

HIERARCHIES, NETWORKS, AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN VIET NAM

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how decentralization supports the policy commitments made by the Viet Nam government to increase citizen participation and accountability, and to reduce poverty and regional disparities. The article includes a review of basic definitions of decentralization that places the case study in an international context, a brief look at the unique, historical context in Viet Nam and its relevance, a brief comparison of policy intention vs implementation reality, a preliminary analysis of the impact of decentralization during the period, and a concluding section on remaining challenges. The article examines the interplay between hierarchical and network organizations in Viet Nam, as stakeholders seek to better define the respective roles and authority of the party, and other public, quasi-public and private organizations at different territorial levels.

INTRODUCTION²

The success of East Asia at promoting economic growth and poverty reduction is well known. Since the early 1980s, sustained real growth of 6 per cent per capita has reduced poverty rates by half. But not all areas are equally well connected with newly expanding economies or regions, nor are basic public services accessible by all. As economic growth progressed, pockets of poverty were often accompanied by growing inequalities, both across the region and within countries, between urban and rural areas, uplands and lowlands, and rain-fed and irrigated farming land.

Across Asia Pacific, and most marked in East Asia, one common feature of the approach of governments keen to foster growth alongside poverty reduction has been to assign state powers, responsibilities and resources to subnational authorities and to private and civil society agencies under various forms of contract, partnership or principal-agent relationship. Decentralization has become the catch-all term for what proves in practice to be a highly differentiated, and differently motivated, range of practices and institutional forms. Although many East Asian countries are moving toward a greater role for local government, the region's experience defies any single application of the concept 'decentralization'. At the same time, although central-local relations are being reconfigured in many different ways, it is quite clear that sub national areas are now regarded as important for effective governance. To this scale of governance is pinned the hopes of better service delivery and private enterprise promotion, and increasingly the sub national scale is seen as the site for the exercise of new forms of participation and citizenship emerging throughout the region.

The case of decentralization in Viet Nam fits the regional pattern of policy intention tempered by eclectic experience. This article will explore how decentralization supports the policy commitment to increase public access to government affairs; brings about

greater responsiveness and accountability of locally elected leaders; better matches resources for public services with locally defined, and often highly specific, needs. At the impact level, the article will investigate how decentralization is associated, positively or negatively, with achievement of commitments made by the government to poverty reduction and sustainable economic growth. It will also examine the interplay between hierarchical and network organizations in Viet Nam, as stakeholders seek to better define the respective roles and authority of the party, and other public, quasi-public and private organizations at different territorial levels.

The relationships between political participation, democracy and decentralization have of course been debated since John Stuart Mill and are still not entirely clear (Breton 1998; Litvack 1998). But the intention here is to identify problems, challenges and innovative experiences in ways that contribute to building fair societies and democratized public policies that work for poverty reduction within the framework of fiscal discipline.

DECENTRALIZATION: SOME DEFINITIONS

Decentralization means transferring fiscal, political and administrative functions from higher to lower levels of government, and can take on different forms depending on the degree to which authority is assigned to lower levels. Deconcentration involves central agencies assigning certain functions to lower level branch offices. Delegation takes place when authority for defined tasks is transferred from one public agency to another agency or service provider that is accountable to the former, but not wholly controlled by it. Devolution takes place when authority for defined tasks is transferred from a public agency to autonomous, local level units of elected leadership holding corporate status, granted, for example, under legislation.³ Mark Turner, in a volume dedicated to decentralization in Asia Pacific, provides a useful framework to understand both the territorial and functional dimensions of decentralization, as well as its common public and private sector manifestations – which serves to remind that fiscal decentralization is merely one manifestation of an ongoing restructuring of state-market relations throughout the region in the past 30 years (Table 1).

Decentralization is not necessarily a spatial concept requiring reassignment of service delivery responsibilities from higher to lower orders of administration, though this often is the case. Cohen and Peterson (1995: 61) emphasize that it is rather the broadening of institutions producing and providing needed goods and services at efficient cost, wherever they are located and whether they are public, quasi-public or private. Indeed, the fact that decentralization often manifests in a plurality of agencies, public and private, operating at different scales of jurisdiction providing overlapping services gives rise to debate about the consequences for efficiency, through competition, and accountability, through unclear, overlapping mandates.

Table 1: Forms of Decentralization

Nature of Delegation	Basis for delegation	
	Territorial	Functional
Within formal political structures	Devolution -political decentralization, local government, democratic decentralization	Interest group representation
Within public administrative or parastatal structures	Deconcentration (or delegation) -administrative decentralization, field administration, indirect rule	Establishment of parastatals or quangos
From state sector to private sector	Privatization of devolved functions (deregulation, contracting out, voucher schemes, etc.)	Privatization of national functions (divestiture, deregulation, economic liberalization)

Source: Turner 1999:5.

A related element is that sub-national economies are increasing their linkages with production networks in other countries, both across borders and further afield. Such links tend to be market driven, and can help to motivate an increasing role for local governments in investment promotion and the streamlining of business regulation (Xiangming Chen, 2003).

It is fallacious to presume decentralization indicates an inexorable policy progression from 'more' to 'less' centralized governance structures, but by conventional measures, decentralization is in its early stages of adoption in East Asia, despite common commitment in most countries to intensify it and the fact that various 'decentralizations' are underway.

