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**Drivers and Barriers for the Adoption of Global Sustainable
Development Policies.**

**A Review of the experience with Agenda 21 and the United
Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development
in Vietnam.**

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Abstract

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The Socialist Republic of Vietnam has shown in recent years a high political commitment in adopting global frameworks for sustainable development. The 'Strategic Orientation for Sustainable Development', issued by the Prime Minister in August 2004, reflects the Agenda 21 principles agreed by world leaders at The Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. More recently, a high level committee chaired by Minister of Education has been created to coordinate activities for the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005-2014 (DESD) as a follow up of the resolution 254 in the 57th session of the United Nations General Assembly in December 2002.

The aim of the present paper is to review the process as well as the challenges faced by Vietnam in adopting the Agenda 21 and DESD. The concept of sustainable development is at the heart of this paper and represents the theoretical framework to explore the specific cultural, ideological, and economic context of Vietnam and its interpretation of the meaning of sustainable development. Based on outcomes of national level conferences, interviews and review of policies and programme reports, this paper looks at the barriers and drivers for integration of these policies in the government policy making process. The paper sets out by providing an introduction to the key national frameworks derived from the Agenda 21 and DESD. It then continues by discussing the linkages with the current Socio Economic Plan 2006-2010 and the draft Education Strategy for 2008-2020. It then analyzes the decision making process and spaces for participation provided to citizens, civil society organizations, NGOs and mass organizations in the development of national policies. At the moment several initiatives in Vietnam led by NGOs and educational institutes are linked to the principles of Agenda21 and DESD. However most of these are not connected with national level policy making processes.

The main conclusion of the paper is that global frameworks, such as Agenda 21 and DESD, can guide the Vietnamese government in formulatigr national sustainable development policies. However, if the implementation results in the creation of parallel policies and institutional structures to existing ones, the sustainability of these project-driven initiatives remains uncertain. Moreover, there is a threat that if the initiatives from the bottom do not meet with the top-down planning, national statements will end up becoming in the end only a façade of good intentions without concrete support from local networks and limited practical policy implementation.

1. Introduction

The term of sustainable development is at the core of the current government policy environment in Vietnam. The Five-Year Socio-Economic Development Plan 2006-2010 (SEDP) of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is divided into three policy sectors (social, economic and environment) (SRV 2006). These sectors are derived from the pillars of sustainable development as described by global sustainable development declarations. This paper use two global frameworks the Agenda 21 and the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005-2015 (DESD) endorsed by Vietnam, to explore the contribution that these global initiatives can have in the national policy development as well as the challenges faced by Vietnam in adopting these frameworks. Beside the secondary sources, the paper is based on personal observation during meetings and workshops, interviews of ten informants and one written reply to sent questions. These informants belong to government agencies, development agencies and independent local NGOs. All of the informants have been personally involved in the Agenda 21 or DESD process or have taken the concept of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) as the guiding framework for the activities conducted by their organizations.

2. The Vietnam Agenda 21

In May 1992, 179 countries, including the Vietnamese delegation led by the National Environment Agency under the former Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment participated in the 'Earth Summit' held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In the course of the Earth Summit, the Agenda 21 was developed. Chapter 8 of Agenda 21 calls on countries to adopt a national strategy for sustainable development. This strategy should build upon and harmonize the various sectoral economic, social and environmental policies and plans that are operating in the country.¹ The Strategic Orientation for Sustainable Development (Vietnam Agenda 21) approved in August 2004 is the main guiding framework derived from the global Agenda 21 (SRV 2004). This document provides list of priority areas in each sector and envisages legal basis for the adoption of a more holistic view on development and inclusion of social and environmental concerns in all government policies.

The National Environment Agency was responsible for reporting the five year progress made since the Rio conference to the special session in the in the United Nations General Assembly meeting in 1997.² The role of the environmental sector in raising the awareness of policy makers is recognized: *“The initiative from the environmental sector is good in raising the awareness of the government and raising the awareness of the investors and planners who should look and think about sustainable development”* (Informant). After the Rio conference awareness on the interlinkages from environment to social and economic sector became more evident. The international community was supporting this development³ and in early 2000 the government of Vietnam has decided to locate coordinating role at sustainable development from the environment sector to the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) (PMD 2002). The same ministry is also responsible to draw mainstream socio economic strategies and plans, manage the state budget and coordinate activities among ministries. However, although

1 Agenda 21: Chapter 8, section 8.7.

2 The National Environment Agency is later incorporated to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE) established on August 2002 (The Resolution No. 02/2002/QH11).

