating under vigilant state scrutiny.

9.2 Contributions of the study

As stated previously, this research set out to explore and analyze the ways in which participatory development practices in Vietnam shape young people's civic engagement, visions, and aspirations toward the development process. Its contributions are multifaceted and extend to both the empirical and theoretical realms.

9.2.1 Empirical contributions

The empirical contributions of this study revolve around three core dichotomies—inclusion–exclusion, self–collective, and assistance–resistance—each of which is elucidated below.

First, this research brings to light the coexistence of inclusion and exclusion mechanisms within participatory development. The findings reveal that while participatory development is perceived as an inclusive space that fosters a profound sense of belonging among young participants, entry into such collectives demands possessing specific skills and a particular class disposition,

effectively excluding a significant segment of youth. This discovery is a valuable addition to the field of development studies, offering critical insight into the contemporary development landscape. It illustrates how development programs can both serve as bridges to narrow the rural–urban divide and empower disadvantaged youth, while being susceptible to co-optation by elites.

Second, this study expands its empirical contributions into the scholarship of youth civic engagement in the Global South. By delving into how young participants interpret, engage with, and envision development practices, it unveils the diverse and contextually-embedded pathways through which youth contribute to societal change. In this study, social change can be envisioned through the blurring of the dichotomy between the self and the collective. The findings highlight how youth envision and promote societal change through personal growth, establishing a strong link between individual self-improvement and societal progress. While the youth in this study focus on enhancing their own capacities, they make sense of this in relation to the desire to contribute to collective benefits. Consequently, this study adds nuance to the discussion of the generational gap between Vietnamese youth and their parents, which is often attributed to the influence of the Đổi Mới reforms. It shows that while young people are indeed pursuing individualist values, as H. Nguyễn's (2015) study has suggested, this shift toward individualism does not necessarily negate collectivist values but can instead foster collective dedication.

Third, this research contributes empirically to the study of civil society activities within authoritarian contexts. It illustrates that even within such states, a potential for change exists, as does a space for civil society to perform its functions. By scrutinizing one of the activities undertaken by CSOs— namely development programs—to navigate the complexities of civic participation in an authoritarian regime, this study offers insights into the adaptive strategies employed by civil society actors. It reveals that in circumstances in which CSOs find it challenging to directly confront or collaborate with the state due to bureaucratic hurdles and a pervasive atmosphere of distrust, they often opt for an approach of assisting the state in areas in which the state faces limitations. This strategic maneuvering not only allows these organizations to survive under repressive conditions, but also carves out space for potential resistance functions. In essence, this finding demonstrates that the relationship between the state and civil society in authoritarian contexts cannot be conceptualized merely in terms of an assistance or resistance dichotomy. Rather, as the study shows, development programs can blur this dichotomy, serving as a space where assisting the state can lead to potential resistance against the state's hegemony.

9.2.2 Theoretical contributions

This study has made several theoretical contributions.

First, it has shed light on the intricate relationship between meaning-making and civil society. By examining how individuals interpret and engage with civic activities, the study expands our understanding of civil society functions, illuminating Fine's (2014) thesis regarding the connection between tiny publics and civil society. This is accomplished by analyzing the shared frames and narratives within these small groups, which establishes a compelling link between group culture and sustained civic engagement.

Second, the study contributes to the scholarship on civil society by offering insights into how civil society is able to exist in less formal and more flexible forms, particularly in authoritarian contexts. It demonstrates that civil society can extend beyond traditional organizations or sectors, taking on fluid and indirect shapes. By exploring its presence in cultural and historical foundations, the research highlights the importance of understanding civil society as a function or "logic of action," as suggested by Wischermann (2005). This perspective has implications for future research, such as considering civil society's functions in the digital sphere, including the internet. This resonates with previous research on youth political engagement in Africa (see Oinas et al., 2018; Laine et al., 2018; Y. Mai & Laine, 2016), which emphasized the potential of the media and the blogosphere in fostering civil society's public sphere function, even under restrictive conditions.