Historical context to decentralization in Viet Nam⁴

Viet Nam's experience with decentralization since 1991 is part of a broader transformation process. Governance institutions have been influenced by many external factors, including 1000 years of Chinese rule ending in the 10th century and a tributary relationship with China for the next 900 years. A continuing challenge has been the difficulties of successive governments in ruling a narrow, 1500 km long piece of land, and warding off both internal and external challenges to this rule. The French colonial administration, starting in the late 19th century, failed to address the long-standing issue of concentration of landholdings in the hands of a small elite, and offended many by dividing the country into three parts. A brief period of Japanese occupation during World War II was followed by the formation of a provisional government of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam, a nationalist-communist group led by Ho Chi Minh, and a rival government supported by France and the US, the Associated States of Viet

Nam. Nine years of struggle between the French and the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam followed, resulting in the end of French colonial rule in 1954.

The ceasefire agreement established a provisional demarcation line 5 km wide at the 17th parallel, and provided for unified national elections in 1956. However, a provisional government in the south building on the Associated States of Viet Nam regime was promised continuing support by the US in 1955 and became the Republic of Viet Nam. The Democratic Republic of Viet Nam initially tried to address this challenge through political means, but shifted to escalating armed struggle by the late 1950s. Direct US military support to the Republic of Viet Nam began in 1961, and escalated until reaching a peak strength of 525 000 US troops in 1968. Following a successful communist offensive that year, the US came under intense domestic pressure to reduce its military support. A peace agreement was signed in 1973; the US withdrew and a unified, communist-led government took control over all of Viet Nam in 1975.

Viet Nam paid a steep price for victory, including an estimated 1.5 million deaths and the loss of another one million citizens who fled the country after the war, including many skilled professionals and technicians. For this and other reasons the unified government did not initially succeed in achieving its goals for economic development and poverty reduction.

To address these problems the Fifth National Party Congress held in 1982 sanctioned privately held small enterprises and the 'family economy' for agriculture. The latter gave greater scope for individual initiative, and began to lead to increased agricultural production. Building on this a major economic reform process known as the doi moi renovation was launched in 1986. The importance of the reforms was signaled in 1987 when 12 ministers were dismissed, including the ministers of national defense and interior, and several ministries were merged or restructured, allowing the government to effectively pursue macroeconomic stabilization, price liberalization and deregulation. Some political prisoners were released and a larger number of candidates than in the past were allowed to stand for seats in the National Assembly. In 1990 18 000 officials were dismissed or charged with corruption. The 1992 constitution recognized individuals' ownership rights and legitimized the private sector. These changes took place in response to severe economic problems, including famine in the north in 1988, limited foreign trade and major deficit spending by the government with resultant hyperinflation. From 1987 to 1995 the number of ministries was reduced from 28 to 22. In 1989 a new local government law reduced the number of provincial administrative offices from 40–50 per province to 17–22. There were corresponding reductions at the district and commune levels, with a view to streamlining the government apparatus.

Aid also fell dramatically. Aid from the former Soviet Union alone had been 10 per cent of GDP (mainly financing heavy infrastructure), but by the late 1980s total aid to Viet Nam was less than 1 per cent of GDP (Dollar and Pritchett 1998:105–108). Yet the limited aid received was put to good use, for example, to hold meetings with other reformers in Southeast Asia to improve understanding on the workings of a market economy, trade liberalization and foreign investment; consultations between the private sector and government officials; and rural workshops to discuss how donors could best help with poverty reduction. The non-Soviet aid also gave greater emphasis to social welfare related areas.

The results of the doi moi reforms were impressive. In comparison to the 40 poorest countries in the world in 1986, Viet Nam had the highest economic growth rate over the next decade, while maintaining or improving human development performance. GDP grew at an average annual rate of 8 per cent during the 1990s, with household per capita consumption growing at 7.2 per cent. Real income rose by 39 per cent in real terms between 1992 and 1998, while the poverty rate was cut by more than one third during these six years. These changes meant that Viet Nam was well positioned to benefit from the windfall market opportunities of the Asian region in the early 1990s, and became attractive to foreign investors just as the US embargo was lifted in late 1993. These events led to a major infusion of foreign investment and international donor commitments, resulting in economic growth of almost 9 per cent per year during 1993-1997. In addition to capital investment, these international interests brought much needed management and technical expertise to Vietnamese ventures and public sector projects (Fforde 2001).

Decentralization in Viet Nam: push and pull in center-local relations

Decentralization reforms have unfolded opportunistically in fits and starts, and not as part of a structured, reform program as in some developed countries. Woven into this opportunistic pattern, one finds interplay between hierarchical and network organizations, as stakeholders seek to better define the respective roles and authority of the party, and other public, quasi-public and private organizations at different territorial levels.

A major initial challenge of the Communist Party of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam (CPV) founded in 1930 was to establish a unified force first for independence from colonial rule, and then for victory in the American War. Yet given the realities of guerilla warfare, this meant giving considerable discretion to local units, linked broadly to nationalistic and ideological goals. This pattern was a form of organizational network, composed of many different groups and leaders linked into networks through various structural, personal and ideological ties. Such a form of organization has been described as a segmented, polycentric ideologically integrated network (SPIN) by Gerlach (1987: 115). The form has similarities to the policy networks described by Klijn (1997: 28-33), which take a pragmatic approach to advancing an array of public and private interests of network members. A difference from the normal usage is that the Viet Nam networks discussed here are dominated by state and party members, and focus mainly on policy implementation rather than design and approval.