3 Capacity 21 -Vietnam Integration of environment in economic development 1993-1996 - Strengthening National Capacities to Integrate the Environment into Investment Decisions 1997-2000.

institutional settings have changed, the key people involved in the Rio process continued to support the early stages of drafting the Vietnam Agenda 21.⁴

The process to develop and implement the Vietnam Agenda 21 began in August 2000 with an official letter from the Office of Government on the formulation of Vietnam Agenda 21 on sustainable development (Government Office 2002). The project “Support to Formulation and Implementation of the Vietnam Agenda 21”⁵ started in 2001 and received technical and financial support from the United National Development Programme (UNDP), the Danish International Development Agency and the Swedish International Development Agency played a key role in the Vietnam Agenda 21 process. In May 2002 Prime Minister assigned MPI to chair the implementation of this project (PMD 2002). The project was directly implemented by the Department of Science, Education, Natural Resources and Environment under MPI. The aim of the project was to assist establishment of national policy and institutional framework for sustainable development. The project guided the development of the Vietnam Agenda 21 and conducted capacity building, awareness raising and policy research. The project was also directly piloting the establishment and implementation of sectoral and local Agenda 21 plans as demonstration models for the government (UNDP 2001).

Sustainable Development Office (Agenda 21 Office) of Vietnam located in the MPI was established to implement the Vietnam Agenda 21. According the Minister of Planning and Investment decision of June 2004, the role of the office was to deliver action programs and plans and coordinate Sustainable Development projects among ministries and sectors. The office was also assigned the function to act as a focal point for the international cooperation programmes (MPI 2004). After establishment in 2005 the National Council on Sustainable Development was assigned to directly lead the activities of the Agenda 21 Office. The establishment of the National Council on Sustainable Development shows a very high political commitment to the process. The list of 45 high level members of the National Council on Sustainable Development is impressive. The Minister of Planning and Investment is the standing vice chairman of the council, while the Deputy Prime Minister is chairing the committee. The intersectoral nature of policies promoting sustainable development is recognized while the members represent all line ministries, and members of the most important committees of the Communist Party are invited to the Council (Government Office 2006).

The project “Support to Formulation and Implementation of the Vietnam Agenda 21” provided technical and financial support in drafting the operational charter of the National Council on Sustainable Development in order to define clearly the role and responsibilities of the National Council on Sustainable Development and the Agenda 21 Office assigned in the Prime Minister Decision (PMD 2005a). The drafting process followed the model from China and involved many consultations and revisions. However the charter was never approved by Chairman of the Committee or signed by the Prime Minister (NCSD 2006).

Two senior full time staffs supported by three junior staff members manage the Vietnam Agenda 21 Office today. Members of the National Council on Sustainable Development have not met after the high level conferences during the “Support to Formulation and

4 For example Mr Nguyen Ngoc Sinh Head of the National Environment Agency (responsible to submit the 5-year report after Rio Conference 1997) and Ex Vice Minister of Ministry of Science and Technology Mr Le Quy An were involved with other retired government officials in the drafting of the early stages of the Vietnam Agenda 21 (Informant).

⁵ VIE/01/021

Implementation of the Vietnam Agenda 21” project and Vietnam Agenda 21 office does not receive instructions from the National Council on Sustainable Development (Informant). No five year or annual work plans are produced by the Agenda 21 Office and only minimal state support is available for the operation of the office.⁶ As of today six provinces from 64 provinces of Vietnam have produced their local Agenda 21 plans and more than 15 are under preparation. The Agenda 21 Office has limited capacity to support the preparation of these provincial plans (Informant).

The Agenda 21 Office has requested further support from UNDP and Swedish International Development Agency, but continuation of the “Support to Formulation and Implementation of the Vietnam Agenda 21”⁷ project is still in the planning stage. The main concerns are related to the overlapping of the mandate of the National Council on Sustainable Development with the state management system and the composition and function of the National Council on Sustainable Development.

As mentioned by one informant:

“Some functions and mandate given to the National Council of Sustainable Development overlap with the state management and state governance... the role of the National Council on Sustainable Development in the Prime Minister Decision is similar to the mandate and function given to the MPI.” (Informant).

The second informant reflected that:

“There has been criticism, actually from inside, that committee can not mirror the Cabinet at the lower level or at the same level, the council has to be advisory...but then what is needed is the board of advisors...and experts form the advisory body not decision makers, bureaucrats or politicians, but academics, consultants and companies...” (Informant).

There has been discussion to reduce the government presence and increase the participation of the private sector and civil society in the council in the spirit of the global Agenda 21 where these three should be equally represented. On one hand, the importance of creating a council of advisors with experts rather than politicians is favored but on the other hand, there is still discussion on using the National Council on Sustainable Development of high ranking government officials as a forum for a dialogue between the government and donors.

This point was stressed by one informant who said:

“Donors are also interested to have a higher level dialogue with the government in the number of issues, it [the National Council on Sustainable Development] can be an entry point into policy making process... and in this case the council has to be a mirror of the Cabinet filled by Vice Ministers....” (Informant).

One informant expressed concern that if the Council remains a council of high ranking government officials who have no time to meet, it will not be efficient:

“Because these members are fully occupied by other duties and assignments, maybe they have little time to think about sustainable development, little time to see what has been done or what the secretariat of the National Council is doing?” (Informant).