Finally, the study offers theoretical contributions to social movement scholarship, particularly in contexts marked by contingent authoritarianism. It introduces a way of envisioning politics at the level of subjective experience, emphasizing that civic engagement should be conceived as going beyond formal processes such as voting or protest (see also Jabberi & Laine, 2015; Navne & Skovdal, 2021). The study encourages us to explore how individuals make sense of society, their roles within it, and their engagement in social and political debates across various levels. This conceptual shift allows for a more nuanced understanding of democratization processes and underscores the subversive potential of "strategic knowledge." This form of resistance and political engagement can be subtle, hidden within everyday activities, and not necessarily coordinated or violent, but rather aimed at peaceful change and transformation.

9.3 Final reflections

As stated in Chapter 1, the inspiration for this study came from my experience of participating in a development program long before the idea for this dissertation took shape. In this program, I was deeply moved by the vulnerability displayed by young activists as they openly shared their personal struggles with activism and reaffirmed their commitment to the cause. Thus, when the dispute between the trainer and two young participants erupted, I was just as shocked as the other participants in this space. The incident was unexpected

and unsettling, causing me to question the perceived safety and harmony of the space we had created. It was a moment of disillusionment that left a lasting impact.

But the story of that event did not end there. A few hours after this dispute, the program organizers, who were not present during the incident, became aware of what had transpired. They took swift action. Despite the late hour and the closure of the hotel's conference room, they gathered us participants in an empty area of the hotel. Sitting on the floor in a circle, we reflected on the incident, and the organizers offered heartfelt apologies. They asked if any of us had felt disrespected at any point during the program. It was a lengthy and emotionally-charged discussion that allowed us to voice our concerns, feel heard, and begin the process of healing. The organizers concluded the discussion by assuring us that they would take our feedback seriously in order to ensure a safe and respectful environment in future participatory events. I left that event deeply impressed by their crisis management approach and with a renewed sense of hope.

Throughout my research journey, this dual sense of skepticism and hope has been my constant companion. The skeptic in me, aligning somewhat with the views of post-development scholars, acknowledges that certain aspects of participatory development can perpetuate "symbolic violence," as exemplified by the incident I witnessed. At the same time, the optimist in me draws inspiration from the unwavering commitment of young people to the development process, and their shared determination to improve Vietnamese society.

Whether these aspirations can be fully realized in the near future remains uncertain. Through this study, I hope to have provided a vivid portrayal of youth participation in Vietnamese development. What I aim to convey is that despite its challenges and shortcomings, there is undoubted potential and hope in participatory development. In this process, the contribution of youth must be acknowledged. Young people in this authoritarian society are far from passive: they are active, inspirational facilitators who drive the development process forward. In essence, this study hopes to shed light on the dynamic role that youth play in shaping the trajectory of development. It emphasizes that even within the constraints of an authoritarian context, youth can be the driving force behind progressive change and societal advancement. And while our nation's history may be marked by struggles, loss, and bloodshed, the future holds great promise for progress and positive change.

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Appendix 1. List of development programs

Program	Organizer	Topic
Program 1	NGO	Sustainable development, networking
Program 2	Nonprofit firm	Integrity and transparency in work and daily life
Program 3	Citizen network	Sustainable development, green living
Program 4	NGO	Critical thinking, multicultural diversity
Program 5	NGO	Communication, leadership, problem-solving skills
Program 6	Citizen network	Critical thinking, human rights, free speech
Program 7	Citizen network	Sustainable development, fundraising skills
Program 8	Nonprofit firm	Connection with the self, society, and nature
Program 9	Nonprofit firm	Gender and sexuality equality, diversity
Program 10	NGO	Leadership, problem-solving skills
Program 11	NGO	Community development, fundraising skills

Appendix 2. Consent form

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Yên Mai, a doctoral candidate from the Sociology Department at Uppsala University (Sweden). The results will be contributed to a doctoral dissertation.