Following reunification in 1975 and despite formal CPV control and the appearance of a hierarchical, Stalinist structure, this organizational network structure with bottom-up discretion continued in important respects, such as in the growth of nascent markets. In the late 1970s for example there was increasing buying and selling of products as farmers began leaving their cooperatives. State enterprises were permitted to trade freely starting in 1981.

At first glance this movement toward opening up markets could seem a modern application of the tradition of local autonomy (There is a Vietnamese saying: “The rule of the emperor stops at the village gate”). To an extent, people were simply responding to the rigidities of an economic model that was not working in the best way it could. This went on without any formal decree or other indication that the Party sanctioned the ‘discretion’ embodied in ‘fence-breaking’ activities.⁵

However, on closer inspection, it seems likely that the CPV was allowing its organizational network structure to help prevent any erosion of its authority as market forces gained an increasing role in the economy. Thaveeporn (1996) points out that growing acceptance of market forces was linked to the slogan 'rule by law', meaning that the CPV and the state agreed to be less hostile to 'outsiders' such as private businesspersons and foreigners, thus helping to facilitate the robust, export oriented growth evident since 1992. In addition part of the doi moi reform policy and institutional package applied has been to assign state powers, responsibilities and resources first from the CPV to the government, and then from the central government to subnational authorities and to private and civil society agencies under various forms of contract, partnership or principal-agent relationship.

Viet Nam during this period was an authoritarian, unitary state, yet also adopted elements of a collaborative strategy (cf. Roberts, 2000) using organizational networks responsive to long-standing traditions of peasant innovation and resistance. The state carried out this dual role (1) by selectively delegating fiscal, administrative, political powers [including discretions – the most important powers in Viet Nam] and (2) by changing notions of the public vs the private sector.

On the first point, there has not been any consistent trend. During the early 1980s, with growing provincial councils and committees in some areas (provincial 'emperors' were reported 'dealing at the borders', handing out logging concessions, black marketeering, etc.), decentralization was introduced in the form of greater political autonomy in return for greater fiscal centralization, whereby the tax links with the center were reinforced. The market-driven, cross-border impetus for a greater local government role in business promotion is not unlike processes seen in other border areas in the region, such as along the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Cambodia borders with Thailand.

During the 1980s also the relative powers of commune and district vs. the province shifted greatly, but unevenly; networks of elites and their supporters continuously reconfigured themselves to gain maximum (often self-serving) benefit from a dynamic environment. All this took place against well-established traditions of fiscal federalism and reducing inter-provincial inequalities, although the latter was never the primary rationale.

On the second point, the shifts in notions of 'public' vs 'private', one sees increasing appropriation by 'local' powers (party, military and administrative) by private means of what was formerly considered the 'public' realm. Again, this is a pattern seen in other countries (Cf. Table 1, last row). For example health services are increasingly delivered by a public 'shell' filled by 'private service providers'. Much of state-owned enterprise (SOE) reform has also proceeded as a result of internal equitization (privatization), whereby the regime allows incumbent managers to take stakes in the new ownership structure. This provided new ways of winning over party elites and networks for reforms under the umbrella of party unity.⁶

These evolving patterns help to explain the nature of Viet Nam's local administration system today. On a formal level the system is divided geographically into three levels: provinces (about 60 units including three municipalities), districts (about 600 units) and communes (about 10,400 units). At all three levels there is a representative body (the people's council) and an executive body (the people's committee). The people's

committees and people's councils often have overlapping membership. The local people elect the people's council, the candidates for which are usually nominated by the Viet Nam Fatherland Front⁷ and approved by the higher-level administrative unit. The people's council selects the chairman and vice-chairman of the people's committee.

While ultimate legislative authority rests with the National Assembly, provincial and local departments have a dual reporting responsibility to the local people's committee and assembly, and to the central line ministries. Responsibility for planning, implementation and operation of facilities is split, although the implications of this vary from province to province, depending on the importance of the province. Large urban centers under central administration and a good number of provincial governments enjoy a high degree of autonomy. For example they are authorized to license foreign investments up to a certain value, approve certain local socioeconomic development plans and formulate their own budgets.

The local administration, the people's committee, has budgetary and administrative responsibilities. They are charged with maintaining law, order and security within their jurisdictions; forwarding budget requests to higher levels; reviewing and approving plans for socioeconomic development within their delegated authority; executing the budget; and undertaking duties as assigned by higher levels of administrations.

Local authorities can only carry out administrative functions that are assigned by national legislation. In accordance with the provisions made in the 1992 constitution, a number of laws provide the basic framework for local government organization. The Budget Law that was passed in 1996 then formalized the fiscal arrangements between different levels of government, assigning important budget responsibilities to local authorities, especially at the provincial level. As a result, the people's committee has now both budgetary and administrative responsibilities.

Under the 1992 constitution the popularly elected people's council is 'the local organ of the State power'. But in practice there are some obstacles to the council carrying out this function. While the tasks of people's councils are increasing both in terms of importance and volume of work, they often have inadequate resources, skills and infrastructure. Meeting only twice a year, often after the National Assembly's semi-annual sessions, their contribution to policy discussions at the national level is limited.

