Civil society action: Another formation of civil society in Vietnam (The case studies of environmental protection in Dong Nai River Basin, Vietnam)

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ABSTRACT

Most research on civil society in Vietnam tends to equate civil society with registered civil society organizations. This seems to provide an inadequate understanding of the civil society in Vietnam. To fill this gap, this research adopts the action-based approach that underlines civil society action—another formation of civil society in Vietnam. This approach is examined via the contrast cases between a foreign-invested company and a state-owned enterprise that better understand the formation and contribution of civil society action on Vietnam’s environmental issue. My findings confirmed that civil society in Vietnam is not only in the form of organizations but also the action via utilizing the chain of activities based on the voluntariness in public space toward common interest, and it exists in the Vietnamese color. At the end of this article, I will discuss the implications of this study for the effective contributions of civil society in Vietnam.

1. Introduction

Vietnam’s civil society is often considered the formally registered organization recognized by the Vietnamese state (Norlund, 2007; P. T. Le, 2013; Q. H. Tran, 2010; Waibel & Benedikter, 2013; Wells-Dang, 2011). Besides the formally registered organizations, civil society action, not recognized by the state and rarely mentioned in Vietnam, is silently mobilizing activities to work for the common benefit of the community in Vietnam. Recent issues such as supporting the Central of Vietnam to overcome the heavy rainfall and flood 2020 (Department of Community-based Disaster Risk Reduction, 2020), protesting tree-felling plan 2015 in Hanoi (Q. Le, 2015), objecting the filling up the Dong Nai River for construction of housing in 2015 and demonstrating the fish death caused by Taiwan’s Formosa Ha Tinh Steel Corporation (Mollman, 2016) showed that the coordinated actions of scientists, students, NGOs (Non-governmental organizations) and citizens can promote their advantages to bring common interest for communities.

Existing studies mainly address civil society organizations (Hannah, 2007; Reis, 2014; Thayer, 2009, 2014; Wischermann, Nguyen, Bui, Dang, & Nguyen, 2015; Waibel & Benedikter, 2013) in Vietnam while little research focuses on civil society networks or civil society action (Wells-Dang, 2011, 2014a). Therefore, this study adopts civil society action to emphasize the chain of voluntary activities in the public sphere towards a common good. This research attempts to fill this gap by studying how civil society actions are used to tie individuals’ or groups’
activities together based on common interest.

Although many pollution cases occurred in Vietnam, civil society action has been largely overlooked in the literature on environmental protection in Vietnam. This research focuses on two case studies to trace the dynamics of civil society actors involved in environmental protection by concentrating interaction between civil society actors with the state agencies and polluting companies.

This article examines environmental protection by juxtaposing the state agencies, enterprises, and civil society as they interacted in the two cases of environmental pollution. The culprits in these cases included foreign-owned Vedan Vietnam Company and Sonadezi Long Thanh Company, a State-Owned Enterprise (SOE). Both are located in Long Thanh District, Dong Nai Province and were found to have polluted Dong Nai River Basin between the years 2008 to 2012. The two company cases were selected because causing the pollution was severe, and two companies are different ownership to find out how civil society action was formed to different types of polluting businesses (A. T. V. Tran, 2017).

To reconstruct the politics of industrial pollution cases, I apply the political ecology approach to explore the characteristics, interests, and actions of the companies, the state, and civil society in order to find out how different actors pursued and protected their economic and other interests in dealing with pollution. This approach also shows how the state agencies used their power to put pressure on civil society and how civil society, the less powerful actor vis-à-vis the state, and the companies struggled with their more powerful counterparts. My research highlights how actors create the room to carry out civil society action by relying on formal and informal connections against industrial pollution.

The remaining parts of the paper present the literature review, the conceptual framework, and the findings from the comparative case studies. In conclusion, I will address that civil society action in this research revealed another form of civil society in Vietnam so far and addressed the current debate whether civil society exists in Vietnam or not. I also confirm that civil society action is more and more popular in Vietnam so far because it can use the advantages of internet development. From this background, I will discuss the implications of this study for the effective contributions of civil society in Vietnam.

2. The literature review: The current debate on civil society in Vietnam

Civil society in Vietnam is focused on its associational aspect and the other on the action aspect. This section first discusses the two approaches to civil society: the association-based versus the action-based approach. Based on this discussion, I will redefine civil society action, which will pave the way to recognize civil society action against industrial water pollution.

