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Mind the Gap: Exploring the Challenges and Opportunities for Social Enterprise in Vietnam

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Mind the Gap: Exploring the Challenges and Opportunities for Social Enterprise in Vietnam

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Abstract

Social enterprise is a maturing area of activity within the development sector, and in Vietnam the sector has expanded significantly over the last thirty years, providing social services to communities and individuals experiencing socio-economic exclusion. Initially growing in a legislative vacuum, social enterprise currently appears to be flourishing following recognition by the state. However, the sector now faces new challenges as it matures. With Vietnam’s attainment of middle-income status, the international development funding previously available is now limited and the focus is on capacity and viability. Based on findings from interviews with representatives from a wide range of social enterprises and support organizations we explore the challenges and opportunities for future development, finding that there continues to be significant opportunity for both the augmentation of the sector and its impact. Through analysing the influence of a changing international development environment on evolving government policy, we provide new insights into the thoughts and perceptions of social enterprise sector practitioners. Recognizing that policy change has not resulted in effective local implementation, we suggest that government action is now needed to fill that gap, by supporting new start-ups, prospective social enterprises, and those established enterprises which are striving for viability and increased impact.

Keywords: Vietnam; social enterprise; civil society; vocational training

Introduction

Social enterprise is a wide-ranging and maturing form of intervention activity within the international development sector. In Vietnam, as elsewhere, examples of practice commonly include vocational training schemes for socio-economically disadvantaged people, vulnerable and/or marginalized groups in society, homeless or abandoned young people, people with disabilities, and survivors of human trafficking or domestic violence. In each case, the model is often similar, and in the context of Southeast Asia, where they are prevalent, is frequently based on tourism sector-related enterprise, usually with a shop, production centre, café or restaurant providing accommodation, formal vocational training, and work experience. The social aim of these enterprises...
is to enhance the skills and capabilities of the targeted, socially excluded participants to improve their life opportunities. Upon completion of the training programme, the majority of participants have a recognized qualification, experience, and an enhanced access to and ability to participate in the employment market, with a network of support. Research recognizes that vocational training for transition-age youth increases their ability to attain and maintain employment and can have a significant effect on employment success (Biddulph, 2018).

By investing profits in disadvantaged people, and the social programmes which support them, the model secures income to reinvest into the project. The number of these type of schemes evident in Southeast Asia (e.g. Biddulph, 2018; Giang et al., 2017; Khieng and Dahles, 2015; Porter et al., 2015; Sidel, 1997), suggests that the provision of training in liaison with commercial enterprise is a viable model for the financial security of the organizations, and the employment outcomes of participants in this region, being based on the development of capabilities, social capital and networks (Easter and Conway Dato-On, 2015). Considered a ‘hybrid’ model, combining elements of business enterprise and social impact, social enterprises pursue a social mission using market-based activities (Cung et al., 2012). Social enterprises therefore ‘cross the conventional boundaries between private sector and the voluntary or philanthropic sector’ (Sheikheldin and Devlin, 2019, p. 325).

Reviewing social enterprise activity in Vietnam – a one-party socialist republic with a ‘socialist-orientated market economy’ – in this paper, we examine how projects were established, have developed, and operate. Using this detail, we frame the relationship between state and civil society and explore the challenges and opportunities for the future development of the social enterprise sector in Vietnam. Through analysing the influence of a changing international development environment on evolving government policy, our paper adds value to the scholarly work in this area by providing new insights into the thoughts and perceptions of social enterprise sector practitioners. Recognizing that governmental policy change has not resulted in effective local implementation, this paper addresses a gap in literature around the disaggregated governmental support that would facilitate the wider development of the sector – for start-ups, intermediate enterprise, and established social enterprises alike – which would lead to improved outcomes. Our findings therefore extend knowledge in this maturing research area.

The next section outlines the methodology for the research, after which we turn to define the scope of social enterprise organizations, within the wider civil society. We then present an overview of the research context for the development of social enterprise in Vietnam, followed by an in-depth discussion of the fieldwork findings, focusing on national and international power dynamics, and opportunities for developing the sector in Vietnam. The final section investigates the challenges facing social enterprise in Vietnam, and provides conclusions, recommendations, and suggestions for further research.
Materials and methods

In this paper, we review the existing literature to provide an outline of the historic development of the social enterprise sector in Vietnam. This provides the context within which consideration can be undertaken of the future challenges that the sector faces, and the opportunities that exist for social enterprises. Primary data collection undertaken between May-June 2019 provides additional in-depth and nuanced information. Eight face-to-face, semi-structured interview sessions were conducted with representatives from independent social enterprises (i.e. none of these were part of Government-organized NGOs, or GONGOs), not-for-profit and other supporting organizations based in Hanoi, Vietnam’s national capital. Additionally, two further interviews were conducted by telephone with social enterprise representatives of two different organizations based in Hoi An and Hue, Vietnam. All social enterprises were established in the decade following the lifting of the United States embargo in 1994. A total of twelve participants were interviewed; eight of these were Vietnamese citizens, and four were non-Vietnamese nationals. Interviews were conducted in either Vietnamese or English, based on the interviewee’s preference, with Vietnamese interviews facilitated by a research assistant. The collected data were then analysed using thematic analysis.

The detail arising from the interviews included financial information, as well as participants’ views on the roles and position of Vietnamese society and government. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the discussions, all interviewees and their respective organization have been kept anonymized.

Despite formally-registered social enterprise in Vietnam being a small sector, discussed below, it is acknowledged at the outset that this is a small sample, albeit we have purposively sampled to include some of the key organizations engaged in this sector. However, the objective is not to provide a statistically representative analysis but rather a rich, nuanced understanding based on the experiences and perspectives of some key stakeholders to obtain a rounded picture of the country’s social enterprise sector at present. The range of organizations involved in the study, including social enterprises, not-for-profit and other supporting organizations, provided opportunity to take a disaggregated approach to the research. By interpreting the themes emerging from the fieldwork, the research addresses the interrelationships between civil society, the state, and international development, and analyses the challenges and opportunities for the future of social enterprise in Vietnam.