In fact, official meetings of the National Council for Sustainable Development have never been organized.

3. The Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005-2014 in Vietnam

Education is one of the eight priority social areas in the Vietnam Agenda 21. The draft DESD National Action Plan for is based on the priority activities for education identified in the

⁶ The last year budget of the Vietnam Agenda 21 Office was 300 000 000 VND (approximately 18750 USD) (Informant).

⁷ VIE/01/021

Vietnam Agenda 21, however an entirely new high level government structure has been established to oversee the implementation of the DESD in Vietnam (PMD 2005).

Vietnam finalized the Vietnam Agenda 21 when the DESD 2005-2014 began. United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Headquarters and regional office in Bangkok, organized a series of workshops on DESD. The National Commissions for UNESCO⁸ have been acting as catalysts for DESD in member countries and the Vietnam National Commission for UNESCO (NATCOM), under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), was invited to represent Vietnam during these events. The regional UNESCO office supported compilation of the "Situational Analysis" with Asia Pacific countries and the National Institute for Educational Planning and Curriculum Development, under the MOET, was involved in the drafting of the Vietnamese section (UNESCO Bangkok 2005).

The International Implementation Scheme of the Decade calls countries to establish an own DESD committees and draft national action plans (UNESCO 2005). The NATCOM with the support of the UNESCO Hanoi Office was able to mobilize the high level political commitment for the DESD in Vietnam. In November 2005 there was the Prime Minister decision to establish Vietnam DESD National Committee as caretaker of DESD and as an advisor to the Prime Minister and the NATCOM was nominated to act as the secretariat of the this high level Committee (PMD 2005b). Vietnam was among the first countries to launch the DESD. The National launch was organized in February 2006 and was the biggest DESD related event in Vietnam. It was marked by the official announcement of the establishment of the DESD National Committee. Around 300 participants including high-level officials from the Office of the Government and relevant ministries participated on the event.

The composition of DESD National Committee although smaller in number of members is similar to the National Council of Sustainable Development. One of the Deputy Prime Ministers, the Minister of Foreign Affairs was first appointed as the President of the Committee and the four Vice Presidents are from Ministries of Education and Training; Science and Technology; Natural Resources and Environment; and Culture and Information. Besides NATCOM, the 14 members of the DESD National Committee, represent other line ministries and government agencies and institutes (PMD 2005b).

The NATCOM has coordinated the drafting of the DESD National Action Plan and Statutes for the DESD National Committee. From August 2006 to August 2007 the Prime Minister has been leading the DESD National Committee. After consultations with the national experts and the DESD National Committee members the draft DESD National Action Plan was submitted to the Prime Minister in December 2006. No comments to the Plan or Statutes have been made in 2007 (Informant). In August 2007 the responsibility of the DESD coordination was transferred from MOFA to MOET and the Vice Prime Ministers and Minister of Education was appointed to lead the National DESD committee (PMD 2006). At least partly the slow approval process is related to this power shift: *"The changes in position of chairmanship of National DESD Committee affected a great deal on the approval of National DESD Committee Plan and Statutes. It also delayed the whole process and the start of functioning of National DESD Committee."* (Informant).

⁸ The National Councils for UNESCO are the main governmental institute for UNESCO's activities Article VII of the UNESCO Constitution: "Each member state shall make such arrangements as suit its particular conditions for the purpose of associating its principal bodies interested in educational, scientific and cultural matters with the work of the organization, preferably by the formation of a National Commission broadly representative of the Government and such bodies".

Finally in January 2008 the National DESD committee took the drafts into consideration in the first plenary meeting of the Committee, but until today no decision on further steps have been taken (Informant).

The objectives of the draft DESD National Action Plan are based on objectives of the International Implementation Scheme of the DESD and priorities of the Vietnam Agenda 21 (DESD NC 2006). Directly connected to the activities of the DESD, the NATCOM has implemented two small scale pilot projects and two national awareness raising workshops partly supported by UNESCO.⁹ Some government education institutes have adopted the concept of ESD and are using it in their activities.¹⁰ Some independent local NGOs are using ESD as the framework for their work. However, since the DESD National Action Plan has not been approved there has also not been wider discussion on the practical implementation of the objectives set for the DESD.

The draft DESD National Action Plan is a broad strategy paper without specific targets or indicators to measure the success of implementation (DESD NC 2006). At the same time the regional and global monitoring and evaluation process calls on countries to establish a clear monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to follow up the implementation of the national action plans. A detailed questionnaire to monitor the implementation of ESD has been sent to the member countries from UNESCO Headquarters in February 2008.¹¹ This questionnaire looks at the context and structures for implementation of DESD and is one in a series of three global questionnaires sent to the NATCOMs and the government agencies for self reporting (UNESCO 2008). The regional monitoring project led from the UNESCO Bangkok office supports the processes for developing national ESD indicators, data collection and reporting mechanisms based on the DESD National Action Plans in the Asia and Pacific countries. The development of indicators is seen as a process to clarify the national priorities and targets for the DESD (UNESCO Bangkok 2008).