The purpose of this research project is to understand the motivations underlying participation in NGO-implemented training programs. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because of your involvement in said programs.

Procedures and Confidentiality

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer a set of questions regarding your background, experiences and motivations to participate in NGO-implemented training programs. The interview will take place online or at the location of your choosing.

The interview will be recorded for transcription purposes. In accordance with the European General Data Protection Law (GDPR), the recording tape and your personal data will be classified and used solely for the research.

Potential Risks and Benefits

This study involves minimal risks to you. Participation in this study will give you a chance to reflect on your motivations and experiences with NGO programs and with development activities.

Participation and Withdrawal

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

Identification of Investigators

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact the principal investigator, Yên Mai at (+84)902 92 1561 or yen.mai@soc.uu.se.

I understand the procedures and conditions of my participation described above. I agree to participate in this study.

Name:_____
Signature:_____
Date:_____
Name of Researcher: YÊN MAI
Signature of Researcher:_____

Appendix 3. Interview guide

Expectation for the research:

First of all, why do you want to participate in this research? What about this topic that makes you find interesting?

Do you have any expectations for this research?

Background information:

Which development programs have you been in? Which groups/organizations run these programs?

When participating in the training program, were you still a student or were you already done with school? What is your field of study?

Does your current job/study relate to the skills you learned from the training in development programs?

Motivation for participation:

How did you know about this program?

Why did you decide to participate in this development program?

If you have participated in more than one development programs, what motivate you to continue your participation?

Barriers and facilitators of participation:

Does your family know that you are participating in the training? If so, what does your family say about your participation in the program?

Were there any obstacles that made it difficult for you to participate in the training program? If so, what were they? How did you overcome them? Did you receive any assistance in resolving the difficulty?

Before participating in the program, did you know anyone who had participated in previous programs? If so, what was your impression of the program based on their stories?

Do you have any friends or acquaintances who also participated in the training program with you?

Entry to participation:

What did the application process to this program look like? How did you convey your interest to the program organizers and recruiters?

Did this development program have an interview round? If so, what were you asked during the interview? Who conducted the interview? What do you think about the interview questions?

What are your expectations for the program after going through the application process?

In your opinion, what strengths make you a good fit for the program?

Experiences and emotions about participation:

What are the main activities of the program? What kind of skills does the development program teach you? Can you describe a typical day in the program?

Can you give an example of something that impressed you in the program or a memorable experience from the program?

Were there any moments when you found participating in the program challenging? Or were there times when you felt that your efforts were worthwhile? What happened then?

What was the most interesting thing about the program? What about things that were less interesting or unnecessary?

What do you think about the way the staff of the program treated you? What made you satisfied or dissatisfied in your interaction with the staff?

After participation:

What do you think about the program after participating? Is there anything that makes you satisfied or dissatisfied? Did you feel that your expectations were met?

Looking back on your experience, do you have any regrets? If you could experience the program again, would you do anything differently?

If you could give program staff suggestions on how to improve the development program in the future, what would they be, and why?

What do you think about the knowledge or skills you learn from the program? Is there anything that you learn from development programs that influence your life afterwards? If yes, what is it?

Where do you see yourself in 5-10 years? What will you be doing? What are your career ambitions?

If you have your own development initiative, can you tell me a little bit about your group? What is the aim of your development initiative? What kind of activities that your group do and why so?

Concluding question:

Is there anything else you would like to discuss that hasn't been mentioned in the interview?

Appendix 4. A memo's snapshot

July 17, 2021. Sài Gòn, my home city, is experiencing what some refers to as Vietnam's fourth wave of COVID. Given the first three being tamed rather swiftly, this new wave (with the new virus variant) comes the closest in comparison to the first wave that hit Europe a year ago. A dense city with a recorded population comparable to that of Sweden, Sài Gòn's underfunded healthcare system is struggling with overflown quarantine sites and hospitals. Population density renders social distancing and contact tracing rather obsolete, especially when it is no longer possible to identify the sources of the spread.