Civil society, social enterprise and the state

Civil society, for Habermas (1992, p. 453), ‘is constituted by voluntary unions outside the realm of the state’, though for others the separation from the state provides a means for citizens to moderate state power and assert their own interests (Tocqueville, 1961), or to actively oppose to state hegemony (Gray, 1999). Rather than regarding civil society as being independent, separate or autonomous from the state, Gramsci
identifies a fundamental association between the two, with often overlapping boundaries. It is within this interplay that Laville et al. (2015, p. 1) recognize civil society as having ‘critical roles in social, economic and political life in most countries’. For the purposes of this paper, civil society organizations (CSOs) are recognized as being groups, societies and organizations which operate independently from the state and the market, though sometimes in conjunction with these spheres (Defourny and Nyssens, 2006; Kerlin, 2010). Termed collectively, often interchangeably, as the third sector, the social economy or civil society, this diverse set of groups, societies, organizations, and practices have increasingly provided social interventions as an alternative to state or market activities (Scarlato, 2013).

With the civil society sphere’s role of implementing, localizing and monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals, Kontinen and Millstein (2017, p. 82) invite the ‘rethinking of civil society in the field of development research’. Nederveen Pieterse (2012, p. 368) recognizes that twenty-first century globalization differs from its twentieth century form, as the ‘importance of North–South development cooperation is receding’. In this context, globalization itself is reconfiguring from development-aid dependency towards a focus on economic viability, to which Williams et al. (2014) suggest credit can be given to community-minded actors offering progressive localization.

Literature in the field of Vietnamese civil society suggests a symbiotic link with the government (Kerkvliet, 1994; 2010). The state has actively reduced restrictions around operations to support the sphere’s independence (Wells-Dang, 2010), with this retreat creating space for civil society to develop (Salemink, 2006). However, the boundaries between the state and civil society in Vietnam are blurred and contested (Kerkvliet, 2018; Norland, 2007). Civil society mass organizations, such as the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF), an umbrella organization encompassing a number of state-registered mass organizations and special interest groups (Thayer, 2009), based around women, farmers, labourers and youth ‘carry out government policies at various levels’ (Salemink, 2006, p. 107) within technocratic rules of law (Knutsen, 2015) and within a historic and ongoing culture of corruption (Kerkvliet, 2018; Norland, 2007). While Norland (2007, p. 74) acknowledges that ‘classic definitions do not accept the mass organizations as part of civil society because they are Party-sponsored and to some extent part of the Party structure’, she contends that given their contributions to grassroots and local level organizing they should be recognized as such.

Within the civil society sphere, we consider a social enterprise as a body which creates social as well as economic value (Chell, 2007) but which gives primacy to the social activity. For Defourny and Nyssens (2006, p. 13) social enterprises are located ‘at the crossroads of market, public policies and civil society’, being a hybrid between a business entity and a not-for-profit organization (Garrow and Hasenfeld, 2014). It is the positioning of social enterprise at that juncture which brings Mazzei and Roy (2017) to suggest that governmental support is more often a patchwork than the rhetoric advocates. The literature on Vietnamese social enterprise
suggests that while it grew in a legislative vacuum (Sidel, 1997), the state recognized a role for itself to facilitate the sector (Gray, 1999), which is now flourishing either with government support (Le Ngoc, 2017; Thang, 2018) or despite the lack of clarity of the support that is available (Pham et al., 2016). However, significant challenges confront the sector as it matures, with a recent reduction in non-governmental organization (NGO) and official development assistance (ODA) donor funding (Smith and Darko, 2014) precipitating other difficulties in accessing capital generally (Phan and Nguyen, 2017). Although Phan and Nguyen (2017) identify the barriers to the development of the social enterprise sector, including limits of knowledge, resources and network linkages, their analysis is not disaggregated into the constituent parts, whether for start-ups, ‘intermediate’ enterprises, or for established social enterprises. By disaggregating the sector, we are able to identify the specific support that the government can provide to facilitate the sector.

Society is comprised of the state, the market and civil society (Defourny and Nyssens, 2006), although Kerlin (2010) identifies a fourth, international aid sphere. We therefore explore the challenges and the opportunities for Vietnamese social enterprise within the wider civil society sphere, and the sector’s links to the state and international spheres. Within this, we analyse the extent to which the sector is moving towards localized viability, though first, we provide the context to the research.

**Research context: social enterprise in Vietnam**

Vietnam has long associations with geopolitical struggles, colonialism and external domination. From ongoing overt Chinese influence over two millennia through to French colonialism from 1858 to 1954 with a period of Japanese imperial control from 1940 to 1945, the modern Vietnamese state has developed through conflict and coping with adversity. This struggle has set the template for state and civil society relations. The socialist state of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, formed in the North in 1954, sought to bolster against counter-revolutionary insurgency. Similarly, the reunified state of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam from 1976, emerged following resistance against United States of America colonial aspirations; thereafter Vietnamese state-building sought to ‘socialise’ or ‘decolonise’ the newly liberated South (Sidel, 1997). Today, Vietnam remains led by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), while its economy has been liberalizing since 1986 when it officially inaugurated a series of market-orientated reforms known as đổi mới, or renovation.

Prior to the 1980s, the state had sole responsibility for the provision of social services, with the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF) providing an overarching mass movement through which social programmes were provided (Thayer, 2009). NGOs were not permitted, however community cooperatives with collective ownership provided a range of services, including ‘serving the needs of vulnerable / disadvantaged communities’ (Cung et al., 2012, p. 19). Indeed, cooperatives are ‘considered as one of the early models of Vietnamese social enterprises’ (Phan and Nguyen, 2017, p. 5).
Yet, following doi mơi, the government began to recognize that ‘if international donors can create “civil society”, it is also something which governments are capable of undertaking’ (Gray, 1999, p. 694) or facilitating, by ensuring that organizations can operate with fewer restrictions from the state, with a greater sense of independence (Wells-Dang, 2010). This highlights the government’s responsivity to ‘societal pressures and demands’ (Kerkvliet, 2010, p. 36), in this case for allowing civil society to address social concerns, recognizing that NGOs were carrying-out government policy at various levels (Salemink, 2006, p. 107), whilst continuing to utilize the VFF for state-sponsored social programmes (Thayer, 2009). From the inception of doi mơi in 1986, through to 2010, social enterprises with business activities that were associated with NGOs flourished despite a lack of formal approval. Such enterprises were often supported with funding from foreign organizations, with this activity accelerating after the lifting of the United States’ embargo in 1994 (Cung et al., 2012).

