



Social Enterprise in Vietnam

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is part of a series of Working Papers produced under the International Comparative Social Enterprise Models (ICSEM) Project.

Launched in July 2013, the ICSEM Project (www.iap-socent.be/icsem-project) is the result of a partnership between an Interuniversity Attraction Pole on Social Enterprise (IAP-SOCENT) funded by the Belgian Science Policy and the EMES International Research Network. It gathers around 200 researchers—ICSEM Research Partners—from some 50 countries across the world to document and analyze the diversity of social enterprise models and their eco-systems.

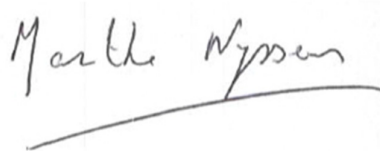
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First and foremost, the production of these Working Papers relies on the efforts and commitment of Local ICSEM Research Partners. They are also enriched through discussion in the framework of Local ICSEM Talks in various countries, Regional ICSEM Symposiums and Global Meetings held alongside EMES International Conferences on Social Enterprise. We are grateful to all those who contribute in a way or another to these various events and achievements of the Project.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social enterprises make a significant contribution to both economic development and societal well-being; they have thus been considered as an effective solution to address many current social and environmental problems across the globe. As in many other countries, social enterprises in Vietnam have made substantial contributions to meeting social needs and solving numerous social issues. While the term “social enterprise” has only recently been legally defined (in the new Enterprise Law of November 2014) and advocated as an innovative approach for Vietnam’s broader social and economic development, organizations integrating both economic and social goals have been operating in the country since the early 1990s. The year 1986 marked an important transformation of the Vietnamese economy, from a centrally planned regime into a socialist oriented market economy, through the so-called “Open Door” (*Doi Moi*) policy, which creates a favorable environment for the development of the private business and nonprofit sectors. By providing tax exemption and other advantages, some state policies have motivated private enterprises to provide social services such as health care and education or to integrate people with disabilities into their businesses as employees. These changes are believed to have paved the way for the emergence of the social enterprise movement in Vietnam.

The majority of Vietnamese social enterprises have been developed in response to social needs and led by charismatic and persistent social entrepreneurs. Professional intermediaries and supporting programs have promoted the social enterprise movement since 2008 by popularizing the “social enterprise” notion among the public, facilitating policy advocacy and incubating social enterprise initiatives. Additionally, in response to the country’s new economic status and the decline in international development funding sources, Vietnamese non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have launched business activities to generate financial return to sustain their social activities and social missions, thus becoming one of the social enterprise models in Vietnam.

In this paper, we will first present the historical background (section 2) and the current context as well as the key factors and driving forces which led to the development of social enterprise in Vietnam (section 3). On the basis of previous studies and our observation, we then propose a classification of four broad models of social enterprise that can be found throughout Vietnam (section 4). The four broad models of social enterprise include: (i) cooperatives; (ii) social enterprises established and driven by social entrepreneurs; (iii) social enterprises incubated by professional intermediaries; and (iv) social enterprises transformed from local NGOs. For each social enterprise model, we present distinctive features of the social enterprise phenomenon in Vietnam based on three core components: social mission, financial structure and organizational governance.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Before 1986, the state held monopoly power in planning and organizing all economic activities as well as in providing social services to people. Cooperatives, as collective economic entities, were strongly promoted by the government; they were defined as socio-economic and cultural collective units for individuals and families, mostly farmers. The number of cooperatives grew sharply, from 45 to 73,470, in the period from 1955 to 1986 (Economic Committee of National Assembly and United Nations Development Program 2010). Among the massive number of cooperatives, many were established to create jobs for and improve

the lives of vulnerable people, such as people with disabilities. Cooperatives, therefore, are considered as one of the early models of Vietnamese social enterprises.