Prior to 1992 the main decision-making bodies were not government agencies, but those of the party. For example a branch of the CPV Central Committee managed government personnel matters. At the local level, local party committees and mass organizations were the major players in implementing government and party policies. People's councils and people's committees could not make decisions independent of party committees. At the commune level the two key decision makers were the secretary of the commune party committee and the chairman of the cooperative. The 1992 constitution sets out functions that are the responsibility of the National Assembly, the judiciary and government. Although the party continues to guide policymaking and continues to maintain party organizations within government agencies, many functions once carried out by party organizations are now carried out by the government. For example the Government Committee on Personnel⁸ (GCOP) was set up in 1994 to manage government personnel and organization, including issues of the merger or

abolition of agencies, and the distribution of accountability among provincial, district and commune levels.

Although there was less real transfer happening from rule by party to rule by government than appeared from policy statements, there was still some movement from collective to individual leadership. Authority relations became more based on rule by law and less on rule by decree. Not surprisingly many practical problems emerged in implementing the new distribution of tasks under the new constitution and the 1992 Law on the Organization of the Government. There were cases where there was no clear division of tasks between the prime minister and other ministers. For some matters the result was the prime minister taking over tasks from his deputies and ministers.

As part of this shift local government agencies also became more important. Previously local party committees and mass organizations played the dominant role in mobilizing local people to implement policies. People's councils and people's committees did not have decision making and executive power independent of party committees. The 1989 law on local administration was the first attempt to clarify the roles of different local government units. However it did not make clear whether people's council's were state agencies or local representative bodies, and whether people's committees were agents to implement the decisions of people's councils, or to implement decisions of higher levels of the state. The result was that local specialist units responsible for education, health, and other services were supervised at various times by both, thus creating confusion and blurring accountability (Thaveeporn 2002).

This notion of accountability has been called 'double subordination', or reporting to different and sometimes inconsistent authorities:

1. Under the 1994 revised law on local administration, people's councils at all levels are supervised and guided both by the Standing Committee of the National Assembly and the government;
2. People's committees are held accountable to both the people's council at the same level as well as to the next highest executive body (either a people's committee or the government);
3. Some central ministries have branch offices at the local level, which are administratively placed under the people's committees but which functionally report directly to their higher authorities, leading to some ambiguity regarding the accountability of officials.

Although various laws and decisions have helped to clarify respective roles and authority, in particular the 1996 Ordinance on the Specific Tasks and Powers of the People's Councils and People's Committees at each level, there are continuing coordination problems between central and local government, both due to unclear laws and a continuation of the tradition of local autonomy discussed earlier. Many central government decisions were not elaborated as guidelines by local governments, and thus could not be implemented. Local governments issued regulations contradicting those of central government. Local governments launched and expanded SOEs, managed natural resources and undertook imports and exports often contrary to central policy. Both the National Assembly and local authority have overlapping roles in deciding on revenue collection and expenditure and on personnel issues. The latter has been clarified

somewhat in a 2001 revised law that delegates more powers to localities in areas of budget and organization of personnel. Yet the unclear demarcation of the mandates of various agencies continues to leave room for discretion in interpretation of responsibility and accountability where there are overlapping functions and duties (ADB 2002).

Take for example the area of investment approvals. The difficult transitions discussed above (party to state, rule by decrees to rule by law and others) create an unclear authority situation that is filled by many state organizations, including local ones. In such an environment the ability to make key decisions becomes crucial. In the case of foreign investment the initial approval needed comes from the central government, but the bulk of approvals come from local governments, which continue to control their respective local economies.

Political and administrative practice may also be more decentralized in some provinces than suggested by the formal lines of command. As in all political systems autonomy at the local level depends to an extent on the standing and authority of local leaders. Moreover although civil servants are ‘vertically’ responsible to central government ministries, they are ‘horizontally’ responsible to the local authorities, with whom they are in daily contact.

It should be emphasized that although many aspects of administration were taking place at the local level, this did not necessarily mean a reduction of power by the party. A small number of party members continued to wield great power on all big issues, at all levels of government, and they were only loosely accountable through internal controls. Still there were signs of increased rule by law, separation of administrative functions in some areas, clearer legal documents and a growing consensus that consistency in policy constitutes good practice. Although dedicated reformers push for this to be expanded, there is and will continue to be resistance, since it goes against the fundamental tenet of ‘democratic centralism’ which vests supreme, unquestionable leadership in the party.⁹ Furthermore some provincial authorities are unenthusiastic about greater autonomy, seeing it to their disadvantage where they lack the capacity required to undertake development tasks. With the increasing reliance being placed on aid, the leadership of some localities also supports the need for central supply of counterpart funds (McCarty 2002).

Yen Bai province shows the results possible from local government reforms. Following the merger of three ministries to form the Ministry of Agricultural and Rural Development in 1995, the Yen Bai People’s Committee authorized a corresponding merger of the three corresponding provincial departments, leading to a reduction in staff from 85 to 61, and of administrative units from 16 to 10. The new department defined the roles of various bodies, including how the party worked with the department, the department with professional agencies and enterprises, and the department with people’s committees and party committees at the provincial and district levels. It then re-examined these roles on a regular basis and made necessary adjustments. The provincial department took on more activities, including designing comprehensive plans on settlement, new economic zones, infrastructure construction, expansion of plantation sector, environmental protection and training. Total agricultural production increased in the province by 15 per cent over 1995–2000. There were also reforms carried out on

other aspects of public administration in Yen Bai, including procedural reform and reduction in organizational units to reduce overlap.