As the number of cases increases by the thousand on a daily basis, I experience a rather odd sensation of waking up every day to news and photos of self-organizing charity groups popping up all over the corners of Sài Gòn in my Facebook newsfeed. I have found myself, many times thinking: if this is not civil society I don't know what is. None of those groups or activities I've encountered have to do with an official organization. Mostly they are the products of citizens who live in the heart (and heat) of the pandemic wanting to extend an arm to help the less fortunate. Fund were raised both domestically and abroad. People got together to cook and distribute food. The target groups varied: it began with people with low-income, then extended to those locked in quarantine, children and the elderly. It seems as if the worse the crisis becomes, the more creative ways one could imagine of to address societal needs.

There's also a superglue, Putnam's bridging social capital kind of thing that takes place between people from different cities. The running slogan is: Sài Gòn falls sick, and [another city] rushed to help. Hence, we have vegetables and fruits from Đà Lạt, medical students and staff from Hải Phòng rushing to help.

July 20, 2021. A relative asked if I could contribute to his project: feeding children and the elderly in quarantine hospitals, which have become overflowed due to the rising number of cases this summer. The kitchen there could not afford to feed everyone, hence small groups (with no legal standing) rushed out to help through fundraising and food distribution. Within hours of his announcement, he managed to raise enough to feed 200 people in 10 days. Half of the raised fund came from people living abroad.

As an expat myself, social media makes me feel like a part of Sài Gòn even when I'm not physically there. In a sense, I guess one should not limit the reach of civil society within geographical national boundaries. In fact, the fund raised by Vietnamese people who lived abroad to help Vietnam fight the pandemic, up to June 2021, has reached 5.3 billion VND. Worth noting is that this number is recorded via official state channels, meaning it precludes the flow of funding via non-official channels, towards groups and activities organized by average citizens.

July 28, 2021. My parents' house is located in a low-income neighborhood in the outskirt of Sài Gòn, where most of the neighbors are either retirees or factory workers. This fact suddenly dawned on me as I learned that my parents had just received a donation of 5 kilograms of rice, a bundle of morning glory, and a dozen eggs this morning. The donor? Unclear. As community support is pouring in from everywhere to heal a sick Sài Gòn, philanthropists and charity groups are continuously reaching out to the poor, the unemployed and those with low or unstable incomes, bringing them food and produce to sustain during the lockdown. Each household in my parents' neighborhood received the same donation, which, to my parents, was timely. They were low on rice, as my mom told me the day before, and while money was not an issue, finding a way to buy and collect the food during lockdowns remained a challenge as it has been for most Saigonnese. Thankfully, the donation was delivered straight to their door, hence to them this was a pleasant surprise. To me who is thousand miles away and can't help worrying about their well-being, the donation feels like a heartwarming reassurance that my parents will not be left stranded in this pandemic. That there are kind strangers who coordinate to take care of them, as fellow citizens care of one another, irrespective of who one is on either end.

On the same day, a well-known figure of the Vietnamese NGO/NPO scene posted an announcement to raise fund for an ongoing NGO project that provides tools and equipment for hospitals, such as ventilators, blood pressure monitors, electric syringe pumps, droplet shields, N95 masks, medical gloves, and test kits. As the NGO in question makes the list of donors and the amount of donation public (an effort to achieve transparency?), I have a chance to take a glimpse of the list of contributions. My only conclusion is, people are generous and there is overwhelming support both domestically and from abroad. And this is only one NGO, among many nonprofit organizations and groups, who currently work to tackle COVID-related problems.