4. Linkages with the current Socio Economic Plan 2006-2010

The Five Year Socio Economic Development Plan 2006-2010 (SEDP) is considered the most important policy framework of Vietnam (SRV 2006b). It is also the basis for the United Nations Development Assistance Framework UNDAF and One UN Plan (GACA 2007). The Vietnam Agenda 21 was developed prior to the current SEDP.

Although approved much later, it seems that Vietnam Agenda 21 bears similarities to another plan, the Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (CPRGS) that was finalized in 2002 with support from World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

As mentioned by one of the informants:

9 DESD Advocacy for Vietnam Project (Advocacy Project) (UNESCO Hanoi Office contract: AFC07-019), Developing a Model for Home-based E.I. for Children with Disabilities ACCU UNESCO ESD Programme Innovation Programme for ESD link: http://www.accu.or.jp/esd/projects/ip/ip01_vietnam.shtml and Flagship projection on CLC and ASPnet partnership for ESD: Phase I & II (2005-2006). (UNESCO Hanoi Office, Phase II contract AFC 06-032)

10 Hanoi National University of Education (HNUE) has established Center of research and promotion for Education for Sustainable Development (CERPROD). Center of Education Technology (CET) in Hanoi has included education for sustainable development beside the environmental education in the training agenda in International University (IU) of Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCM) has considered to apply status as the Regional Centre of Expertise connected to DESD and promoted by United Nations University Institute of Advanced Studies UNU-IAS.

11 The monitoring questionnaire and guidelines were sent to Secretary General of the UNESCO National Commissions with the cover letter from Mark Richmond Director of Education Sector Division for the Coordination of UN Priorities in Education on 15 February 2008.

“Both of these were developed by Ministry of Planning and Investment and drafts were sent across the Ministry and donors involved, I am not saying that these say the same thing. They don’t. However there are very few contradictions...there is evidence that it is not a very large group of people that do the final edits of the policy documents.” (Informant).

The Vietnam Agenda 21 was drafted prior to the Johannesburg World Summit in September 2002, but approved only in August 2004. There was a gap in the activities under the “Support to Formulation and Implementation of the Vietnam Agenda 21” project during 2003. The donors were hesitant to support the finalization of the new plan soon after the CPRG strategy (Informant).

The Department of Science, Education, Natural Resources and Environment in MPI was responsible for implementing the project “Support to Formulation and Implementation of the Vietnam Agenda 21” and was coordinating the formulation of the Vietnam Agenda 21. Different department in the MPI, the Department of National Economic Issues, was preparing the SEDP. However, some of the key people drafting the SEDP were also advising the process of Vietnam Agenda 21 formulation. (Informant). The development of the CPRGS and Vietnam Agenda 21 documents influenced the current structure and content of the SEDP. Especially in the case of the CPRGS, there is evidence that it has actually contributed to change the structure of national plans more result oriented.¹² Furthermore, the pillars of the SEDP can be seen as the clear indication that the drafters were thinking of organizing the plan in accordance with the concept of sustainable development. *“Somehow I think he¹³ got the idea that we need to look at the three pillars economic, social and environment and he managed to take some of these ideas into the socio economic plan...it is the first time we have seen environmental targets and indicators in the SEDP.” (Informant).*

Even though envisaged by the "Support to Formulation and Implementation of Vietnam Agenda 21" project and the decision by Minister of Planning and Investment (MPI 2004), there were no five years or annual plans developed from the Vietnam Agenda 21. Although these plans do not exist the SEDP could be seen as the implementation framework for the Vietnam Agenda 21, but as discussed the linkages of these two documents are loose.

Unlike at the national level the Provincial Vietnam Agenda 21 plans are drafted by the same Division of the Department of Planning and Investment drafting the provincial socio economic plans.

One informant remarked that:

“The preparation of the sustainable development document [Provincial Agenda 21] is different at the local level from what happens at the central level. The secretariat of sustainable development [at the provincial level] is the right agency, the people are the right people, they prepare the local five year socio economic plan and formulate the local Agenda 21. I think at the local level there is guarantee or insurance that

12 “The CPRGS, though approved by the Prime Minister, was not a traditional part of mainstream planning processes. It coexisted with a five-year Socioeconomic Development Plan (SEDP) 2001-2005...However, the process of formulating, implementing and monitoring the progress of the CPRGS has initiated permanent changes in the approaches to socioeconomic planning. Directive 33 was issued by the Prime Minister in September 2004, stating that the SEDP 2006-2010 be drafted according to the same principles that had governed the preparation of the CPRGS. This has resulted in a document that is better linked to budgets and that is more poverty-focused and results-oriented than previous SEDPs, reflecting best practice.” Extract from: <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFICEXT/VIETNAMEXTN/0,,contentMDK:21316865~noSURL:Y~pagePK:141137~piPK:141127~theSitePK:387565,00.html>

¹³ The Director of the Department of National Economic Issues and advisor for the Vietnam Agenda 21 process.

integration of these two documents (local SEDP and local Agenda 21) would be higher than at the central level. (Informant).