In another example Tuyen Quang province determined that it had too many old cadres and too few young ones. To address these issues in 2000, the province started reducing employees. It took 5 per cent of the province's saving fund for a 'fund for employment resolutions'. This fund compensated early retirees; others were reassigned. From mid-September 2000 to mid-January 2001, 85 of 587 staff members were retired.

Ho Chi Minh City has been a leader in subnational reforms in many areas, for example, taking on the one-stop-shop system in three districts in 1995 to streamline business regulations. Widened to five administrative offices the next year, it is now available on an interactive website. The city also standardized forms across the different departments that investors need to deal with (Thaveporn 2002: 47-51 and Cohen 2001). These reforms are perhaps the most full-blown example in Viet Nam of the process discussed above where local authorities are pushed by market-driven forces to increase their role in investment promotion and related areas, to facilitate links with production networks in other countries.

Looking at the patterns of reform, including overlapping functions, double subordination, ambiguous decrees and apparent lack of coordination, one may wonder why an authoritarian state has been so slow to move toward greater administrative coherence and control. The overarching reason is the importance of the organizational network of party elites and supporters cutting across all formal administrative levels. As in such networks in other places (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2001: 6-10), the key to success is not administrative prowess, but shaping the flow of communications that can keep people connected, create bridges across different networks and create the perception that the Party has a winning momentum, and that time is on its side. As part of this communication pattern, decrees are only meant to be signals, calling for details to be filled in by party insiders. This helps to maintain the status of party elites and the importance of their personalistic ties, based on the power that comes from privileged access to secret deliberations. Because there is only internal accountability in this power network, there is no guarantee that the theoretical benefits of decentralization outlined above will be realized through such a system.

A second part of the network pattern is that ambiguities help to smooth over conflicting views among party elites, and to preserve an aura of unity.¹⁰ Such a network organizational strategy is well suited for a highly diverse country such as Viet Nam, with diversity exacerbated by the allegiances and legacies of 30 years civil war and the very differently distributed benefits post-1986. The organizational network form responds to this diversity by a constantly shifting push and pull in center-local relations - that is, powers being granted, then being undermined by provincial committees, this then countermanded by Hanoi's edicts and then round again. The network form is also well suited for the fact that there is far less than certain knowledge about how to produce desired changes. The organizational network offers an explicitly experimental approach to policy, drawing on the different ideas of government units and levels in the network, without being overly concerned with administrative coordination and coherence.¹¹ Since this organizational network structure seems to be central feature of governance in Viet Nam, one can expect that the leadership will be cautious in carrying out reforms in this area.

A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF DECENTRALIZATION IMPACTS DURING THE PERIOD

This section will begin to explore how decentralization supports the policy commitments made by the government of Viet Nam to increase citizen participation, accountability and reduction of poverty and regional disparities. It is not possible to fully attribute policy outcomes to decentralization, but at least one can show a sequence of decentralization followed by outcomes, and infer that the decentralization may have had a role. The following will discuss three such outcomes: increased citizen participation, poverty reduction and increased accountability.

Increased citizen participation

Take, for example, the policy commitment of citizen participation. The grassroots democracy decree (GDD)¹² asks local assemblies to consult residents about decisions. The genesis goes back to the May 1997 peasant protests in Thai Binh province, and the November 1997 protests in Dong Nai province. Thai Binh peasants protested against corrupt local officials, punitive tax demands, land disputes, unfair rice price and compulsory labor contributions; Dong Nai peasants protested against the appropriation of church land by corrupt local authorities (Human Rights Watch 1997). Many of the protesters were veterans of the American war. The government's response was to discipline some of the officials involved, and to adopt the GDD, which called for greater transparency, participation and administrative streamlining. Between 1998 and 2001 a number of additional documents were issued to implement grassroots democracy by the government, the Prime Minister and the GCOP.¹³

To implement the GDD, Prime Minister's Directive no. 22/1998 suggested that one or two places be chosen as experimental sites. One successful case reported is in the village of Phu Long where, for example, officials asked villagers where they should build a new electricity pylon and followed their advice. Some believe the reason this case has succeeded is because of the presence of a foreign NGO (Thaveeporn 2002: 44–45).

Another example of increased participation is community-driven environmental regulation. O'Rourke (2001) reports that community pressure reduces pollution and other hazards when the community groups are tightly bonded and well connected to both local and national government, when state agencies can act autonomously, and when firms must respond to external pressures and are in a strong market position. Media pressure and favorable environmental laws also help to overcome problems of double subordination and unclear accountability in enforcing environmental regulations and laws.

Reduction of poverty and regional disparities

As another example linking decentralization and policy, take the policy commitment to poverty reduction. Poverty dropped significantly between 1993 and 1998. The proportion of the population below the total poverty line dropped from 58.1 per cent in 1993 to 37.4 per cent in 1998. The proportion below the food poverty declined from 25 per cent to 15 per cent. However, the gains in poverty reduction are fragile, since many

people who were just below the poverty line in 1993 had just barely crossed above the poverty line by 1998. These near poor could fall back below the poverty line with any downturn. Although poverty has gone down in both rural and urban areas, the incidence of rural poverty (45 per cent) is much higher than urban poverty (15 per cent). Further, the extent of poverty, as measured by the poverty gap index, is much worse in rural areas than in urban areas, and over 90 per cent of Viet Nam's poor live in rural areas. The rural poor are also more vulnerable to shocks caused by natural disasters or ill health. Poverty reduction has occurred in all seven regions of Viet Nam but at different rates. The regions with the worst poverty are the northern uplands (59 per cent), central highlands (52 per cent) and north central coast (48 per cent). The southeast and the Red River delta have proportionately the fewest poor. Inequality has gone up a bit in Viet Nam 1993 and 1998, due to differing growth rates across rural and urban areas (ADB 2001).