July 29, 2021. Today it dawns on me that perhaps it's not really the summer vacation atmosphere that distracts me, but how close I feel to Vietnam's COVID fourth wave. At first looking at the situation with a glass half full attitude, I thought seeing people rushing out to help each other, forming what I believe is the self-organizing dimension of civil society, is so timely with the chapter I've been writing. Taking on the role of a researcher I feel the need to record everything: what kind of charity groups are running, what kind of services and resources are they offering, if and how do they coordinate with state authorities, etc. It also helps that I don't really need to search for it; rather the data just comes right at me every time I open Facebook, or read the news, or talk to my family and friends in Sài Gòn. The NGO/NPO forum is flourishing, and it seems that people are making the best lemonade out of the pile of bitter lemons suddenly thrown at them. I see people voicing against state authorities when some decisions were made hastily and thoughtlessly. Be it the whole mockery debate about whether bread is considered essential food, whether period pads and diapers are considered essential items, whether shippers should be punished for delivering refrigerators, or whether it's fair that a young healthy woman with family ties to state officials get the vaccines before the old and the ills: I see the other dimension of civil society that Young (2000) outlines – the public sphere – thriving, criticizing, and pressuring the state. Stumbling across these news articles, I often think to myself – who says Vietnam's civil society is underdeveloped? It's so damn strong, even when confined within authoritarian state apparatus. But one needs to have a certain insider understanding to recognize these dynamics.

So yes, as a researcher, this is an opportunity for observations. Naturally I try to stay alert to current events, to remember, to draw connection between what I've witnessed and the theoretical debates I've been catching up on. Today, however, I realize this has become too draining for me, emotionally. Like it or not, I'm still emotionally attached to this field. My entire family is there, home quarantined amidst this chaos. Last week my phone call with mom was cut short because she received an immediate notice to be tested for the virus. She said, in a half-joking-half-seriously tone before hanging up: "maybe tomorrow when you call I'll already be in quarantine camp." The next day I called, she didn't pick up, and in the few minutes before she saw my missed call and rang my back, I felt my heart sinking and my head exploding with possibilities. I was scared out of my mind, not only because there's a possibility my parents had contracted the virus, but also because what's happening next would be entirely out of anyone's control. With hospitals and quarantine sites overflown, the conditions of living for those trapped within these areas, be it doctors or patients, are less than ideal. In fact, many charity groups and NGOs are continuously fundraising to provide hospital equipment and food for these sites. Mom said, in one of the daily phone calls, it feels as if we return to one of those war times, with evening curfews and food shortage, with empty streets and closed border. She spoke of our old relatives planning for their death and the aftermath. It's already clear if one dies during this current wave, the only option is cremation.

I've always known my mom doesn't want that. Long before the pandemic, she had told me she would want to be buried next to her mother, in the paddy field of her childhood. The idea of burning one's body scares her. Then she said, in one of those phone calls, it was fortunate that my grandmother had passed away shortly before Corona, or else she would not have had a proper funeral.

I didn't expect myself to become so morose writing this memo. At first, I was just thinking of jotting down the emotion aspect of this job. I was just thinking, the emotion work involved in doing research is not limited to the interviewing process, or to the data analysis stage, but it's spilling over everywhere especially if one conducts research on a sensitive topic. But as it seems it doesn't even take a sensitive topic to challenge one emotionally. Sometimes it's just the site. Witnessing a site in crisis, and understanding that confined within that site is not simply statistics but actual human fear and wishes, dreams and suffering, begs you to wonder whether what you are doing really makes any difference. I could use my understanding of the Vietnamese NPO/NGO scene to identify which charity and development organizations I should donate to, and that is the only piece of knowledge that seems remotely helpful in this situation. Beyond that, I have pages of grand theories in my head and absolutely no practical applications for them when all hells break loose.

This crisis does help me see things clearer, though. Not just with a rational eye. I have come to appreciate the people who have been running around to support the poor, the olds, and the ills so much more. I have come to see so much solidarity, generosity, and dedication of people from all walks of life and professions. Perhaps it's because we don't have a strong welfare structure, so we have to form that informal welfare support by ourselves.