After 1986, the Open Door Policy created essential conditions for the emergence of the social enterprise movement in the country. Individuals and groups are now allowed to set up private enterprises. Some public policies encourage the private sector to assist marginalized groups and to provide public social services. One of the remarkable policies is the one that grants tax reduction or exemption to private enterprises providing employment and job training opportunities to people with disabilities and ethnic minorities. Another important policy is the “socialization policy” through which the state calls for investment and commitment on the part of various economic organizations and individuals to provide public services such as health care and education. As a result, a number of pioneering private-owned enterprises tackling social problems through business activities have appeared since the early 1990s.

In the last decade, Vietnam has been facing rising issues that put its stability at risk and challenge its development. These include both social issues (for instance, low quality of education and health care, and inequality between men and women; between urban areas and rural, remote, mountainous areas; between ethnic majority and ethnic minorities, and so forth) and environmental issues (such as climate change, natural disasters, and so on). To resolve these critical social and environmental problems, resources from the social sector and international community are highly important for Vietnam.

During decades, non-public social organizations (also known as nonprofit, non-governmental, or civil society organizations) were established to receive international development aid from foreign countries and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). However, since 2010, the new status of Vietnam as a “lower middle-income country” and the threat of a potential decline in international development funds have urged Vietnamese nonprofit social organizations to evolve into more market-driven business entities. This transformation enables social organizations to generate diverse incomes so that they can tackle social and environmental problems more sustainably.

Aligning with this trend, a number of donors and intermediary organizations have supported social initiatives with a focus on incubating new initiatives and strengthening existing organizations’ operations through training, mentoring, networking and research services. Leading donors and intermediaries supporting the social entrepreneurship movement in Vietnam include the British Council, the Irish Aid, the Center for Social Initiatives Promotion, and the Spark Center for Social Entrepreneurship Development. The British Council has been supporting the social and economic development of Vietnam by connecting Vietnamese individuals, communities, businesses and government with partners from the United Kingdom in relevant areas, including social entrepreneurship. With a central focus on Vietnamese civil society organizations, Irish Aid funds the Innovating Civil Society Organizations (ICSO) program, a two-and-a-half-year program initiated in 2014 and conducted by the Center for Social Initiatives Promotion. The ICSO program focuses on capacity building for civil society organizations that aim to apply social entrepreneurial solutions to achieve financial autonomy and sustainability and to expand their social impacts.

Thanks to the supporting programs of those active donors and intermediaries, social entrepreneurship has recently been attracting attention and participation of various stakeholders in the society, including policy makers, regulators, donors, impact investors, entrepreneurs, activists as well as academics, interested individuals and organizations. These

combined efforts and engagement create an emerging multi-stakeholder ecosystem that constitutes a supportive environment for the development of social enterprise in Vietnam.

3. CURRENT CONTEXT

The social entrepreneurship movement in Vietnam has developed rapidly and drawn attention of various stakeholders in the last few years.

In a research project jointly conducted by the Center for Social Initiatives Promotion, the British Council and the Spark Center for Social Entrepreneurship Development (2011), among 100,000 entities reviewed, 167 organizations were identified as social enterprises and 2,000 additional organizations were deemed to have the potential to evolve into social enterprises. Social enterprises exist in a variety of legal forms. About 60% of the identified social enterprises operate as centers and companies. The rest are associations, clubs, cooperatives, funds or schools. The number of social enterprises has been growing significantly since 2011, including new incubated social enterprises and transformed local NGOs. As of June 2014, the online database established by the Center for Social Initiatives Promotion alone listed 209 organizations. The number of social enterprises in Vietnam might in fact be significantly higher than these figures suggest, as many organizations may operate as social enterprises or engage in social entrepreneurial activities without being formally registered as social enterprises.