What has been the role of decentralization in poverty reduction? One needs to start with the view of most analysts that poverty reduction in the period was largely due to strong economic growth, and the growth was mainly due to the rapid deepening of market mechanisms.¹⁴ Analysts of Viet Nam's policy reforms since 1986 (Fforde and de Vylder 1996; McCarty 2001) find a number of reasons for the rapid, largely successful transition from a planned to a market economy, including the timing and gradualist approach of policy reforms, the fact that central planning had only been partially implemented, the maintenance of political stability, the ability to benefit from being located in a rapidly growing region, and the credibility and advantages of citizens perceiving the reforms as being of domestic origin.

Decentralization through organizational networks had a role in this. For example as liberalization increasingly took hold, the wartime practices of local autonomy helped support local initiatives even when they went against unwise, central decrees. Smuggling of sugar, for example, helped to counteract protective measures intended to shore up an uncompetitive, state owned sugar industry.

Another interesting case is the rapid development of coffee production in the central highlands region. The government encouraged, starting in the early 1990s, people from Mekong delta in the south and the Red River delta in the north to move to the central highlands. The reason was partly to relieve population pressure in the deltas, but also effectively to colonize the highlands. Coffee growing became one of the migrants' main sources of income. Viet Nam was able to become the world's second largest coffee producer by achieving an exceptionally low cost structure. This seems to have come from the way in which output gains were financed. For example, sales of land to immigrants by those in-place (including existing SOEs), pushed resources into the region. Because the windfall proceeds from land sales could largely finance the shift from swidden and forest to intensive coffee production, the net cost of coffee production to regional producers appeared low. However, as local accounting returns to a more normal situation, net costs of production are likely to rise.¹⁵ How important was the role of local authorities to Viet Nam's coffee success? No doubt they gave extensive support to land transfers, provision of inputs, and farm-to-market-roads and other infrastructure. There is also anecdotal evidence that local political elites used immigrants to help neutralize troublesome indigenous minorities, and yet there is also evidence that major sales of land were made to majority Kinh on highly unfavorable terms. Another aspect is that local authorities seem to have allowed a rundown of local ecological capital in

the interest of breakneck production increases. Becoming a major world coffee producer required coordination of many government bodies at the national, provincial and local levels.

Aside from the role of decentralized institutions in promoting pro-poor economic growth, what was the role of redistribution? Poverty is linked with subsistence farming, and little access to schooling and health care. Ethnic minorities suffer from geographical problems and special household characteristics (Sikor 2001). Improving education, health and other public services could help to alleviate these characteristics. Yet as mentioned above, during the period 1993-1998, significant poverty reduction took place despite a decline in redistribution. There are many reasons for the decline, but the main one is that so much of the growth was in the southeast and Red River delta. Some redistribution took place through public spending, promoting immigration and other factors, but redistribution could not keep up with economic growth rates over 8 per cent during the period. Vietnamese administrative practices also work against effective redistribution, including standardized budget norms and staffing ratios, incentives to give misleadingly favorable reports and the difficult task of verifying such reports at higher levels (Ascher and Rondinelli 1999:138). The government is now working to improve redistributive mechanisms to address this problem, but the challenges are major.

To further understand the role of decentralized institutions in poverty reduction, an analysis of the provision of public services is instructive. One sector with clear successes is health. Commune health centers are set up across the country, with service and utilization rates equal or better than other countries in the region (World Bank, *op. cit.*, 44-54). The commune-level health system works better since the government started paying staff salaries in the early 1990s (Tipping and Truong 1997).

Among the success factors are (1) shifting discretion from the 'public' to 'private' realm within the organizational network; and (2) increasing administrative/fiscal/political delegation to local government administrative organizations,¹⁶ although there are significant interregional disparities. In this sense decentralization of health service delivery has helped produce Viet Nam's impressive health outcomes in reducing infant mortality and morbidity.

The focus on curative spending in hospitals benefits the better off; a greater focus on preventative care would benefit more citizens, including the poor. Furthermore because of the limitations of local revenue and voluntary contributions used in financing health care at the commune level, there is a need to focus on primary health care, and to ensure that all citizens benefit, including the poor (Tipping and Truong, *op. cit.*).

Another service mainly provided by local government is education, and many indicators are favorable. Enrollment is up, particularly for girls. There are fewer dropouts and repeaters, and more public financing for primary schools that benefit the poor. As in other Asian countries, it is not clear whether improvements are due to decentralization, or to other factors (Behrman et al. 2003: 94-95). However sample studies carried out in recent years show that standards outside major cities like Hanoi are low, pointing to the need for additional reform (World Bank, *op. cit.*, 54-64).