The contested boundaries between the Vietnamese state and civil society are recognized by Kerkvliet (2018, p. 187) as ‘arenas in which relations between state and civil society are problematic’, whilst Norland (2007, p. 90) suggests that both ‘need to accommodate each other’s wishes’ in order to address social problems. Marxist theory, according to Thayer (2009) would suggest that relaxation of control over civil society would increase the opportunity for counter-revolutionary zeal, and that its politicization can destabilize the state. However, paradoxically, loosening control over civil society, particularly in the social and environmental sectors, led instead to an increase in the CPV’s legitimacy (Hiep, 2012). Dỏi mới emphasized a symbiotic relationship between the state and civil society, providing evidence to suggest the state is responsive to concerns raised by civil society (Kerkvliet, 2010). 

Gray (1999, p. 693) suggests that the proliferation of NGOs in Vietnam during the 1990s ‘did not appear to fit into any definition of civil society which emphasizes independence from the state or disapproval of state ideology’, contrary to the traditional Marxist view of civil society organizations undermining the state. This meshes particularly well with the general approach of social entrepreneurship, which is identified by Brown (2014) as opportunistic, in being able to develop within the constraints of existing political economic systems, rather than actively supporting or seeking to change them. It has been the retreat of the state in social provision which has provided space for alternative organizations to become involved (Salemink, 2006, p. 119), but as ‘opportunities for social participation have opened, they are accompanied by technocratic policies and rule of law that limit political contestation’ (Knutsen, 2015, p. 69).

Since 2010, Vietnam has been identified as a country with lower-middle income status, which is resulting in reduced donor funding from NGOs (Smith and Darko, 2014). Social enterprises there have operated according to market principles, where “economic” and “social” dimensions converge as a single mission’ (Sengupta and Sahay, 2017, p. 20), with income derived less from external financing than from their own business activities (Brown, 2014).
However, Vietnamese law evolved slowly for not-for-profit organizations, being based on laws and regulations dating back to 1957 (Sidel, 1997). By 2011, 167 organizations identified with each of the characteristics of a social enterprise (CSIP, 2011), being a hybrid combining a not-for-profit structure with an enterprise having profit-earning purposes. Social enterprises operated in the country without official recognition, although more recent decrees have sought to provide legal authority and legitimacy for the existence and operations of these organizations (CSIP, 2011). For example, Decree No. 116/2013/ND-CP, from October 2013 allows all profits earned in the course of operations to be shared for specific and recognized activities, and significantly, the Vietnam Enterprise Law of 2014 provides a legal basis, outlining the main distinguishing characteristics of a social enterprise:

Being established under the Law on Enterprise; it has an objective to resolve social or environmental issues in the interests of the community; and at least 51 per cent of its profits must be re-invested to accomplish its social and environmental objectives (Loi, 2015).

Recognizing the potential for the growth of this small sector, and the opportunity for solving social and environmental problems for the benefit of the community, the government of Vietnam sought to encourage further development by allowing social enterprises to receive foreign aid to achieve these objectives (Decree 96/2015/ND-CP47) (Loi, 2015). These measures are recognized by Pham et al. (2016, p. 6) as marking a ‘significant milestone’ in the history of Vietnamese social enterprise, formally legalizing and legitimizing social enterprises for the first time. In addition, those enterprises operating in the fields of education, training and vocational training, amongst other designated sectors, were able to benefit from measures under Decree 69/2008, including:

Long-term leases, preferential prices, and no requirement for payment of land taxes; tax incentives, with Corporate Income Tax (thuế doanh thu) payable at 10% rather than the standard rate of 20%; and the right to bid for government contracts (Thang, 2018, p. 12).

The new law and policy provision sought to provide legitimacy and appear to have had an encouraging effect. Social enterprises now operate in many of Vietnam’s larger towns and cities, providing skills for targeted individuals through vocational training, whilst operating commercial outlets (Pham et al., 2016). By the end of 2015, there was a jump to 209 officially-registered social enterprises operating in the country (CSIP, quoted in Phan and Nguyen, 2017).

This is, therefore, a small but growing sector in Vietnam, which is engaged in tackling a range of social-economic inequalities and environmental challenges. However, Phan and Nguyen (2017, pp. 159–160) identify five main barriers which inhibit the further development of the sector:
[A] shortage of knowledge of social enterprises (policy and practice); less start-up capital and difficulties in accessing capital; limited management ability of the manager; hard to train and develop human resource; and lack of ‘ecosystem’ that can boost the development of social enterprises.

As the sector continues to develop, as social enterprise practices become more commonplace, and as synergies develop, promoting connectivity, networking, and creativity, it is likely that most of these barriers can be overcome. However, access to capital to assist start-ups has become increasingly difficult (Phan and Nguyen, 2017). During the 1990s and early 2000s, access to funding was not a problem, due to the availability of significant development finance, with Vietnam among the top ODA recipients in the world (Ministry of Planning and Investment, UN and EU, 2014). Yet, with Vietnam’s attainment of lower middle-income non-donor country status, access to foreign capital through ODA and private development support has significantly decreased (Cung et al., 2012). Government policy currently supports the sector through the recognition of social enterprise activity, legislation, and favourable taxation structures (Phan and Nguyen, 2017). However, the reduction in access to capital is likely to be an issue for the continued expansion of the sector in coming years, and government clarification on how the legal framework will be implemented is required (Phan and Nguyen, 2017).