2.1. The association-based versus action-based approach to civil society in Vietnam

Previous studies following the association-based approach categorized Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Vietnam into several types (Mai & Schweisshelm, 2020, p. 8; Norlund, 2007, p. 79; Thayer, 2009, p. 6; Umfreville & Bonnin, 2021). For example, Norlund delineates four types of CSOs: (1) mass organizations; (2) professional associations and umbrella organizations; (3) domestic NGOs; (4) community-based organizations (CBOs) (Norlund, 2007, p. 79). According to this view, Vietnam experienced a vibrancy of civil society as it saw the

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1 Data were collected through in-depth interviews (165 interviewees), direct observation, group discussions and a fieldwork diary during nine months of fieldwork from 2013 to 2014. I also consulted secondary data such as media articles and online resources (A. T. V. Tran, 2017).
rapid increase of registered NGOs from fewer than 200 in the late 1990s to approximately 1,700 in 2013 (Wells-Dang, 2014b, p. 163). The categorized CSOs are organizations that have to be allowed to register by the state (P. T. Le, 2013, p. 176; Wells-Dang, 2014a, p. 163). Meanwhile, civil society, as conceptualized by classical theories, refers to public life outside the family, state and market as its core criterion (Norlund, 2007, p. 72). The notion of civil society as the independent realm outside the state is also applied to research on Vietnam. CIVICUS\(^2\) an international NGO, for example, defines civil society as “the arena, outside of the family, the state and the market where people associate to advance common interests” in its research on Vietnam (Norlund, 2007, p. 75). Similarly, Dang Ngoc Dinh, a Vietnamese scholar, regards civil society as “the social organizations [that] exist outside the state, outside the activities of the market, outside the family to connect people to work for a common goal” (Dang, 2006). As the concept of an area independent from the state does not exist, one may be led to a debate that civil society does not exist in Vietnam.

Despite the differences between reality and theory, it does not imply that civil society per se fails to exist in Vietnam (Kurfürst, 2012, p. 12). To underline the existence of civil society in Vietnam, the action-based approach differs from the association-based one in specific ways by paying attention to CSOs’ activities, purposes, motivations, and processes. The action-based approach concern what civil society does rather than what civil society is or what organizations or institutions it consists of.

Taking the action-based approach, Hannah proposes investigating what he termed “civil society process” which focuses on civil society activities and functions. They are even found in state or quasi-state organizations. He argues that the civil society process can change government policies despite the state strictly supervisor civil society (Hannah, 2007, p. 6).

Borrowing Hannah’s conceptual framework, Marston uses the term “civil society actors” to define their activities rather than concentrating on whether they are independent of the state or not (Marston, 2012, p. 177). Marston examines the action process carried out by actors against the bauxite mining project. Marston emphasizes the whole process of action rather than the final result. Although the state approved the project in early 2012, civil society actors such as grassroots citizens, reform-minded political elites, journalists, scientists and Vietnamese NGOs (VNGOs) cooperated in sending the petitions to the central government and tried to attract the attention from public opinion against exploiting bauxite mining. They showed that they could lobby the state’s decision-makers who decided to carry out the project in a smaller area than that initially approved in 2007 (Marston, 2012, p. 187).

Similarly, Wells-Dang (2011) also uses civil society actors to emphasize civil society networks and action in his study. However, his scope of civil society is broader, including both formal civil society (comprising a range of legally registered organizations initiated outside the state, with an office, projects, and paid or volunteer staff) and informal civil society (individual activism, networks, blogs and social media, community groups, and religious activity, sometimes with fewer or none of the organizational elements) were joined together in campaigns, even sometimes coalescing into social movements based on their combined actions via networks (Wells-Dang, 2011, p. 164). Therefore, “the question who is in or out of civil society is no longer, but it focuses on what civil society actually does” (Wells-Dang, 2011, p. 180).

\(^{2}\)CIVICUS (World Alliance for Citizen Participation) carried out the study “Civil Society Index - Shortened Assessment Tool in Vietnam” to establish the first step in identifying civil society in Vietnam in 2006 (Norlund, 2007, p. 72).
2.2. Civil society action: Another formation of civil society in Vietnam

I take advantage of the action-based approach following Wells-Dang’s and Marston’s views to redefine civil society. I conceptualize civil society action as the chain of activities based on the voluntariness in public space toward common interest as four characteristics of civil society activists, which are analyzed below.