Regarding the legislative aspect, Enterprise Law No. 68/2014/QH13 and Decree 96/2015/ND-CP mark a significant milestone in the social enterprise development history, to the extent that these legal texts formally legitimize social enterprise for the first time. Under the Enterprise Law, a social enterprise is defined as “a registered enterprise under the Enterprise Law that meets core criteria: (1) its objectives are to solve social and environmental issues for community benefits, and (2) at least 51% of annual surpluses are reinvested and used for registered social and environmental goals”. Although the law shows government’s recognition of the social enterprise concept, supporting policies toward the sector’s development remain very modest. For example, social enterprises are allowed to mobilize and receive grants and donations, but they do not benefit from preferential treatment such as tax exemption for their business activities. Moreover, the mechanism through which social enterprises receive government subsidies or preferential public contracts in providing social solutions is not clear.

In the academic sphere, in recent years, many activities such as workshops, seminars, conferences, academic and consulting research on social entrepreneurship have been conducted by individual researchers and institutions. For example, the Center for Economic Development Studies at Vietnam National University, Hanoi - University of Economics and Business has been involved in a range of projects and academic activities in the field. In 2014, the Center conducted a study entitled “Evaluating financial capability of social enterprise in Vietnam”, sponsored by Irish Aid. The study report attempted to analyze the financial sustainability of social enterprises and the challenges they face. The Center also published or presented several papers regarding social entrepreneurship in local scientific magazines and international conferences.

Notably, there have been several efforts to include the social enterprise concept into educational programs in higher education, although a curriculum or a degree training program on social entrepreneurship and related fields has not been developed yet. For instance, the British Council funded Thai Nguyen University to integrate corporate social

responsibility and social enterprise concepts into its curriculum. A recent conference on “Social enterprise in Vietnam: the role of universities and research institutions” (March 2015) was organized by National Economics University with the support of the British Council; it aimed to raise awareness of the topic and offer university leaders and lecturers an opportunity to share international experience. The network of Vietnamese scholars on social enterprise (VSES) was launched at the conference and has rapidly attracted participation of many academics and researchers.

4. CLASSIFICATION OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISE IN VIETNAM

There are several ways to classify social enterprise models in Vietnam, depending on their objectives and functional management. In this section, we will review one of the most popular ways of categorizing social enterprises, proposed by the Center for Social Initiatives Promotion, the British Council and the Central Institute for Economic Management. We will then propose our approach to grouping social enterprise models for the purpose of this paper.

According to the Center for Social Initiatives Promotion, the British Council and the Central Institute for Economic Management (2012), social enterprises in Vietnam can be categorized into three main groups, mainly based on their legal status, namely: (i) non-profit social enterprises; (ii) not-for-profit social enterprises and (iii) social business ventures/profit social enterprise.

Non-profit social enterprises are often registered under various legal forms, including those of centers, associations, funds, clubs, voluntary groups of people with disabilities, people living with HIV/AIDS, women suffering from violence, and so on. Those organizations are considered as local NGOs.

Not-for-profit social enterprises usually combine social missions and economic goals. Profits from business activities are used to re-invest in social programs. Not-for-profit social enterprises are often registered as limited or joint stock companies and operate under the Enterprise Law.

Social business ventures/profit social enterprises are for-profit social enterprises that have missions to create positive social changes while providing shareholders with dividends and, more importantly, sharing a social mission with all of them. Social enterprises of this type typically operate under the legal forms of companies, cooperatives, and micro-finance organizations.

In practice, though, this classification of social enterprise models is challenging, due to the lack of transparency in finance records and reporting. Information about profit is usually not being explicitly audited and announced.

There are also other approaches to the classification of social enterprise models in Vietnam, which take into account various classification purposes. The development of different social enterprise models throughout history is affected by the political, economic and social context of the country. In this paper, the authors will categorize social enterprises into four broad groups, based mainly on their emergence contexts and processes. The four groups are:

- (1) cooperatives;
- (2) social enterprises established and driven by social entrepreneurs;
- (3) social enterprises incubated by professional intermediaries;
- (4) social enterprises transformed from local NGOs.

In the following sections, we will present the distinctive features of these four types of social enterprise in terms of social mission, finance and governance.