Improved accountability

Finally citizens and investors constantly complain about corruption, and many complaints focus on local government. There is suspicion of corruption in large construction projects, such as the Water Park in Hanoi, antipoverty programs in minority areas, the cleaning up of polluted water in West Lake, Hanoi, and construction of buildings in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. The major anticorruption protest in Thai Binh complained of financial improprieties; in response, the central government suspended many top officials (Thaveeporn, *op. cit.*, 35–36). One assumes that opportunities for corruption arise for many reasons, including weak coordination among government bodies, unclear and overlapping roles and authority and weak capacity among enforcement bodies (Maitland 2001). Yet corruption also presumably plays a key role in maintaining the allegiance of diverse elites and their supporters in organizational networks. Thus the leadership has taken a cautious approach to combating corruption, which is expected to continue.

REMAINING CHALLENGES

Viet Nam has come a long way in clarifying responsibilities between party and state, and among different levels of government. And there is some evidence that the remaining ambiguity of roles and responsibilities gives scope for useful policy experimentation. The reforms have unfolded opportunistically, in fits and starts, not as part of a structured reform program. Yet many of the features of Vietnamese reforms also show up in developed country reform patterns, including marginal adjustments rather than sudden changes, process based rather than structure based approaches, and reforms that cycle back and forth: for example, decentralization replacing centralization, followed by elements of re-centralization (cf. Jones and Kettle, 2003). The adjustments, process reform, and cycling back are all intended to make policy making, public financial management and service delivery more effective.

In September 2001 the government somewhat shifted gears, and formally adopted a public administration reform master program that contains a comprehensive vision for reforming the public administration system of Viet Nam. The program outlines a workplan for the period 2001-2010, and it proposes to reform the entire public administration system by the end of that period. This is in line with Viet Nam's overriding goal to accelerate the transition from a centrally planned to a socialist oriented market economy, with a state governed by the rule of law.

The agenda for reform and renovation under the program is broad. It includes replacing cumbersome administrative procedures with more simplified and transparent ones; reducing red tape and corruption; better defining the mandates and functions of institutions; reducing, during the period up to 2010, the number of ministries and consolidating within these the number of agencies; reforming provincial and other subnational administrations and redefining their relations with one another and the center; streamlining and rightsizing the organizational structures of ministries and other government agencies; reforming and rationalizing the relationship between ministries and other administrative bodies, and service delivery organizations and enterprises; raising the quality, standards and skills of civil servants and other public sector workers; undertaking salary reform for public employees; reforming public financial

management; and modernizing the public administrative system, notably through computerization and the introduction of e-government.

Successful implementation of the program would address many of the constraints to effective decentralization discussed above, including unclear mandates, weak redistributive mechanisms, uneven service quality and limited citizen participation. By 2005 new regulations, working rules and methods are planned to be implemented that more clearly define functions, tasks, authorities and responsibilities of local administration, and distinguishing between urban and rural administrations. People's committees will also be restructured at each level by the same date (ADB 2003a).

Preliminary results at the sub-national level are mixed. A sample survey of citizens and officials in 20 districts and 40 communes (ADB 2003b) reveals that a major result has been simplification of administrative procedures through "one-stop, one-door" models. Citizen's benefit by spending less time waiting and travelling, and having better information provided to them. Some commune officials have benefited from being given civil servant status. At the district level, competency standards and expenditure management has improved. However, progress has been uneven; more prosperous jurisdictions have benefited more than poor ones, and poor and vulnerable groups, ethnic minorities and women benefit less than other groups. For example, even though more efficient local administrations can now deliver birth and land use right certificates, and other documents faster than before, poor people still cannot afford the charge.

Will the larger reform program be effectively implemented, leading to a more coherent, hierarchical form of sub national governance? As suggested already there are many factors that can be expected to slow down reforms, including the political and tactical advantages of the present organizational network set-up, the formal structure of Viet Nam as a unitary state, the presence of a strong executive along with a relatively weak legislature, judiciary and civil society, a mistrusting of lower levels of administration and the centralizing tendency of official development assistance. Decentralization in its organizational network form can be expected to continue to expand at provincial and district levels, but will expand more slowly, if at all, at the communal level. Granting any meaningful decision making role to citizen's groups outside of the privileged, network organization is not likely in the foreseeable future, except for a limited number of GDD pilots and community driven regulatory efforts (Firtzen 2002).

Yet even within such limited reforms, service delivery challenges can be better addressed in many ways. For example, the publicly funded health system could be reoriented to reduce regional disparities in spending and access, rather than reinforcing these disparities. This could be done by changing the transfer formula used to set transfers to the provinces (World Bank, *op. cit.*, 53–54).

Disparities in education could be reduced if norms used for allocating funds became more flexible. More funding could be provided for students in sparsely populated areas, thus ensuring basic services. Poor provinces should get a larger share of capital budgets, and with special allocations to attract and retain new students. More redistributive funding would permit more and better targeted waiving of fees at the local level (World Bank, *op. cit.*, 64).