Even if these parallel plans are not directly linked when the same people are involved in drafting the both it is likely that the plans will have a better alignment.

The term “rapid and sustainable development” is at the core of the SEDP.¹⁴ The sustainable development is mentioned under the environment section of the SEDP and the sustainable development is seen as a means to serve industrialization and modernization of the country.¹⁵ The Agenda 21 program is mentioned under this main goal.¹⁶ The expected results include that more provinces, cities and agencies are expected to complete their Agenda 21 programs and each ministry, province and city has at least 2-3 programs or projects on sustainable development. The MPI and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment are implementing agencies of these targets (SRV 2006b).

Many see inclusion of environment in the SEDP as increased awareness regarding environmental issues: *“In the last 5-year plan [SEDP] there is much more attention to environment than in the previous plans of course economic development is in the core but there is recognition that there is a need to pay attention to environment.”* (Informant). This is also reflected by the inclusion of some very ambitious environmental goals in the current socio economic planning. According to these targets government is very committed to change the development patterns more environmentally sustainable in some sectors such as application of technology and take concrete measures to reach these goals. However some of the targets are regarded very ambitious and at least in some cases unrealistic.^{17,18}

Similar to the sustainable development goals under environment sector also the main goal in education is renovation to satisfy the country’s industrialization and modernization.¹⁹ The expected results are related to increased enrollment rates, access to education and qualifications of teachers. Objectives include renovation of training content and pedagogical methodology with increased focus on innovation of teaching and learning methodology, however, no direct expected results are included to measure the changes connected to these. Some other areas under social sector are also connected to education for sustainable development. For example under main goal of improving the life of ethnic minority people policies and actions are taken to preserve and develop the language systems.²⁰

14 SEDP page i General Goal: Boost economic growth rate, achieving rapid and sustainable development , quickly bringing our country out of the low development state.

15 SEDP page 177 Main goal: Ensure sustainable development to serve the industrialization and modernization of the country.

16 SEDP page 177 Specific Objective: to prepare and implement Agenda 21 programme at all levels. Two expected results: 1) more provinces, cities and agencies complete their Agenda 21 programs and 2) Each ministry, province and city has at least 2-3 programs or projects on sustainable development.

17 Target of 75% of severely polluted production units are improved and 100% newly established production units will apply cleaner technologies and pollution treatment devices is unrealistic according the personal communication with informant in cleaner production.

18 In addition government is aiming to have 50% of enterprises ISO certified by the end of 2010. This well may be realistic for ISO 9001 (Quality), which is very popular, but not for 14001 (Environment), which is still at a very low level of implementation (personal communication). According to The ISO Survey of Certifications there were 189 ISO 14001 certificates issued in Vietnam by the end of 2006. Beside this source, there is no formal information on the current total number of ISO 14001 certificates, believed to be around 300.

¹⁹ SEDP pages 167 and 168 Main goal (education): Systematically and renovate education and training... satisfy the requirements of the country’s industrialization and modernization.

²⁰ SEDP page 174 Pay attention to the preservation and development of traditional cultures of ethnic minorities. Preserve and develop their language and writing systems.

Many more linkages to sustainable development are evident beside the targets that are described under the environment section or education targets that are described under the social section of the SEDP, but are these actually connected the process of drafting the Vietnam Agenda 21 or promotion of DESD in Vietnam?

It is evident that many issues in the SEDP could be related to the principles promoted by the DESD. It is easy to make these connections afterwards but it is unlikely that the Decade itself has influenced the drawing of these policies. *“When we read the document [SEDP] we could justify the connection...we can always make some linkages. Probably some people could say that the SEDP is connected to ESD action plan, but to me it is not.”* (Informant).

Both the Vietnam Agenda 21 and the draft DESD National Action Plan are parallel strategies to the ten years Socio Economic Strategy or the ten years Education Strategy that provides the official structure for formulating the SEDP and activity plans of the MOET. Furthermore the responsibilities for implementation are not defined in the Vietnam Agenda 21. Difficulties for implementation of both of these plans derive from the lack of direct government funding.²¹

As described by one informant:

“The line ministries and provinces focus on the SEDP. During the preparation of activities or operations maybe some people forget the Vietnam Agenda 21 because it is only a strategy with priority areas but there is no means of finance to guarantee it. But the SEDP is certain, many approved projects are in it with investment budget... it would be very good for us if the sustainable development ideas or principles are truly reflected in this five year document [SEDP] because then this will cover the sustainable development strategy and therefore we will reach sustainable development goals and objectives.” (Informant).