4.1. Cooperatives

Cooperatives are collective economic entities that are jointly owned and democratically controlled by at least seven volunteering members and cooperate in production, business, and job creation to meet the common needs of their members (Cooperative Law 2012). Cooperatives are considered as one of the early models of social enterprise in Vietnam; they indeed engage in business activities in order to achieve social goals of bringing mutual benefits to their members.

Cooperatives in Vietnam have a long history of development since the 1950s. They used to be dominating economic entities besides state-owned enterprises in the pre-1986 economy, in which the state played the governing role. After the implementation of the Open Door policy, with the emergence of the private sector, cooperatives lost their popularity. They then evolved into a more autonomous model, with more independence and democracy in the overall process of production, decision-making and profit distribution.

The number of cooperatives went down sharply, from 73,470 in 1986 to 18,607 in 1996 (first Cooperative Law), and to 14,207 in 2003 (revised Cooperative Law); they then recovered to some extent, reaching a population of 18,244 in 2010 (Economic Committee of National Assembly and United Nations Development Program 2010).

Cooperatives in Vietnam operate in various sectors. 50% of cooperatives are active in the agriculture field, where there is a large number of poor farmers. Another 14% of cooperatives employ people with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups (Vietnam Cooperative Alliance 2005-2010).

Social mission

Cooperatives' social mission is to bring common economic, social, and cultural benefits to their members. Members often engage closely with cooperatives as producers, consumers or employees. All cooperatives' members are equal in income distribution. Common central goals are to increase income and improve the quality of life of their members. In addition, cooperatives are also encouraged to promote education, training, and community development.

Finance

Cooperatives can mobilize various types of financial resources for their business activities, including members' contributions, loans, reservation capitals, funds, government subsidies, grants and donations by domestic and international individuals and organizations. Among these resources, members' contributions are usually the main source of finance for cooperatives' operations and investments. Each member can contribute money or in-kind

contributions such as land or intellectual property, but his/her portion cannot exceed 20% of the registered capital.

Regarding income distribution, cooperatives in Vietnam must retain at least 20% of their income for the cooperative's development investment fund, and at least 5% for the financial reserve fund; the rest can be distributed among members on the basis of contribution proportion. Co-operatives frequently have social goals, which they pursue by investing a share of their trading profits back into their communities to meet the educational, cultural and social needs of their members.

Governance

Cooperatives are owned and operated jointly by their members and the governance structure must ensure equality among them. It is stated in the Cooperative Law 2012 that "all members have equal right to vote, not depending on the amount of shares; all members should be informed sufficiently about operation, business performance, finance, income distribution and other activities." Cooperatives' governance includes board, director, and supervisory board or supervisors. Members' congress, where cooperatives' governing people and their members meet, is the most important event in the decision-making process. Members' congress is organized annually or whenever needed.

4.2. Social enterprises established and driven by social entrepreneurs

This category refers to social enterprises that are set up by social entrepreneurs—usually charismatic and persistent individuals, who are strongly aware of and deeply caring for one or several social issues. Social entrepreneurs often set up private companies or business entities to solve the social needs they have identified through entrepreneurial activities. They typically use business as a tool and innovatively combine social goals with commercial activities in order to sustain their organizations. In this group, founders play a vital role in the establishment and growth of the social enterprise thanks to their will, passion, and persistence.

This model appeared in the early 1990s, alongside private enterprises in Vietnam. Mai Vietnamese Handicrafts Limited Company, Hoa Sua School of Economics and Tourism, Sao Mai Center, and KOTO are some examples hereof. Mai Handicrafts, established in 1990, trades handicrafts produced by neglected rural women in small remote villages. Hoa Sua, registered in 1994, provides cooking and hospitality training for underprivileged and handicapped youths. Sao Mai, set up in 1995, provides early detection and intervention for children with intellectual disabilities. KOTO, established in 1999, empowers street and disadvantaged youths through vocational training in hospitality.