This provides a context for the journey Vietnam government policy has taken since the 1980s as relevant to social enterprise. During the years following đổi mới and into the 1990s, the rapid growth of the social economy ‘outstripped comprehensive state regulation’, and with a lack of overt control by the CPV (Sidel, 1997, p. 291) the state was content to provide some freedom for those organizations which were non-challenging to the state, allowing the development of the sector within acceptable parameters (i.e. working on certain environmental or social matters) (Thaveeporn, 2001). With time, the state augmented its position, first recognizing social enterprise activity, then moving to support this activity with legislation. Nevertheless, the sector now faces new challenges as it matures (Phan and Nguyen, 2017). Our analysis of interviews with social enterprise representatives provides a basis to consider the current challenges and opportunities for the sector, which we turn to explore next.

Exploring the challenges and opportunities for social enterprise in Vietnam

The state and social enterprise

Several academic commentators agree that Vietnam’s social enterprise sector initially grew in a legislative vacuum (Sidel, 1997) but is now flourishing following recognition by, and then with the support of, the state (Le Ngoc, 2017; Loi, 2015; Thang, 2018). The government support referenced in the literature (Table 1), includes the legal recognition of social enterprises and the provision of tax breaks for those registered. This highlights the role of government in facilitating and enabling the development of the sector.
During our interviews, the concerns expressed by representatives working in the social enterprise sector contradicted some of the academic discourse outlined in the table above. Interview responses suggest that in practice there is only very limited governmental support for the development of the sector, despite legislation. This reflects ongoing academic debate, with a less positive appraisal offered by some authors (Table 2).

Several organization representatives we spoke to expressed concern at the limited support offered by the government and government agencies. An owner of a medium-sized business, which has a social mission but is not a registered social enterprise, summed-up their sentiment in relation to the development of the sector: ‘social enterprise has taken off despite limited government support rather than because of it’. This was echoed by an interviewee representing an organization providing vocational training in the hospitality sector, stating ‘it is too complicated to work with the government,

Table 1: Academic discourse on the role of the Vietnamese state in facilitating the development of social enterprise.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Key Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Le Ngoc (2017, p.,32)</td>
<td>‘Vietnamese government in early 2017 has made concrete steps in supporting small and medium enterprises including social enterprise through underlying assistances namely access to … tax support’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loi (2015)</td>
<td>‘… new social enterprises shall … automatically succeed to the entire lawful rights and interests, and shall be liable for all the obligations such as … taxes …’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thang (2018, p. 12)</td>
<td>‘In addition to the Vietnam Enterprise Law 2015 and Decree 96, enterprises operating in the fields of education, training and vocational training, medicine, culture, sports, and environment can benefit from some measures under the Decree 69/200848, such as … tax incentives: corporate income tax rate at 10% during operation; to be exempt from corporate income tax (CIT) for four years after the taxable income is generated, plus a 50% reduction in subsequently five years’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Academic discourse on the role of the state requiring additional action to facilitate the development of social enterprise.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Summary of Research</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pham et al. (2016, p. 6)</td>
<td>‘Although the law shows government’s recognition of the social enterprise concept, supporting policies toward the sector’s development remain very modest. Social enterprises [can] mobilize and receive grants and donations, but they do not benefit from preferential treatment such as tax exemption for their business activities.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phan and Nguyen (2017, p. 161)</td>
<td>The government should issue a ‘national programme’ about encouraging the development of social enterprise, and issue financial incentives to support this development, including reduction of corporate income tax rate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and there is no policy for social enterprise’, referring to the administrative difficulties they had encountered.

Several interviewees representing organizations which support the sector through the provision of information and advice, highlighted the role of government. In the words of one of these representatives, ‘whilst it may seem that Vietnam is not governed, or is chaotic, there is a high level of governance’ which ‘may not be fast or efficient but it is there, and it is very well organized’. However, the issue of having to work with a range of government departments and the difficulty of doing so was also a recurrent theme in the interviews. In relation to this challenge, one enterprise owner identified that any interaction with official agencies can be slow or difficult to navigate, requiring patience and ‘a need to play the game’, and that ‘for social enterprises, there are more frustrations than there are successes, but it doesn’t mean that we should give up’. This interviewee alleged that corruption is commonplace, supporting assertions by Norland (2007) and Kerkvliet (2018), particularly by government agency officials seeking payment to smooth administrative procedures, and that the impact of this on business activity cannot be underestimated. This respondent indicated that ‘the least interaction with government departments as possible is preferable’, particularly as the social enterprise registration process, and the impact on autonomy, ‘could hinder rather than support the development of the sector as well as the development of individual organizations’.

These statements by representatives on their experiences with attempting to access support from the state therefore contest authors such as Le Ngoc (2017), Loi (2015) and Thang (2018), who have argued that there is substantial support from the Government of Vietnam for social enterprise.

According to an organization which supports the wider development of the sector, while there are approximately 200 registered social enterprises, there are a total of as many as 19,000 – around 95 times as many – unregistered social enterprises currently operating in the country. Formal registration as a social enterprise is not compulsory, with some of these entities being NGOs supported through grant funding, whilst others are hybrid businesses which allocate some profit to social activity.

Critically, we found that there is confusion amongst some CSO representatives around what the benefits are of officially registering as a social enterprise in Vietnam. According to an interviewee representing one such registered social enterprise, the registration process ‘involves a great deal of time and paperwork’. Thus, some social enterprises specifically opted not to become formally registered, because as one entrepreneur clearly explained ‘there is no identified benefit [to doing so]’. One organization we spoke with operates according to the model of a social enterprise, as set out above, but it has not taken steps to become officially registered as there is ‘no demand or benefit for registration’. Another, well-known, social enterprise is registered but has experienced only limited advantages from going through this process, with the representative outlining that it was not worth the effort. Similarly, an interviewee from an organization which is growing organically
and extending its social mission, indicated that it is not striving to formally register as ‘laws may provide peace of mind, [but] they do not provide support and therefore the enterprise is not involved in registration’.

This is amplified by a representative of an organization which remains unregistered, relating their frustrations with government departments: ‘does it help to get a bank loan for growth? Maybe not, maybe it hinders you, as banks will not recognize that you are for making profit and this may affect [their perception of your] ability to repay the loan’. This confusion expressed by participants around the benefit to social enterprise registration accords with Phan and Nguyen’s (2017) findings in terms of a general sense of ambiguity amongst social entrepreneurs as to the supports being offered by the government through the legal framework.