Another round of Thai Binh-Dong Nai disturbances, perhaps motivated by a sharp economic downturn, could spur broader participation than at present. In such a case the grassroots democracy decree might be expanded to adapt local governance to the needs of minority ethnic groups. For example the present administrative structure is based on that of the Kinh majority and different from traditional authority structures in minority groups. Local administrative structures could be encouraged to become more closely aligned with traditional structures. The recruitment of minority officials could also be more encouraged. Although minority officials are well represented at the commune levels, the balance becomes uneven at higher levels. For example 11 per cent of the Cao Bang population, but only 3 per cent of officials, are Dao. 29 per cent of the people of Lao Cai province is Hmong, but only 13 per cent of provincial officials. In Van (Ha Giang) 90 per cent of the population are Hmong, but only 21 per cent of officials. On the other hand in Gac Ha district (Lao Cai), 11.5 per cent of the population are Kinh, but 72 per cent of officials (Thaveporn, op. cit.).

CONCLUSIONS

This article has explored the extent to which decentralization has supported the policy commitments made by the government to increase citizen participation and accountability, and ensure that public service delivery helps to reduce poverty and regional disparities. A review of basic definitions of decentralization sets some preliminary limits on the case study and places it in an international context. A brief discussion ensues on the historical context in Viet Nam and its relevance, followed by an analysis of decentralization policy intention vs implementation reality. There is a preliminary analysis of the impact of decentralization during the period, and finally some remaining challenges. The article examines the interplay between hierarchical and network organizations in Viet Nam, as stakeholders seek to better define the respective roles and authority of the party, and other public, quasi-public and private organizations at different territorial levels. These patterns have played out against a backdrop of rapid economic growth, generating a rush of lucrative opportunities for well placed entrepreneurs within or closely linked to the party network. A related element is that, as in other parts of Asia, local authorities are increasing their role in investment promotion and the streamlining of business regulation, to facilitate market-driven links across borders and with production networks in other countries.

The results have been mixed. On the one hand policy statements, decrees and new laws have clarified and codified functional responsibilities across different levels of party and government. On the other hand a small number of party members continue to wield great power on all big issues, at all levels of government, and only loosely accountable through internal controls. These two seemingly contradictory strands of rule of law and democratic centralism are in a sense woven together by an organizational network. The network acts in many ways with considerable discretion (particularly to enhance the self-interest of network members), but under the ideological leadership of party elites. Against this landscape one can expect decentralization reforms leading to greater administrative coherence and consistency will continue to move ahead at a slow pace.

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NOTES

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² Portions of this and the next section summarized from Wescott, C. and D. Porter (in press).

³ This categorization as defined by Rondinelli et al. (1983: 13–31), Leonard and Marshall (1982: 27–37), and others, is the most widely accepted in the recent literature, although Cohen and Peterson (1999: 52–61) list a long array of alternative definitions.

⁴ Portions of this section summarized from Wescott (2001).

⁵ Personal communication from Prof. Scott Fritzen, National University of Singapore, December 2002.

⁶ Personal communication from Doug Porter, ADB, August 2002.

⁷ The officially designated body for mobilizing the public to support party directives.

⁸ Since August 2002, the Ministry of Home Affairs.

⁹ Personal communication from Prof. Scott Firtzen, National University of Singapore, December 2002.

¹⁰ Personal communication with Martin Painter, City University of Hong Kong, December 2002.

¹¹ Such a strategy may have been unplanned. See Peters, B. Guy (2002). For elaboration of this argument as applied to Viet Nam, see Fforde and de Vylder (1996).

¹² Directive no. 30-CT/TW of 18 February 1998.

¹³ For example, 'Government Decree no. 29-1998-ND/CP of 11 May 1998 on the promulgation of regulations to implement grassroots democracy at the commune level; Prime Minister Directive no. 22/1998.CT-TTg of 15 May 1998 on the implementation of grassroots democracy at the commune level; Prime Minister Directive no. 24/1998/CT-TTg of 19 June 1998 on the building and implementation of customary laws of villages; Circular no. 03/1998/TT-TCCP of 6 July 1998 of the Government Committee on Organization and Personnel guiding the implementation of grassroots democracy in communes, wards, and district towns; Plan no. 145-TT/TCCP of 6 July 1998 of the Government Committee on Organization and Personnel on the implementation of grassroots democracy in communes, wars, and district towns; and Government Decree no. 71/1998ND-CP of 8 September 1998 on the promulgation of

the regulations to realize grassroots democracy in government agencies'; Thaveeporn (2002: 44).

¹⁴ The 20.8 per cent decline in poverty between 1993 and 1998 can be broken down into a 30.7 per cent increase in the growth component and a 7.6 per cent decline in the redistribution component.

¹⁵ Private communication with Adam Fforde, Aduki Ltd., Sydney, Australia.

¹⁶ Although 43 per cent of government expenditure takes place in provinces, districts and communes which is higher than the average for the region, this rises to 63 per cent for health, and 73 per cent for education, based on 1998 figures; the total is up from 26 per cent in 1992 (World Bank, *op. cit.* 20). Bird et al 1998 has a higher estimate of subnational expenditure proportion for 1992 (35 per cent, excluding commune expenditures), showing the difficulty of making such estimates using Viet Nam data. Data on six countries in the region for which comparable data are available can be calculated using the IMF's Government Financial Statistics yearbook as reported on OECD-DAC Indicators page: China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, Philippines and Thailand.

http://www.bellanet.org/indicators/index.cfm?fuseaction=dsp_indicator&indicator_id=7

Bearing in mind the limitations in using such data (Ebel and Yilmaz 2001), only China and Mongolia have a subnational share of public expenditures over 30 per cent (China is 54 per cent), while Malaysia and Indonesia are under 20 per cent, and Philippines and Thailand under 10 per cent.

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