A group of social enterprises in this model were set up by founders who came from disadvantaged backgrounds themselves and thus have a deep understanding of the needs of vulnerable people. Some businesses in this group are entitled to governmental subsidies and support, such as receiving free job training and benefiting from tax exemption for employing people with disabilities or ethnic minorities in mountainous and extremely difficult areas. Hong Ha Limited Company, for example, was set up in 2005 by a handicapped entrepreneur to provide vocational training and to create jobs in the garment sector for people with disabilities. Since then, the company has trained 250 trainees, including disabled and unskilled workers. The company also hires nearly 40 employees (Center for Economic

Development Studies 2014) in its garment factory, among which over 50% are people with disabilities.

Social mission

Social enterprises in this group usually aim at solving one or several specific problems and at creating positive impacts for communities in need through job creation for the poor and people with disabilities and through job training for street youths and teenagers from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Finance

The background and working experience of these social enterprises' founders may play an important role in mobilizing financial resources for their organizations. Founders with NGO background or state sector experience tend to get more donations and support from international NGOs or government institutions respectively.

Although social enterprises in this group mobilize various types of financial resources, including both business revenue and grant resources, the share of business revenue within their resource mix tends to increase over time. A recent report conducted by the Center for Economic Development Studies (2014) reveals that for some of the social enterprises established in the early 1990s, such as Sao Mai, Hoa Sua, or Hong Ha Garment (mentioned above), the share of income from trading activities has increased over time. After some 10-20 years in operation, these social enterprises retain part of their profits to reinvest in their development, so that they can increase their impact and scale up their business.

Governance

The social enterprises in this group usually have more than 50 employees (for example, Hong Ha has 47, Sao Mai has 95, and Hoa Sua has 86). But although some social enterprises have an advisory board, as required by the legal governance structure, in most cases, the founding social entrepreneurs still play a key role in the organizational governance; they remain central actors in the decision-making process, leadership and management. KOTO is the only case observed by the authors that it is currently run by a board of directors; the founder is currently in the board of trustees.

A survey conducted by the Center for Economic Development Studies (2014) indicates that employee empowerment is still limited in these established social enterprises. Among the 19 surveyed organizations, 17 are still being governed by their original founders. One of the remaining two organizations is led by the son of the founder, representing an apparent case of family succession. In that case, the original founder still retains an advisory and oversight role through her relationship with her son and with the organization that she founded and led for many years.

4.3. Social enterprises incubated by professional intermediaries

Social enterprises in this group are inspired and motivated by supporting programs and incubating organizations. They started to emerge in 2008-2009 with the development of professional social enterprise incubators and intermediaries such as the Center for Social Initiatives Promotion (CSIP) and the Spark Center for Social Entrepreneurship Development (Spark).

From 2009 to 2014, the CSIP has supported and promoted 78 social initiatives, which have improved the lives of over 200,000 disadvantaged people (<http://csip.vn/en>). About 20 other social enterprises received seed funding and capacity-building support from Spark (<http://spark.org.vn/en/>). Social enterprise supporting programs have continuously been innovating in order to effectively promote the development of the social sector in Vietnam. Innovative sectorial support programs have also been implemented in various fields, such as initiatives for HIV-affected groups, inclusive businesses, and initiatives in the area of health, agriculture, and climate change.

Social enterprises in this group often receive training and consulting on business models and impact evaluation from social enterprise incubators. In addition, with the dynamics of a younger generation of social entrepreneurs, they tend to be innovative in creating new products and services, implementing new processes, and approaching new markets. For example, SECO Social Enterprise started in 2012 with the purpose of bridging the market gap for ethnic minorities' local products; 65% of this enterprise's business profits are committed to support children, women and poor families of ethnic minorities through scholarships for students and to provide technical support for ethnic minorities to improve their production capacity. Sapa O' Chau aims to improve the lives of ethnic minority youths through education, vocational training, and work opportunities, while encouraging other local families to set up local businesses and keep their children in school.