Civil society action consists of a wide variety of concrete activities. Examples include expressing opinions in newspapers and social networks (Facebook, Twitter, or Blog); sending petitions to state agencies; disseminating knowledge to the public through organizing training, seminars, and conferences; doing demonstrations, lawsuits, boycotts, and mass media campaigns; and providing material or emotional support to needers. These activities are carried out by individuals, groups, communities or organizations, or through collaboration among some of these actors. The activities focus on what civil society does rather than whether civil society in or out the state, family, and market (Wells-Dang, 2011, p. 45).

Voluntariness means that people are free to share their same expectations and carry out their common goals. The activities are not considered civil society action if they have resulted in intimidation, bullying, or repression.

Following Habermas’ idea of the public sphere, I consider public space as an arena for communication and action toward public purposes, that is, a place where people come together to form opinions or take common actions (Habermas, 1992, pp. 439-452). Common interests are the most important dimension; it is a defining characteristic of civil society. Civil society action has to serve the common interests and needs of the community rather than those of individuals or families, or political parties. It is also implied that civil society action is not oriented at individual or family purposes or to fulfill economic purposes or political aims of certain families or individuals. Besides, civil society actors can take the form of advocacy, which “engage[s] and make[s] demands to state and society in order to influence and change the decision of any institutional elite on behalf of a common interest” (Wells-Dang, 2011, p. 53). Civil society action must serve common interests regardless of where it occurs or who carries it out. Activities serving common interests must be non-violation and toward social welfare.

Before illustrating civil society action in two case studies, this study will present a theoretical perspective from the political ecology to prove how civil society actors used limited space against the more powerful counterpart to carry out civil society action via formal and informal connections.

3. Civil society actors from the political ecology perspective

The political ecology (Bryant & Bailey, 1997) approach treats the human-environment relationship as a political issue. This approach explores different actors’ characteristics, interests, and actions (such as the state, multilateral institutions, businesses, environmental non-governmental organizations, and grassroots actors) to understand environmental problems from economic and political dimensions in newly industrialized countries. The approach addresses how different actors act and interact to pursue their economic and other interests. The focus is on actors’ ways of using their power by identifying how one actor seeks to exert control over the environment of other actors and how the less powerful actors resist and struggle with their more powerful counterparts (Bryant & Bailey, 1997, p. 47).
Figure 1. The political ecology approach upon industrial water pollution

Source: Author adapted from Bryant and Bailey (1997)

Based on this approach, this article examines the different characteristics, interests, and actions of the state, the polluting companies, and civil society to understand how industrial water pollution was created and how various actors with unequal powers among them dealt with it.

The subsequent sections will illustrate how the political ecology is approached in the comparative case studies of a foreign-owned company, Vedan Vietnam Company and a state-owned company, Sonadezi Long Thanh Company. How actors’ characteristics influence their interests and how they drive their response to industrial pollution will be identified. Especially, how civil society—the less powerful actors struggled or cooperated with the state and the companies—their more powerful counterparts against industrial pollution will be analyzed. How actors create the room to carry out civil society action by relying on formal and informal connections against industrial pollution is highlighted.

4. The case of Vedan Vietnam: The unity of actors against industrial water pollution

This section will describe civil society action against industrial water pollution in the case of Vedan Vietnam Dong Nai in three affected areas, Dong Nai Province, Ba Ria - Vung Tau Province and Ho Chi Minh City. Civil society action here focused on compensation, which dominated the Vedan Vietnam case. Before describing the struggle of civil society action against the pollution caused by Vedan Vietnam Company, the company’s profile is presented shortly.

4.1. The profile of a foreign-owned company

Vedan Vietnam Company, a Taiwanese-owned company, was established in Phuoc Thai Commune, Long Thanh District, Dong Nai Province, in 1991. It was the first plant of Vedan Vietnam Enterprise Corporation Limited in Vietnam³ (Vedan International, 2012; Vedan Vietnam, 2014). The Vedan Enterprise Corporation, which was established in 1954 in Taiwan, is

³After that, the Vedan Vietnam Enterprise Corporation Limited added branches in Hanoi, Phước Long, Hà Tĩnh and Ho Chi Minh City (Vedan Vietnam, 2014).
a leading producer of monosodium glutamate (MSG)—an indispensable food additive in Asia (Vedan International, 2012; Vedan Vietnam, 2014).