A representative of a social enterprise which recently registered only distinguished gains relating to the positive publicity that can be achieved from officially ‘being a social enterprise’, through increasing sales. Moreover, the interviewee identified an additional value of registration as being able to receive donations from external donors, which are not taxable. But, in relation to the headline preferential tax rate of 10 per cent, a participant from one of the officially-registered social enterprises stated that this ‘to my knowledge, doesn’t exist as of now’, and that taxation continues to be levied at the regular commercial enterprise rate. Therefore, registering as a social enterprise ‘did not provide any additional support’. The interviewee also indicated that if taxation were levied at 10 per cent as set out in the legislation, rather than the standard 20 per cent currently charged, the enterprise would be self-sufficient and financially-secure, allowing for replication and scaling-up. In their words, the benefits to prospective social enterprises seeking registration ‘are not clear, as the taxation rate has not been clarified’.

Whilst the legal framework recognizes social enterprise, it does not offer a tax incentive, and as one representative of a large social enterprise outlined, ‘the 10% reduction [on Corporate Income Tax] is only available to start-up business for their first two years, and this does not apply to social enterprises’.

The research data suggests that the tax regime is not being implemented in practice for social enterprise, reflecting wider discussions of disjuncture between theory and practice, between policy development and implementation (Laws and Hajer, 2006; Mazzei and Roy, 2017). The de jure and the de facto situations appear to be quite different, and thus support the conclusions of Pham et al. (2016, p. 6), recognizing government support as being ‘very modest’ and that the proposed reduced corporate tax rate is not observed. However, the reasons for this remain unclear and none of our interviewees could offer an explanation as to why this is the case when asked.

However, not all respondents shared the same interpretation concerning tax rates applied to registered social enterprises. For example, one social entrepreneur interviewed takes a more philanthropic approach to taxation as ‘20% tax is not too high – it is a reasonable rate and it helps society’. Another interviewee, representing an international organization supporting social enterprise activity, provided an alternative
opinion. They outlined that the legal framework enshrined by the Enterprise Law (2014) and Decree 96, outlined earlier, provide for ‘rights and responsibilities’ and is ‘clear enough for people to understand’. This legal framework affords ‘the right to obtain funding and grants as well as to operate as a business as a hybrid model, and this is the main benefit’. Furthermore, their explanation, which they clarified as being provided as a personal opinion rather than the view of their organization, is that it is extremely hard to provide tax breaks for social enterprise in Vietnam because ‘the line is very thin between a social enterprise and a normal enterprise, although [the Ministry of Finance] has not given this much attention’.

There is also a requirement for registered social enterprises to contribute at least 51 per cent of their profits to ‘social activity’, defined in the Vietnam Enterprise Law as activity to resolve social or environmental issues in the interests of the community. However, our interviewees concurred that there is confusion as to where this funding is supposed to be allocated. For example, a representative of a business which has considered registering as a social enterprise identified that this requirement suggests that at least 51 per cent of profit must be approved for distribution or provided to a designated government agency. In their words, ‘the approval process scares us – if [the funding] goes to an orphanage, which orphanage? It is very difficult to police and to control and [the process] is open to fraud’. This uncertainty highlights the absence of clarity in the minds of some actors in this sector and suggests their lack of trust in the government. Organization representatives explained that they want autonomy to decide where proceeds are spent, with interviewees indicating that it is simply easier to just pay the standard tax rate in order to maintain control.

**Social enterprise and the international dimension**

A second core theme emerging from the data analysis relates to the maturing of the social enterprise sector in the context of international development. Through our interviews we identified two key models for the establishment of social enterprise in Vietnam. The first approach is through grant funding from an international NGO, charity or development agency which often provides seed funding to cover start-up and operational costs for a period of time. The second is through a business model approach, achieving social impact through profit-earning enterprise.

The problem of relying on NGO grant funding to establish social enterprise was highlighted by a number of social enterprise representatives, and others working in the sector, particularly as there have been significant changes to available funding streams, such as the reductions in development assistance the country has recently experienced (Scarlato, 2013). As noted earlier, Vietnam attaining middle income country and non-donor status has resulted in a substantial drop in net ODA, from USD 4.1 billion in 2012 to USD 1.6 billion in 2018 (World Bank, 2020). Some prospective social entrepreneurs felt that the NGO funding still available could be diverted elsewhere at any time, given competing and changing global challenges.
Other entrepreneurs saw an ethical dimension too in respect to seeking charitable donations whilst also having a profit motive, albeit an altruistic profit motive. This perspective was reflected by one interviewee whose business has a social mission but is not formally registered, who stated ‘you can’t borrow money to donate it, therefore [there is a] need to build the business side of the organization first’.

Several interview participants, including prospective social entrepreneurs and representatives of organizations which support the sector, expressed that establishing a business enterprise, and then building the social element slowly as the business grows is more economically sustainable than establishing it through NGO grant funding, given the reduction in international NGO activity. However, while interviewees acknowledged that the development of a social enterprise could still succeed without external funding, this was regarded as a more challenging route to take. The effort required was summarized bluntly by one social entrepreneur, who noted ‘it takes a lot of hard work’.

According to one interviewee from an international organization supporting the wider development of the sector, since 2012 existing NGO and ODA funding sources have shifted their emphasis away from providing social support towards the emergence and development of so-called ‘impact enterprise’, described as economically viable ventures which achieve positive change. This shift reflects a neoliberalisation of development funding globally, recognized by Garrow and Hasenfeld (2014, p. 1479) as promoting ‘a model of social service organizations envisaged by the neoliberal welfare logic’. The new emphasis provides a change in opportunity, promoting a proactive approach to business viability in order to continue to improve social outcomes, supporting Brown’s (2014) assertion that enterprise is opportunistic in being able to adapt and to develop within the constraints of existing political economic systems. However, it is that opportunity that offers localized resistance (Williams et al., 2014) and as such, social enterprise activity might be less about promoting neoliberalism, as instead being a response to its failings (Scarlato, 2013).