Social mission

Social enterprises in this group usually aim at solving certain social problems through business initiatives, which are then strengthened by supporting programs of social enterprise incubators.

Finance

Incubated social enterprises usually receive seed funding and capacity-building consultancy from supporting programs. They are also active in mobilizing various resources from both business and development aid sources. Thanks to supporting programs, they usually have a clear business model in which the business side is strongly promoted and enhanced. However, most businesses in this model are young and in the startup phase of development. Most of them are struggling to survive in the market or looking for resources to expand their business size.

Governance

Similarly to what is the case in the group of social enterprises established and driven by social entrepreneurs, founders of social enterprises incubated by professional intermediaries usually act as directors of companies and are directly involved in the daily management of business operations. These social enterprises often have fewer than 10 employees.

4.4. Social enterprises transformed from local NGOs

Since 2010, Vietnam has become a “lower-middle income country”. Many large development agencies such as the Department For International Development (DFID) of the United Kingdom or the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) have put an end to their programs in the country or are planning to do so. Development aid has become competitive and scarce. In response to the situation, many local NGOs have to look for various income sources. Some provide consultancy services or trade products to increase the income available for their operation. Others set up a business arm to generate revenues, which in turn serve their social purposes. A support program for those organizations has been conducted since 2014 by CSIP. 43 civil society organizations received capacity-building support within this program; some strong cases also received seed funding and in-depth consulting services.

The ICS Center constitutes a good example of a social enterprise of this type. The ICS Center was founded as a not-for-profit organization in 2008 under the Department of Planning and Investment of Ho Chi Minh City by and for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) minority community, which accounts for about 2 million people in Vietnam. ICS mainly relied on international funding from bilateral donors and international non-governmental organizations like SIDA, Oxfam, USAID, or the US Embassy. In 2013, ICS started to provide professional counseling services, including psychology and legal advisory, for LGBT and their families. 100% of profit is reinvested in activities for the LGBT community.

Social mission

Most social enterprises in this group have clear social goals but they do not have yet a relevant business model to finance their operations in a sustainable way. Local NGOs usually have well-established social missions, which they have been pursuing for many years using international funding sources.

Finance

From the authors’ observation, transformed NGOs still rely mainly on grants and donations, although they start to provide some services, such as consultancy or training, in order to increase their income. The proportion of income from business activities is still very modest. Only some NGOs with strong expertise and experience can provide professional training services to the wider community and attract new clients to generate more income.

Governance

In this group, individual founders also play governing roles in their enterprises.

5. CONCLUSION

In Vietnam, social entrepreneurs, professional intermediaries and market are the three driving forces behind the emergence and development of the social enterprise sector. Most social enterprises are led by and rely on charismatic social entrepreneurs, which may cause a challenge in terms of governance structure when those founders retire. Professional intermediary organizations have greatly contributed to raising social awareness of the public and to incubating a group of enthusiastic social enterprises. Market is the driver for the group of local NGOs evolving into more business-oriented entities in order to generate more sustainable sources of income to attain their social objectives. In Vietnam, the state has not directly leveraged the establishment of the social enterprise sector. However, the state has been advocating to provide supporting policies for the development of the sector.

Despite many differences, the four broad groups of Vietnamese social enterprises—namely (1) cooperatives, (2) social enterprises established and driven by social entrepreneurs, (3) social enterprises incubated by professional intermediaries, and (4) social enterprises transformed from local NGOs—share several similar features regarding their social mission, finance, and governance. In terms of governance, governance structures such as boards are not strongly developed in Vietnam, in particular in small and medium enterprises. It remains common for the founder to serve as the long-term director, with a strong and centralized decision-making power; where it exists, the organization's governance or advisory board usually plays a relatively minimal role. Most social enterprises mobilize various financial resources, including business activities and development funds, to cover their operational expenses and achieve their social objectives. With the exception of some social enterprises established in the 1990s, most social enterprises resulting from the evolution of local NGOs are relatively new and they are still struggling to secure sufficient incomes to survive and scale up.

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