As Vedan Vietnam Company in Dong Nai Province first operated in 1993, it immediately discharged untreated wastewater into Thi Vai River. Polluted surface water in the river, causing the death of fish and shrimp in Dong Nai Province, Ba Ria - Vung Tau Province and Ho Chi Minh City (Bui, 2008, p. 3). As a result, affected farmers in the three regions sent petitions to government agencies accusing the company of polluting the river and demanding compensation. However, Vedan Vietnam refused to compensate them. The company only paid VND15 billion (US$1,363,363 in 1994 prices) to “support fisheries development” in three affected provinces (Bui, 2008, p. 3).

After that, Vedan Vietnam continued polluting Thi Vai River day in and day out within 14 years later, until 2008. The company had discharged 45,000 cubic meters of post-fermentation molasses waste into the river every month, not including dumping nearly 5,000 cubic meters of untreated wastewater every day. The water pollution levels were over ten times the limit set by the National Technical Regulation on Surface Water (QCVN 08: 2008/BTNMT) (Department of Inspectorate Vietnam’s Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, 2008, p. 10). The company built three Wastewater Treatment Plants (WWTP) at the same time as the illegal wastewater pipes in 1994. While the legal plants were only used, the officials of environmental agencies visited to inspect the company. Furthermore, the company evaded US$7 million in environmental taxes. Besides, the company did not install the Automatic Monitoring Station of Water Quality (AMSWW) as required by environmental regulations (Department of Inspectorate Vietnam’s Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, 2008, pp. 1-4).

Until December 2008, Vedan Vietnam’s violations were caught by environmental police after farmers sent countless petitions to protest Vedan Vietnam Company as the now “dead” Thi Vai River completely destroyed their livelihood.

4.2. The continuous struggle of affected farmers

The history of the response to pollution from Vedan Vietnam Company is the continuous struggle of affected farmers for a long time. Since the company started in 1993, farmers sent petitions to government agencies accusing Vedan Vietnam Company of polluting the river. Only VND15 billion was given in the name of “supporting fishery development” not compensation as mentioned above. Dong Nai Province People’s Committee and the Department of Natural Resources and Environment of Dong Nai Province (DONRE) agreed with Vedan Vietnam on this matter. Therefore, farmers reluctantly accepted this amount, even though they said it was so small with their loss (interviews, farmers, Dong Nai Province, Ba Ria - Vung Tau Province and Ho Chi Minh City, from June to November 2013).

Unfortunately, the farmers’ struggle with pollution did not stop there but lasted until 2008. After their initial payment, Vedan Vietnam continued polluting Thi Vai River day in and

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5AMSWW provides the automatic means of continuously monitoring the water quality. Specifically, this automatic system enables water discharge or water run-off to be measured and sampled. Moreover, it notifies when a sample collection is made or measured excess level (Dehua, Pan, Bo, & Zeng, 2012, p. 840).
day out. The pollution posed notable damages to the environment and farmers’ livelihood in Dong Nai Province, Ba Ria - Vung Tau Province and Ho Chi Minh City.

To respond to the pollution, farmers regularly drafted petitions, sent them to government agencies, and took every chance to denounce the company in meetings with government officials. However, local government officials (at the commune and district levels) replied that this matter was beyond their jurisdiction. The government officials of Dong Nai Province confirmed that they found nothing wrong with the company because at that time, many companies discharged wastewater in Thi Vai River. Farmers were unwilling to accept these answers but they could not produce concrete evidence to prove the company’s guilt. Based on farmers’ constant petitions and Japanese cargo ships’ refusing to anchor at Go Dau Port due to serious pollution, the central Environmental Police Department finally discovered several environmental violations of the Vedan Vietnam Company in September 2008 (Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, 2008, pp. 16-18). As soon as the state acknowledged Vedan Vietnam’s deeds, tens of thousands of farmers in Dong Nai Province, Ba Ria - Vung Tau Province and Ho Chi Minh City sent numerous petitions to government agencies to claim compensation from the company. However, the state seemed to respond with the compensation issue quite slowly because the state agencies had never dealt with such a huge environmental scandal as Vedan Vietnam Company. MONRE, DONREs and the provincial People’s Committees had difficulties estimating the number of farmers’ losses.

4.3. The interactions of various actions with the state agencies’ supports

Because of the confusion of government agencies to solve the Vedan case, farmers’ associations took the main role as advocates for farmers. Farmer’s Associations in Ho Chi Minh City and Ba Ria - Vung Tau Province were at the forefront of demanding compensation for farmers’ losses by negotiating with the state and companies, and later threatened a lawsuit, which prompted Vedan to accept their demands. Meanwhile, the Farmers’ Association and government in Dong Nai Province were more passive, and they claimed that they did not know how to cope with the issue. Later, the Farmers’ Association in Dong Nai Province cooperated with Farmer’s Associations in Ho Chi Minh City and Ba Ria - Vung Tau Province helped farmers require compensation under the pressure of social opinion.