5. Linkages with the Education Strategy 2001-2010

The sectoral five-year plans of line ministries contribute to the development of the SEDP. The process of creating five-year plan of the MOET for 2006-2010 has given inputs to educational goals, activities and results in the SEDP (MOET 2005). The five-year plan of the MOET is based on the Education Strategy 2001-2010.²² In August 2007, the Minister of Education and Training signed a decision to start the development of a new Education Development Strategy 2008-2020 (MOET 2007). Twenty seven working groups were created to conduct this task. The draft strategy was prepared in December 2007 but was not satisfactory and a new draft will be prepared in April-May 2008. The final version is expected to be approved by the third quarter of 2008.²³ Because no written documents of the new Education Strategy are available at present, this paper will look at the connections with the principles promoted by DESD in the 2001-2010 education strategy. It must be added that as the DESD is more recent than the current strategy the DESD itself has not influenced in the content of the strategy. However, there is hope that ESD will be part of the new strategy. *“I am strongly convinced that it (ESD) will be included in the new Education Strategy, which is being developed by Ministry of Education and Training, mentioned government informant.*

ESD fosters values and promotes skills needed to face the challenges of a changing world and contributes to creating a more sustainable future. It recognizes that learning is connected to all

21 The last year budget of the Vietnam Agenda 21 Office was 300 000 000 VND (approximately 18750 USD).

22 Decision No. 201/2001/QĐ-TTg of December 28 by Prime Minister, approving the 2001-2010 educational development strategy.

23 In the annual dialogue meeting with the Education Sector Group, the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of the Ministry of Education and Training with the Departments of Ministry of Education and Training answered the questions on the current status of the new strategy Hanoi 6th of March 2008.

stages of life and occurs in different spaces besides formal education. Accordingly, the ESD education should be connected to the everyday life of the learners. Participation and networking of various actors from private sector, state and non governmental organizations is promoted by the ESD. Skills such as creative and critical thinking, communication, ICT literacy, collaboration and cooperation, conflict management, problem solving, and planning are to be fostered through ESD.

The current 10 years education strategy of Vietnam recognizes that in the beginning of 21th century the quality of education remains weak, education is not closely related to reality, and the capacity of students to work independently is limited.²⁴ The strategy pinpoints that educational programs are academic, do not foster creativity and are not closely linked to requirements of the current socio-economic development.²⁵ According to this strategy, one of the four guiding viewpoints of educational development is the creation of the conditions for people to learn at all stages of their life. This is combined with increased social participation: *create conditions for entire society to take part in education development* (SRV 2001, p. 12). The strategy goes on listing some measures such as: *to change from passive knowledge transmission... to advising learners on the ways of active thinking and receiving knowledge, to teach students the methods of self-learning, systematic collection of information and of analytic and synthetic thinking; ... to increase the active independent attitude of students in learning process and self-management of the activities at schools and in social work* (ibid 2001, p. 19-20). These principles and measures are similar to the ones of the ESD. However, the concept itself came to Vietnam after the finalization of the current education strategy 2001-2010.

The formal curriculum for primary and secondary education was revised (2002-2007) and the revision of textbooks up to 12th grade will be completed in 2008. The renewal of curriculum and textbooks is often connected to the direct measures taken by the government during the DESD (Vietnam News 2007). It is evident that some changes in the curriculum and textbooks can be seen as promoting the same principles as the ESD but as the concept is not widely known these are not direct result of the DESD.

6. Decision making process and spaces for participation in the development of national policies

Vietnam is known for making good plans and policies, but as the number of circulars, degrees, decisions and action plans increase, the different targets are not necessarily aligned with each other. The parallel plans supported by the international frameworks may add to the confusion on which plan is actually been supported by a specific action.

A respondent remarked that:

“Vietnam has lots of plans, but all the documents that seem very interlinked are not. Ten year strategy, five year plan, education plan... when you are looking into those very closely the targets and goals are not really interlinked...sometimes we are not quite sure of which targets and plans we are referring to.” (Informant).

The mechanisms for civil society or private sector to participate in the government planning process are limited. The traditional approach is that the policy itself is drafted by a small

24 Section 1.2. from the 2001-2010 Education Development strategy: *“The quality in education in general is low...the ability for creative thinking, the practical skills, the adaptability to the professionals world of graduates are limited...their spirit of cooperation are not high..”*(SRV 2001, p.5)

25 Section 1.2. from 2001-2010 Education Development Strategy: *“Curricula are very much academic...do not pay due attention to creativity, practicality and career orientation; are not linked strongly with socio-economic development practice and the needs of the learners.”* (ibid 2001, p.5)

number of decision makers backed by national level experts. There is no wide consultation process before the approval of the policy but the review and testing comes only afterwards. Even high level workshops or conferences do not usually provide opportunities for dialogue with decision makers as the high level government officials only give a speech in the beginning, but leave before the discussion. A challenge for civil society actors, business sector and donors is therefore to find ways of influencing the policy making processes.

Until recently the number of independent NGOs or civil society groups has been very limited in Vietnam. The so called mass organizations, such as Women's Union, and the Youth Union or Farmer's Union, have represented the Vietnamese civil society as organized structure. These party related organizations have their associations at all levels: national, provincial, district and commune/ward level and have provided possibilities for each citizen to participate in the development of their community at the local level. However, the ability of these organizations to respond to the bottom up process and directly support the initiatives from the local level has been restricted by top down planning processes.