A representative of an international NGO supporting the development of the social enterprise sector in Vietnam since 2010 and focused on importing the social enterprise concept from the United Kingdom was interviewed. This international NGO is working at three levels. The first level is policy advocacy, developing the legal framework for social enterprise in Vietnam. This policy advocacy led directly to the Enterprise Law (2014) and Decree 96 (2015), outlined earlier, which sets out the rights and responsibilities of social enterprise. Second, the NGO focuses on capacity building, working in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), promoting social enterprise in thirty Vietnamese universities, via developing careers in social enterprise or by establishing projects. Thirdly, the international NGO works on public awareness, showcasing social enterprise activity, to increase the consumer base and the market.

The focus of this international NGO supports earlier observation by Kerlin (2010) of the now-dominant neoliberal approach in the development sector globally, which
has moved to a refocusing of international assistance away from grant funding towards supporting non-state actors and developing organizational capacity. It is that interaction between an autonomous model of national development and a changing international development sector that is highlighted by this research, supporting analysis that the economy may be liberalized, but it is not neoliberal (Masina, 2012). Though it is impacted by the wider neoliberal world, shaping its economic governance (Bekkevold, 2020) and influencing civil society, the country’s socialist tradition is fundamental to the development of the present, and the socialist state can benefit from elements of neoliberalism without losing sight of its socialist values and goals (Schwenkel and Leshkowich, 2012). Social enterprises established through international aid and NGO activities are focusing on self-sufficiency and increasing their market activities to resolve poverty and donor dependence (Kerlin, 2010). In the context of Vietnam, this was also confirmed by three of the social enterprises interviewed during this research. For instance, one representative of an organization which provides vocational training explained how it was ‘lucky to have the support of an NGO’ to provide the initial start-up funding required, although without this support development ‘could have been achieved, but it would have taken much longer’.

However, support for the social enterprise sector in Vietnam currently appears to be haphazard. Several projects supported by international NGOs aim to promote social enterprises, offering support, inspiration and training for staff, the provision of financial and technical support and consultancy services. This was particularly valued by the representative of a large social enterprise providing vocational training. Yet, several interviewees found such organizations unhelpful, as the support offered remained on high-level sectoral capacity rather than supporting existing local-level activity which it was felt should be the priority. The conflicting experiences of social enterprise stakeholders, particularly between social entrepreneurs and NGO representatives, emphasizes a difference in drive and motivations, and confirms the importance of a disaggregated approach. On the one hand, social entrepreneurs focus on the local-level outcomes for the programme participants, based on their organization’s founding principles, whilst on the hand, international NGO representatives focus on wider sector functionality, including policy advocacy and public awareness, reflecting a reduced direct-funding role.

The overriding goal expressed by each of the social enterprise interviewees is that their organization’s activity was established to provide for an unmet need, particularly in delivering social welfare outcomes within the context of enduring poverty, disadvantage, marginalization, and inequality. They assert that the development of social enterprise has utilized the available resources (i.e. international NGO funding where available) and existing opportunity in Vietnam to assist social welfare provision and to fill the gap left by the state in social provision. This analysis supports recognition by Williams et al. (2014) that cracks in society can be utilized by forms of localism, and by progressive actors, like social enterprises, although
their rhetoric and direct action simultaneously conceals or masks the impacts of the retreat of the state.

The social enterprise sector in Vietnam has developed within an evolving political and economic landscape, set against the significant reduction and changed focus of ODA funding. During this period of change, Vietnamese social enterprises have demonstrated resilience through developing their own business model and the data emerging from this study suggests that they are increasingly seeking self-sufficiency. It is this overall goal for organizational viability, self-sufficiency and financial security, as a common objective shared by social enterprises, which we now turn to explore.

**Organizational viability**

The key to the hybrid approach, combining elements of business enterprise and social impact, is that business activity generates enough income to finance the implementation of the social enterprise’s ‘social mission’ components. Organizational viability is therefore critical to delivering ongoing effective outcomes, and organizations have increasingly recognized the requirement for income through commercial operations to replace alternative funding sources (Scarlato, 2013) such as donor aid funding. Through the interviews with social enterprise representatives we explored the viability of the hybrid approach, with participants invited to discuss their ideas and thoughts on organizational self-sufficiency and financial security in order for us to examine these in relation to key academic debates on social enterprise sustainability.

One representative from an established social enterprise recommended developing a business model with a top mission to create social impact and to use a commercial wing to bring the social and business sides together for harmonious integration. According to the interviewee, ‘this hybrid model is the only way it will work, but the drive for sustainability must be built-in from beginning’. Two entrepreneurs, who had each developed a social mission at the inception of their respective businesses, identified that social entrepreneurs must start a business which is feasible and can genuinely make money, using market research to identify opportunities. These entrepreneurs shared the opinion that the key to financial security is to establish and prioritize the enterprise first and increase the social element when profit allows. To be successful, a social enterprise needs to identify its main social goal, and then focus on that key element. In their view, a viable and financially-secure business needs to set aside the income for social mission causes when it is able, and to view this percentage as a ‘cost’ and place this into a fund.

These entrepreneurs advocated that this approach promotes organizational viability, and importantly, by using investment capital, in one of their words, there is ‘no need to chase NGO funding, which is not a sustainable model’. This sentiment was mirrored by a representative from an established social enterprise, who suggested that a hybrid model ought not to rely on NGO staff, stating this is because they
have a ‘different mindset’ which is more about seeking and sourcing funding as opposed to achieving business outcomes.

Our interviews with the four social enterprise vocational training providers identified that all are seeking to increase business revenue as a percentage of total costs (Table 3).