As Farmers’ Associations in Ho Chi Minh City and Ba Ria - Vung Tau Province received the petitions against Vedan Vietnam; they asked permission from the provincial People’s Committees to demand compensation for farmers’ losses. With those Committees’ approval, Farmers’ Associations were able to represent farmers and participate in the meetings to discuss compensation, so they had a chance to present their opinions. As Lawyer Anh Hai confirmed:

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6The pollution caused severe difficulties in the lives of thousands of fishermen and their families. In addition, it inflicted enormous damage to 2,465 hectares of fish and shrimp ponds and dams, as well as to thousands of hectares of land (Institute for Environment and Resources, 2010a, p. 1; Institute for Environment and Resources, 2010b, p. 6; Institute for Environment and Resources, 2010c, p. 4).

7In Vietnam’s political system, Farmers’ Associations, one type of socio-political organizations but not government agencies, are managed by mass organizations under the leadership of People’s Committees at these four levels (at the commune, district, provincial and national levels) (Vietnam Farmers’ Association, 2008, pp. 1-3).

8The lawyer Anh Hai is both a lawyer and a member of farmer association of Ho Chi Minh City. He initiated the representative of farmer association for farmers to ask compensation from Vedan Vietnam Company. He also initiated a lawsuit against the company and made mass media’s involvement in this case because mass media was not accepted to participate in the first period of the Vedan case. Journalists whom I interviewed considered him as a great contributor to help farmer to get compensation in this case. I knew information about lawyer Anh Hai via newspapers, and then I came his office and asked his help to conduct interview with him.
If the state did not recognize the formal role of the Farmers’ Associations, they would have had no way to help farmers

(Interview, lawyer Brother Hai, Ho Chi Minh City, September 2013)

This strategy helps Farmers’ Associations in Ho Chi Minh City and Ba Ria - Vung Tau Province pushing the central government, Farmers’ Associations and government in Dong Nai Province to act even though officials, especially in Dong Nai Province, sometimes seemed to bias in the company favor.

The facts showed that Farmers’ Associations not only pressured the state to act but also drove negotiation with the company overcompensation. Farmers’ Associations negotiated with the company to increase compensation from 06 billion to 60 billion, as shown in the graph within 02 years.

Unsatisfied with the company’s offer in the third week of July 2010, the Farmers’ Associations decided to sue the company. In preparation for a lawsuit of Ho Chi Minh City Farmers’ Association, the People’s Committee of three provinces assigned hundreds of lawyers to help farmer households submit complaints to the people’s court of districts in July 2010 (Minh Luan & Dong Ha, 2010, p. 3). Vedan Vietnam finally agreed to pay farmers VND219.4 billion in compensation to settle the legal dispute after almost two years of negotiation (Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, 2010, p. 1).

![Figure 2](image)

*Figure 2.* The result of the compensation negotiations between Farmers’ Associations and Vedan Vietnam Company from 2009 until July 2010

Source: Figure by author, modified from the data of Tuoi Tre Newspaper (Xuan Long, 2010, p. 3)

Apart from Farmers’ Associations and lawyers’ involvement, Vedan Vietnam’s pollution and the struggle against it attracted a great deal of mass media attention. Popular newspapers in Vietnam such as Tuoi Tre (Youth), Thanh Nien (Youth) and Lao Dong (Work) ran stories on it almost every day between 2008 (when Vedan Vietnam had just been caught) and 2010 (when the company agreed to compensate for farmers’ losses as they demanded). Thus, the issue grabbed the public’s attention and often appeared on the front page of the newspapers. According to my preliminary statistics, Tuoi Tre, Thanh Nien, and Lao Dong published over 100 articles.
It is very important to show that the mass media reports significantly contributed to the nationwide boycott, which forced the company to decide on the compensation issue in August 2010. Lawyer Brother Hai first proposed a boycott against Vedan Vietnam Company but governmental officials in Ho Chi Minh City hesitated to get involved. Thanks to the networks with journalists, Brother Hai had a journalist write an article about it, reporting the issue and sharing ideas with the director of Saigon Co-op. As a result, the general director of Saigon Co-op, a well-known supermarket chain in Vietnam, sent out a press release on 05 August 2010 to newspapers such as Tuoi Tre and Sai Gon Tiep Thi. She announced that her supermarket chain would stop selling Vedan Vietnam’s products (Saigon Co-op, 2010, p. 1). Other supermarkets and markets soon followed suit. This news was reported right away in most national newspapers. VTV1 - a national television channel- ran the footage with the title “Consumers turn their back on Vedan Vietnam’s products” (Vietnam Television Online, 2010). Thanks to the mass media, the boycott spread all over Vietnam, not limited to Ho Chi Minh City or southern Vietnam.