Two informants noted that:

“These organizations at the local level are very weak, because they are considered by the local government as subsidiary organizations of their own. They provide annual funding decide who stays and who goes so the problem is that these organizations do not get their independent position to decide and tell the local government what are the problems or what could be the solutions. These [mass organizations] may be strong to carry out activities when we involve them in the project implementation but I think to involve them in policy change will be difficult.” (Informant).

“There are cultural barriers to overcome in the way that the society is organized...because of its traditions it is very hierarchical and in this set up it is very difficult for what happens in the grassroots to reach the top and to establish dialogue.” (Informant).

The emerging independent NGOs are now working in partnership with the mass organizations. They have been able to provide new models for greater engagement of the people by supporting directly the initiatives from the local level and giving opportunity for the participants themselves to choose their priorities and preferred activities. There are already examples how these initiatives have contributed to the development of government policies. *“We work with the model in the grassroots level but then we find a way to advocate the government”* (Informant).

In the absence of a formal channel, the local NGOs have different forms of getting their messages through. When dialogue with the current policy makers is not possible the communication with retired officials may be an informal and effective way. Retired officials can represent the citizen's interests but at the same time they have knowledge of the government systems. Although they are retired, they may still have an advisory role to the government structure or their expertise is consulted directly by the current leaders (Informant). The government is more accustomed to communicate with the international NGOs and agencies than Vietnamese groups and some formal structures such as Education Sector Group (ESG)²⁶ are in place for international NGOs and multilaterals to express their views and comment current policy drafts. *While the government is more likely to listen to the international organizations it should actually be in the interest of these to consult the local NGOs that may have a valuable experience at the grassroots level* (Informant).

26 MOET hosts meetings of the international NGOs and development agencies to comment and discuss issues on education development <http://esg.moet.gov.vn/index.php>

Networks at all levels provide platform for delivering the message to the policy makers. The umbrella organization of Vietnamese associations Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Association (VUSTA) offer the most commonly used channel for Vietnamese civil society organizations and associations to comment on government policies. NGO Forum offers similar channel mainly to international NGOs to raise concerns.

As described by one informant:

“There is no clear way local organizations can lobby for policy change, if we are organization like us under VUSTA we can go through VUSTA...If something happen it should be consulted by VUSTA because VUSTA has a special position, they are mandated by the government to monitor and to provide feedback on government policies” (Informant).

All media in Vietnam is under the control of the government and the Communist Party. However, some NGOs have been able to use media as means to lobby government especially at the provincial level to consider again the impact of planned interventions on local environment and social equity for example in connection to the construction of new power plants (Informant).

Donors are increasingly eager to engage in the policy dialogue but opportunities for such consultations are limited. As debates with high level government officials are not possible during the workshops or conferences, donors are looking for other channels such as organizing informal one to one meetings. Some wish also to utilize the high level committees connected to global frameworks such as the National Council on Sustainable Development or the DESD National Committee in creating the spaces for the dialogue (Informant).

7. Discussion and conclusions

Vietnam is known as being very eager to be a pilot country and model example to the outside world. *“Because Vietnam is a pilot country for harmonization of aid effectiveness for the EU and also the One UN initiative... Vietnam was always a top country for harmonization but there is still a lot to be done”* (Informant). Sometimes it is difficult to connect the political drive with the substance. The global frameworks come from outside and countries might not be ready or prepared to actually utilize the resources or opportunities that they might offer.

As noted by one informant:

“The DESD started from a very strong political drive... but somehow linkage with substance which is strong and more willing participation from the MOET is still missing...as I can see they have been playing a passive role not being really proactive. However, their contribution to the substance and their leading role are very important as well as the political drive which MOFA is promoting.” (Informant).

Global frameworks such as Agenda 21 and DESD have provided excellent opportunity to pinpoint the commitment of the government to sustainable development. The high level political commitment shows that the government and leaders of the country recognize the important opportunity to show their concern and interest regarding this issue. Nominations of high ranking government officials show the commitment to other countries and elaborate launches are good ways to raise publicity at the local level.

Global frameworks serve a political purpose to highlight the achievements of the countries at the international arena. Therefore, the monitoring process of these frameworks can encourage countries to include all related results, also those that would have been achieved without the new committees or new strategies, in the reports and present them as the results of the specific framework. The self reporting may be intended to guide process of self learning, but especially in countries like Vietnam where evaluation is seen as a test to prove the

achievements rather than baseline for changes it is not surprising to find excellent results when reading the country reports (UNESCO Bangkok 2008). Furthermore, as these national level strategies or action plans are usually parallel to the existing government strategies the monitoring system developed to assess the progress does not directly contribute in improving the national policies with clear implementation framework and budget also in the future.