There was some agreement between interviewees that social enterprise activity could effectively diversify into alternative expanding markets, such as the technology sector, through providing vocational training to deliver improved employment outcomes. However, there was less agreement around diversification of income streams for social enterprises, for example through promoting fee-paying places on existing programmes. For instance, according to one social enterprise representative, it was believed that diversification in this way could ‘fundamentally change the profile of the participants involved in the programme’. This is because it would mean no longer focusing on deprivation or marginalization, but instead on those willing to gamble with an up-front cost.
One of the larger providers of vocational training has diversified its income streams by accepting fee paying participants to supplement its income. Another large training provider requires graduates to pay-back 30 per cent of the training costs, equivalent to approximately USD $330 payable over 10 months post-employment. Of note, all representatives of those social enterprises which are developing, or are considering, different funding approaches repeatedly indicated that the diversification of income sources is not about profit motives superseding their social objectives, but instead was aimed at increasing the numbers of young people being trained whilst securing the financial security of the organization. Indeed, it is the goal of achieving effective outcomes for programme participants, rather than a focus on income, that was captured by a social enterprise representative, who explained that an organization ‘should focus on sustainability; small is good … do not focus on numbers of people going through the system [but instead remember that] the impact on each young person assisted is significant and life-changing’. The emphasis was quality of output over quantity of provision. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that such responses may also reflect interviewee’s desire to ensure that their enterprise’s core beliefs, initiatives and activities are central to the way that they are perceived.

Whilst viability and financial security is essential to delivering effective outcomes for social enterprises (Scarlato, 2013), Cooley and Ron (2002, p. 13) recognize that actors are shaped and moulded by the environments they operate in. In this context, they suggest that a focus on the marketization of social development interventions, through the quest for ongoing self-sufficiency, will result in the interests of entrepreneurs being ‘shaped, often unintentionally, by material incentives’, namely placing profit motives ahead of social motives. This therefore questions not only the viability of social development interventions, but also the morals and drive of development actors. Conversely, our findings from social enterprises in Vietnam indicate that it may not be the actors themselves which are being shaped and moulded, but rather it is the interventions that are transforming as a reflection of, and to cope with, a fluctuating operating environment. This includes changing circumstances of finance, funding, the need for self-sufficiency, and for achieving effective outcomes.

In sum, one of the pre-eminent issues for social enterprise, and organizations striving to have a social impact, is the consideration of longevity through achieving self-sufficiency and financial security. The findings follow Kerlin’s (2010) that social enterprises are focusing on self-sufficiency and developing market activities, and moving away from development dependency (Nederveen Pieterse, 2012). This was borne out in most of the interviews with Vietnam-based social enterprise representatives, which emphasized their reason for being is the ongoing delivery of effective outcomes.

**Exploring the challenges and opportunities for Vietnamese social enterprise**

Our interviews with social enterprises and associated organizations and enterprises in Vietnam enabled us to analyze and explore the current role of social enterprise in the
country, and to provide an up-to-date assessment of the challenges and opportunities for the future development of this sector. Whilst we recognize that the study sample is small but focused, the findings provide perspective to examine the development of the sector within the framework of national and international power dynamics. The information arising from the interviews also allows for an analysis of the opportunities for developing the sector in Vietnam.

In terms of how social enterprises in Vietnam reflect state-society power dynamics, our research findings broadly concur with Kerkvliet (1994; 2010) that the Vietnam state and civil society should not be considered as two isolated, competing poles. Instead, đờì mới has emphasized the symbiotic relationship between the two (Kerkvliet, 2010). However, somewhat in contrast to Gray’s (1999) assertion, that if international donors can create civil society then so can government, we have found that key representatives of the social enterprise sector perceive that the government has not been keen to create social enterprise, but instead has allowed it to prosper whilst not providing substantial or very clear assistance. Such findings support Wells-Dang (2010) that rather than undertaking to directly support the development of civil society, the Vietnam government instead facilitates its development by ensuring that these organizations operate with fewer restrictions from the state, with a greater sense of independence.

The Vietnam government has sought to enable the growth of the sector, perhaps recognizing that effective social outcomes can be achieved whilst not adversely impacting on the underlying socialist principles of the state. The state achieved this by allowing international development organizations to inject funding into the country, however, it has stopped short of active encouragement. The government, according to a director of an international development assistance organization, ‘neither helps nor hinders social enterprise’. When ODA began declining in Vietnam, discussed earlier, the government encouraged international organizations to invest in the processes which focus on capacity-building and organizational self-sufficiency. Whilst there appears to be a ‘light touch’ approach to regulation, our interview findings suggest that the state is very much controlling this form of civil society, albeit subtly, hence one entrepreneur’s recognition that ‘there is a need to play the game’. The Vietnamese state has been responsive to change, but that response has been in relation to changing international development dynamics, rather than with a focus to improve local level impacts. Whilst the government has been responsive in ‘thinking globally’, it has not done enough ‘acting locally’ to support the sector; the gap between global and local action remains to be addressed. A more pro-active, disaggregated approach is required by the government and NGO support organizations in maximizing opportunity for the sector’s further development. The potential additional support which might be provided is set out in Table 4.

Social enterprise is a hybrid approach that provides a ‘middle way’ between social and business outcomes, and this arguably meshes well with the socialist-orientated market economy, or market-Leninist social order (London, 2020), providing for a potentially
unique hybrid outcome with a Vietnamese signature. Our research suggests that the translation of these processes into the Vietnamese context has benefitted the socialist state. A perspective shared by a number of interviewees is well articulated as follows by one entrepreneur: ‘there are pressures on public finances [and social enterprises are] free to operate services which might otherwise be supported or run publicly’. Perhaps this explains why the government of a socialist-orientated market economy would want to tolerate if not facilitate the social economy. Social enterprise is assisting the state by filling the sizeable and arguably growing gaps in provision, overcoming elements of marginalization, thus allowing the state to focus intervention on other policy domains.