As the former lawyer of the Vedan Vietnam Company admitted, the company couldn’t control the situation because of the mass media. National mass media impact on international public opinion. As a result, Vedan Vietnam had to compensate farmers. The conversation below revealed how the mass media were well exploited.

Q: What made Vedan Vietnam compensate farmers?

A: The mass media. Mass media knocked Vedan Vietnam out from the international market. In the market in Vietnam, the company was not impacted much, but international banks and INGOs were concerned about the environment. Many international media agencies and even the English General Consultants also wanted to clarify with the Vedan Vietnam Company over this problem. As a result, Vedan Vietnam’s stock in Hong Kong dropped by four times and international banks did not allow Vedan to borrow money. Eventually, the situation went out of control.

(Interview, lawyer, Anh Ba, September 2013)

As mentioned above, the case of Vedan Vietnam revealed the participation of different
actors with various actions from affected farmers to lawyers, journalists, and consumers, from petition to boycott. Although the same problem, industrial water pollution, occurred in the same district in Dong Nai Province as the Vedan Vietnam case, Sonadezi Long Thanh attracted fewer actors, as presented below.

5. The case of Sonadezi Long Thanh: Actors taking advantage of a little opportunity against industrial water pollution

As mentioned above, the case of Vedan Vietnam revealed the participation of different actors with varied actions from affected farmers to lawyers, journalists and consumers, from petition to boycott. Although the same problem, industrial water pollution, occurred in the same district in Dong Nai Province as the Vedan Vietnam case, Sonadezi Long Thanh attracted fewer actors. Before describing the civil society action in this case, the profile of this company is highlighted.

5.1. The profile of a state-owned company

Sonadezi Long Thanh Shareholding Company is a provincially managed state-owned company and formerly known as Sonadezi Long Thanh Joint Stock Company. As one of 23 subsidiary companies of the Sonadezi Corporation (99.88% of capital in 2011 came from the provincial government) with capital investment from five other provincially managed state-owned companies), Sonadezi Long Thanh is operated under Dong Nai Province People’s Committee’s strategic management to the state-owned company (Sonadezi Corporation, 2016).

Sonadezi Long Thanh took responsibility for wastewater treatment in Long Thanh Industrial Zone. The company’s wastewater treatment was approved by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE) in 2006 (Institute for Environment and Resources, 2012, p. 1). The company collected wastewater in the industrial zone and treated it with two WWTPs. After the wastewater had been treated, it was taken to an ecological pond for final treatment before being discharged into Ba Cheo Reach. The ecological pond contained 45,000 m$^3$ which was three times the discharged wastewater volume from the company, 10,000m$^3$/day and night. This process was inspected and approved by DONRE (Department of Natural Resources and Environment) of Dong Nai Province. However, Sonadezi Long Thanh used this pond to illegally dilute wastewater with river water and then discharged it into the reach. As a result, the wastewater severely polluted Ba Cheo Reach. Consequently, it destroyed the farmers’ livelihood since 2006 (Ngo, 2011).

As a result, the farmers sent petitions continuously to condemn Sonadezi Long Thanh Company for polluting in 2006, but the company only stopped illegally polluting in 2011. On 03 August 2011 Sonadezi Long Thanh was caught discharging wastewater illegally into Ba Cheo Reach by the Southern branch of the Central Environmental Police Department (Institute for