Similarly to the government actors, the local NGOs can use these global frameworks for communicating and networking with the other organizations and donors abroad. The slogans from these frameworks can be actually used to prove that organizations are implementing the goals that are internationally agreed.

Besides, as a tool for publicity these schemes have provided funding opportunities or at least raised expectations to receive financial support to implement the activities linked to these global initiatives. Especially in developing countries, engagement to the new frameworks provides a way to attract foreign aid while international donors continue to support the global commitments at the national level. New decades come and go and attached to them new policies are developed and then either forgotten or assimilated to mainstream policies.²⁷

For fundraising it is good to be up to date and know the vocabulary used in a specific moment in the international debate. For example, in a workshop organized in Hanoi National University in February 2007, many participants raised the concern how to upgrade environmental education to education for sustainable development. One of the drivers was the wish to receive similar funding as provided by UNDP supported project Environmental Education in the Schools of Vietnam.²⁸ However, particularly among NGOs the broad frameworks such as Agenda 21 and DESD may be considered to be too wide to attract donors: *“When it comes into project and funding donors tend to cut issues into sectors for example in this set up you are in the health or education or environment.”* (Informant).

The global frameworks such and Agenda 21 and DESD have provided opportunities for learning. The people participating in these processes have been exposed to new ideas and have been able to take part in the international debate on sustainable development. Among government actors the process of drawing national plans and writing reports has helped to recognize the linkages between the global agendas to the ongoing processes in Vietnam. Awareness of sustainable development has increased among the core people participating in the process at the national level. During the “Support to Formulation and Implementation of the Vietnam Agenda 21” project representatives from business sector and semi-governmental and independent NGOs gave comments to the draft Vietnam Agenda 21 strategy (Informant). These processes can set examples also for the more participatory development of government mainstream policies in the future.

While civil society organizations have not been directly connected to the development of the DESD National Action Plan many have participated to networks or conferences at regional and international level. In some cases these frameworks have provided useful tool for civil society actors to reflect their own work and helped to structure the planning process: *“it gives a better frame and it links the different perspectives. Instead of working with different drawers it becomes a cupboard.”* (Informant).

27 Currently there are 7 international decades or UN Decades ongoing supported by UNESCO Link: http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=7590&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

28 Environmental Education in the Schools of Vietnam (VIE/95/041) and (VIE/98/018)

Nevertheless, it is difficult to pinpoint the actual achievements connected to the introduction of the new strategy or policy especially with broad frameworks such as the Agenda 21 and the DESD. Both promote a holistic view where economic development, social equity and environmental protection are interlinked. The concepts promoted by the Agenda 21 and the DESD are often seen too ambitious or difficult to grasp.

As noted by two informants:

“In comparison to the last Decade this will be failure. This is too abstract. You can not put someone to sit in the group and tell him to do this and that when it [the concept of ESD] is not clear...in fact other countries in the Asia-Pacific do not support the ESD so much as Vietnam. We should talk more with the government and base on things that government already has.” (Informant).

“Many donors have said publicly that this five year plan [SEDP] is good from the environmental perspective, but there are also critics who say that this is not sustainable development. What the government is doing is to nicely separate everything into three pillars and instead of three pillars supporting the same thing it becomes three silos for separate things...but one of the critical comment is that in the socio economic development plan you need to have a sectoral splitting...the sector is defined in law and you need to have ministry managing the sector.” (Informant).

There is a danger that the system in place is not built to implement the intersectoral and holistic plans even if they will be drafted very well. This of course applies to most of the countries, few have government structure that would be able to implement National Agenda 21 in a truly intersectoral manner. Linking these strategies and monitoring to the existing government planning processes and mainstream policies is crucial to quarantine the implementation and sustainability. The development of comprehensive action plans directly connected to the Vietnam Agenda 21 has not been successful and the slow process of the DESD National Action Plan finalization would also suggest that government is not fully committed to support the DESD planning process, while it is not aligned with the existing mainstream educational policy development.

Following suggestions for further research can be made based on the findings:

1. At present the SEDP provides an overall country framework for socio economic development in Vietnam with direct structures for implementation. Further research would be needed to assess the appropriate mechanisms to better connect the sustainable development strategies with the SEDP.
2. There is little evidence on the actual impact on sustainable development connected to and derived from the Vietnam Agenda 21 process. This evidence might help in guiding the current DESD process and when planning the future interventions to support the adoption of global frameworks in Vietnam.

List of Acronyms:

CPRGS	Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy
DESD	UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development
ESD	Education for Sustainable Development
MOET	Ministry of Education and Training
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
NATCOM	Vietnam National Commission for UNESCO
NGO	Non governmental organization
PMD	Prime Minister Decision
SEDP	The Five Year Socio Economic Development Plan 2006-2010
SRV	The Socialist Republic of Vietnam
UN	The United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization
Vietnam Agenda 21	The Strategic Orientation for Sustainable Development in Vietnam (Vietnam Agenda 21)
VUSTA	Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Association

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