Prior to 2012, the Vietnamese government was content to allow NGO involvement in delivering social welfare programmes, whilst enabling state-provided development to focus on other activities of national interest. The change of NGO focus from funder to capacity-builder has necessitated the government to take a more proactive role, leading to the development of the legal framework supporting the recognition of registered social enterprises. Although the government has been responsive to change, this research suggests that a further step-change in the government’s position is now required, to move from recognition of the sector to formal support. This is particularly required in the provision of seed funding and support for new enterprises.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of enterprise</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Support required or potential support to be provided</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Start-up enterprise</strong></td>
<td>New to the market, seeking to identify the balance between social or environmental impact, whilst being profit seeking and self-sustaining.</td>
<td>The provision of mentoring and expertise to develop the human resource; impact investment or seed funding to assist with start-up costs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Socially aware enterprise or ‘intermediate’ enterprise</strong></td>
<td>Seeking to develop a sustainable business, with increasing percentage of profit being focused on the social objective as the business develops.</td>
<td>To be determined – some enterprises seek less government interaction; others more non-financial support; some would welcome a reduced tax rate to facilitate sustainability and the development of the social mission. More research on this element of social enterprise would be valuable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Established social enterprise</strong></td>
<td>An enterprise with an objective to resolve social or environmental issues in the interests of the community, and which re-invests at least 51% of its profits to accomplish this objective.</td>
<td>Implementation of the Law on Enterprise (2014) and the provision of tax breaks at 10% to encourage the sustainability of the enterprise and potential scaling-up opportunities. Reiteration of the benefits of registering as a social enterprise.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Support required by social enterprise – by degree of establishment.
Conclusions

Social enterprise has developed in Vietnam within the context of state and civil society interactions, and international and national as well as neoliberal and socialist power dynamics. The social enterprise sector in Vietnam was initially established within a government policy void and is now flourishing and continuing to provide good outcomes, particularly for young people, with government acceptance. Government measures, with NGO support, are addressing issues of capacity, focusing on human capital, knowledge, and awareness of social enterprise, and developing an ‘ecosystem’ to support social enterprise activity. However, our findings suggest that government acceptance of the social enterprise sector has not translated into tangible support, reinforcing the contention by Phan and Nguyen (2017) that social enterprise in Vietnam faces barriers. Worryingly, the vast majority of social enterprises operating in Vietnam purposely reject the option of voluntary formal registration, and our research highlights that this is due to a range of reasons, including, ambiguity, cumbersome bureaucratic procedures, a lack of experienced benefits, perceived disadvantages in accessing loans, a lack of trust and concerns over the potential for corruption.

While our data suggests that in some cases the social enterprise sector appears to function better without the state, the increasingly limited capital funding for start-ups, due to Vietnam’s recent switch to non-donor-status is a potential and significant challenge, particularly as ODA was previously a key funding stream for many social enterprises. The reduction in investment capital for new enterprise may impact on the rate of the sector’s growth, and this could be a matter for consideration by the government, as well as foreign governmental and non-governmental organizations. It would be a lost opportunity if the rising standard of living for the better-off in society paradoxically prevents the development of the sector which can do so much to improve quality of life, wellbeing, and life chances for the least well-off who have been largely excluded from the benefits of Vietnam’s rise to middle-income status.

We have sought to address the challenges and opportunities for the development of the social enterprise sector in Vietnam by taking a disaggregated approach, recognizing that the sector is comprised of start-ups, intermediate, and established enterprises. Our sample involved social enterprises at similar stages of development, however further research might usefully disaggregate a wider range of registered social enterprises to investigate whether variations in perceptions occur at different developmental stages.

Our research included interviews with businesses with objectives to resolve social issues in the interests of the community, but which do not yet meet with Vietnam’s official definition of a social enterprise. Each of these businesses typically allocates between 5 and 20 per cent of profits to their social mission, with an increasing target devoted to this cause as the business develops. However, this amount remains less than the 51 per cent identified to allow recognition in Vietnamese law as a social enterprise. These small ‘intermediate’ enterprises are developing largely
without government recognition or NGO support, but with a corporate social responsibility agenda which could provide significant impacts for socially-excluded people. Whilst these businesses support the social enterprise movement by employing training scheme graduates, further research on the support which could encourage their development and enable a greater percentage of profit to be allocated to the social objective would be valuable.

For existing social entrepreneurs, the key challenges relate to the viability of their organizations, their scope to diversify to reflect a changing employment market, and the access to funding which would enable the establishment of the next generation of social entrepreneurs. The social enterprise vocational training sector in Vietnam is developed, well regarded, sustainable and achieving. While it is currently small in scale, for those who are fortunate enough to participate in a scheme, the outcomes and employment opportunities are life-changing.

An explanation of the support that is currently offered would overcome the confusion that exists amongst social economy organizations, whilst government support of existing social enterprise programmes, particularly through implementing the existing taxation legislation, could ensure business viability and financial security. The Vietnamese state has a history of enabling rather than proactively promoting social enterprise. Extending this responsive approach with further enabling support, where identified, would close the gaps which our research has identified: the gap that is evident between policy and its implementation; and the gap resulting from an institutional focus on system capacity, which overlooks the support that is required for organizational longevity. These measures might enable some scaling-up or replication in new locations, having an impact on a greater number of disadvantaged people.

Vietnam’s present has been shaped by historical geopolitical struggles, and it is these contestations of power that have shaped, and continue to shape, the boundaries for social enterprise activity. The future depends on how the state navigates with neoliberalism, the dominant economic ideology for the modern era. The adaptability of the Vietnamese development model is mirrored by the opportunistic adaptability of social entrepreneurship that has enabled its development within the constraints of existing political, economic, cultural and social systems. Synergy exists between state and civil society; a more positive, supporting and encouraging approach by the government, which also allows organizational autonomy, and with recognition of the aggregated nature of the sector, could enable social enterprise to thrive in the future, whilst also promoting state legitimacy. However, the prospects of a more proactive while hands-off approach occurring is uncertain, especially given the ongoing challenges posed by endemic corruption and the strong state control over civil society that are unlikely to change soon.

Nevertheless, the Vietnamese government has a role in overcoming the challenges and facilitating opportunities, and this embodies the symbiotic relationship between state and civil society. By surmounting the challenges and harnessing opportunities, social enterprise in Vietnam can continue to impact positively in the face of enduring
and at times, increasing, socio-economic inequalities that further disadvantage and marginalization, whilst supporting the socialist state’s social policy for an inclusive future for all.

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