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9Sonadezi Long Thanh Company was established by Dong Nai Province People’s Committee following the decision 3644/QĐCT-UBT in 2003 and tasked with the construction and development of Long Thanh Industrial Zone (Sonadezi Corporation, 2016).
10Sonadezi Group is one of three corporations operating under Dong Nai Province People’s Committee, the infrastructure developer of 11 out of 32 industrial zones in Dong Nai Province (such as Bien Hoa I, Bien Hoa II, Amata, Go Dau and so on).
11The first system was constructed in 2007 and the second system was invested in 2009 (Ngo, 2011).
12Ba Cheo Reach is one of the branches of Dong Nai River.
13Two water pipes, which were constructed by Sonadezi Long Thanh, connect the ecological pond with Ba Cheo Reach. As the tide in Ba Cheo Reach rises, water in the canal goes into the pond. The mixture of wastewater and river water flows from the pond into the canal when the tide goes down. Taking advantage of natural mechanism, the company diluted the wastewater.
After its violations were found out, the company immediately agreed to compensate for farmers’ losses. However, the company only compensated for it based on the Institute for Environment and Resources (IRE) loss calculation. The Institute concluded that Sonadezi Long Thanh Company was a culprit in polluting Ba Cheo Reach. The pollution damaged fishing, livestock and orchards cover an area of around 114 hectares. According to this result, 278 households were approved for compensation with VND15.2 billion, whereas another 100 households were ignored (Q. Le, 2012).

5.2. Farmers’ struggle and media’s efforts to take a little opportunity

Households that did not yet receive compensation for their losses sent petitions to governmental agencies to demand compensation; they waited and waited. They felt anxious because there was no response from the company and the state agencies for around five months. They decided to step up the pressure by filling up the company’s sewer. A group of farmers protested when they were excluded from the affected areas by IER, which was responsible for estimating the losses.

As a result, the president of the Institute promised in a meeting that they would study the affected area again. Yet, the area was not enlarged so that Long Thanh Sonadezi Company could pay a total of VND15.2 billion for 278 households (Q. Le, 2012).

Seventy farmers from excluded households came to Dong Nai Province People’s Committee to submit their petition to demand compensation. According to the law, when their complaint was not addressed after 60 days, they organized a demonstration in December 2013. The demonstration took place peacefully without violence. Unfortunately, nothing changed.

In this case, Farmers’ Associations worked with farmers throughout the whole compensation process. They saw that the company and provincial government put the farmers at a disadvantage. Still, they dared not really struggle with the company and the government as in the Vedan Vietnam case (interviews, SLT-FA 107 and SLT-FA 108, Anh Bảy Lò Rèn and Anh Tám Lửa).

Lawyers were not present in this case, and as revealed in the interviews,

“If the farmers in the case of Sonadezi Long Thanh came asking me for help, I would refuse. I have more works to do for the benefits of people rather than being affected because of involvement in an issue like this”.

(Interview, lawyer, Anh Chín, December 2013)

Similarly, journalists’ reports were also obstructed in the case of Sonadezi Long Thanh though journalists were very active at the start. As soon as the company was accused of polluting, abundant articles were reported on the issue in Tuoi Tre, Thanh Nien, Lao Dong, Sai Gon Tiep Thi and Dong Nai newspapers. These articles described this issue in great detail and tracked all related events. Significantly, the articles not only described what was happening but also pointed out the nature of the problems. Some articles blatantly criticized irresponsible officials. They condemned the general director of Sonadezi Corporation, a member of the

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14The company was accused of three violations by the central police: (1) discharging wastewater which contained BOD, COD and Coliform levels exceeding the permissible limitations of the National Standard (QCVN 08: 2008/BTNMT) by 02 to 05 times; (2) using the ecological pond to illegally dilute wastewater; (3) installing illegal pipes to discharge wastewater. It was then fined 405 million VND and had to improve the WWTP and compensate for farmers’ losses (Institute for Environment and Resources, 2012, p. 1).
Vietnam National Assembly, for not taking responsibility.

After the Department of Propaganda and Training, which was under the authority of Dong Nai Provincial Party Committee, issued a press release firmly declaring that newspapers should not have disclosed the name of the general director of the company, Tuoi Tre and Sai Gon Tiep Thi Newspapers responded swiftly and harshly. A journalist of Tuoi Tre wrote that:

Nobody made a mistake, and newspapers did not make a mistake either. Looking at the articles again, they showed that Sonadezi Long Thanh belongs to the Sonadezi Corporation. It means that it was the [mother] company that did wrong... As the Vietnamese saying goes, “the mother is responsible for her foolish child,” so Ms. Hằng as leader of the parent company, cannot deny her responsibility (Minh Luân, 2012).

Nevertheless, newspapers became less active as time went on. In contrast with Vedan Vietnam, the number of reported articles declined from early to late 2013. Most noteworthy is that only two articles - one in an online newspaper and one in a magazine - reported the demonstration in December 2013. Afterward, there were a few articles on the issue. My interviewees said that interventions by the government agencies were the main reason behind the gradual drop in media coverage.

![Figure 4. The number of articles published about the Sonadezi case](source)

Source: Figure by author, based on doing statistics from Tuoi Tre, Sai Gon Tiep Thi and Lao Dong Newspaper from 2011 to December of 2013

Facing the lessening participation of journalists, farmers complained. One farmer said that: “In the first period, many journalists were with us, but I do not know why they have slowly dropped off. I do not know who influenced them (Interview SLT-F 99, Chú Năm)”. This quotation and the facial expression of the farmer in the interview showed farmers’ disappointment and dissatisfaction with journalists. Yet, farmers did not blame them.

Few journalists raised the issue again after being ignored for a long time. The journalist “Nhiệt Tình” (enthusiastic) who still observed the case and supported farmers though she had left “A” Newspaper Office. She and one farmer often exchanged information about the issue. Owing to her information, her two colleagues reported the demonstration. Even though the demonstration had occurred three months prior, the journalist brought the case back.

The online article reported how alone the farmers in the case of Sonadezi Long Thanh
were compared to the Vedan Vietnam case. It blamed the director of the company and the responsible government officials. Then, the journalist “Nhiệt Tình” continued to bring up the issue by reporting the meeting between farmers and the member parliament of Dong Nai in March 2014. In this meeting, farmers requested to meet the general director of the Sonadezi Corporation.

They succeeded in securing a meeting, and in May 2014, the general director of the Sonadezi Corporation talked with 100 households who had not yet been compensated (Minh Chau, 2014). She promised she would solve farmers’ complaints reasonably. However, following the news from Lao Dong Newspaper by December 2014, the farmers’ demand had not yet been met. In this article, the Compensation Committee of Dong Nai Province promised to instruct farmers to send petitions to court (Ha, 2014).

6. Conclusion

Civil society action in two cases as presented above reveals the formation of civil society in Vietnam so far. Civil society in Vietnam is not only in the form of organizations but also the action via utilizing the chain of activities based on the voluntariness in public space toward common interest. The case of Vedan Vietnam shows that the solidarity between farmers’ claim-making, the campaign of mass media, the efforts of farmers associations, and the threats of lawsuits and boycotts were crucial to overcoming the company’s stalling tactics. Despite the fact that both the Vedan Vietnam and the Sonadezi Long Thanh cases were initiated by farmers’ claim-making, the Sonadezi Long Thanh case did not see as much participation. Yet, the active farmers and journalists made significant efforts. The process showed farmers and journalists struggling together for farmers’ rights by exploiting a small chance. Although they have not yet gotten compensation for the farmers, they made some progress by meeting the general director of the company. It is not limited to whether the result is successful or not, but the point of evaluation is how actors interact to carry out the action for farmers’ benefit.

This research confirmed again that civil society exists in the Vietnamese color. Western approaches towards civil society, which emphasize the separation of civil society from the state, marketing and family, question civil society’s existence in Vietnam. The Vedan and Sonadezi case showed that civil society in Vietnam is not dichotomic with the state. In this struggle, actors took advantage of formal and informal activities (the interaction from farmers’ claims-making to farmers’ associations and lawyers’ efforts, mass media’s campaign, public opinion’s resistance and the boycott) rather than relying only on official channels from formal organizations. Another good strategy employed by actors was cooperation with the state. All actions were based on collaboration with the state and the state accepted civil society action. In some previous research, mass organizations have been excluded since they are close to the government (Thayer, 2009, p. 2). However, the findings here confirmed that they are able to create the room to carry out the civil society action via the interactions among actors.

In two cases, the civil society action clarifies the political ecology approach by showing how the less powerful actor vis-à-vis the state and the companies resisted and struggled with their more powerful counterparts. Although the state and the company tried to prevent civil society action, civil society action still took place through the informal connections among actors against the cooperation between the state and the companies.

In the development of the internet, civil society action is more and more popular because it can promptly connect people via digital space such as Facebook, Twitter, and Blog to discuss the common good. Then, citizens are able to assemble to carry out activities together via physical public space (such as streets, parks, cinemas, shops, or stadiums) and virtual public space in the
national print media. Recent issues include supporting the Central of Vietnam to overcome the heavy rainfall and flood 2020, protesting the tree-felling plan 2015 in Hanoi, objecting the filling up the Dong Nai River for construction of housing in 2015 and demonstrating the fish death in 2016 proved the popularity of civil society action. Although actors attempt to carry out civil society action, the condition for doing is limited because of the control of the Vietnamese government. Civil society action in Vietnam needs, thus, to be given virtual chances to contribute to sustainable development in Vietnam.

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