Understanding the Challenges Faced by Child-Focused Civil Society Organizations in Ho Chi Minh City

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ABSTRACT
The presence of an active civil society is one of the most integral parts of progressive and productive community development. Within the past two decades civil society organizations have grown in size and scope throughout Viet Nam. This has been in an attempt to offset the divestment of international aid networks and match the rapid economic development occurring in urban centers like Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). The prospect of high paying jobs resulting from increased domestic and foreign investment in urban areas has encouraged rapid rural–urban migration within HCMC. As a result, urban poverty is on the rise in HCMC and the children of these vulnerable populations face unfavorable odds in educational, emotional, and legal support. The civil society organizations discussed in this paper aim to fill these gaps by supporting children in need in HCMC. However, this research finds that organizations lack sustainable funding networks, autonomy, and human resources. To ensure that their practices persist, government policy must be implemented to encourage a culture of domestic charity from individuals and businesses, as well as assist these organization’s capacity building measures.

INTRODUCTION
Since the implementation of Đổi mới (‘Renovation’) policies in 1986, a formal civil society has grown exponentially. In the early 1990s, international development organizations and charities entered Viet Nam to act as a catalyst for economic and social development. The government began introducing not-for-profit science and technology research organizations to work alongside existing mass, state-sponsored organizations such as the Farmers Association. As the economy expanded and the advent of internet and market economics brought greater civilian independence, the demand for a comprehensive civil society grew. Community members began generating ideas for community-based organizations that would champion human rights and partner with better endowed international organizations (IOs). Over the years, civil society organizations (CSOs) achieved greater autonomy and reach in their communities. Unfortunately, the recent increase in rural to urban migration and the withdrawal of international aid has put stress on the sustainability of these organizations, begging the question: what challenges do CSOs currently face?

There has been little in-depth research conducted that details the evolution of civil society in Viet Nam that also highlights first-hand accounts of their successes and challenges. This report was produced to analyze a series of in-depth, qualitative accounts from a sector of civil society that works with disadvantaged children in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). Findings from this research highlight the growing importance of local community based organizations (CBOs) that work with disadvantaged children in HCMC as well as the challenges they face in an undefined space. Conversations with leaders of local CSOs emphasize valuable information concerning the demographics of their clientele, network of funding, disposal of human resources, programmatic focus, structure of governance, and relationship with the community, donors, and government. The conclusions reached in this paper will illustrate that in order to ensure the longevity and strength of these organizations, there must be changes made to government policy that encourage charity from individuals and businesses, and improve their organizational capacity. These accounts are not representative of the entire network of CSOs in HCMC but they do provide an important socio-political context.

BACKGROUND
Defining Civil Society in Viet Nam
Civil society organizations are entities that
inhabit a space between the citizen and the state with the goal of extending pluralism and social benefit. In Vietnam, this term encompasses a wide spectrum of actors from charities and faith groups to research institutes and mass socio-political organizations (see Table 1 for a detailed typology of CSOs in Vietnamese society). Since the inception of the National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1935, the party has supported mass social organizations such as the Farmers’ Association and Women’s Union. Đổi Mới reforms created space for ‘independent’ civil society organizations to generate and grow alongside the needs of a rapidly developing society. Today, there are an estimated 1,700 to 2,000 CSOs in Vietnam. These numbers are estimated due to the extensive number of unregistered CSOs (Taylor, Nguyễn, Phạm, & Huỳnh, 2012, p.7). Nevertheless, these organizations support research interests of the state, cater to disadvantaged populations in rural and urban areas, empower marginalized populations, support educational pursuits of students, etc. Many CSOs tend to mobilize in urban centers as there are larger concentrations of people and economic migrants looking for social support.

**CSOs and the Law**

The political organization of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) allowed and promoted the expansion of an independent civil society only within the past 20 years. Up until the mid-1990s the CPV was not particularly supportive of organizations developing outside of the party’s development framework for fear of political opposition. In 1992, the Ministry of Science, Technology, and the Environment introduced state sponsored research under the Vietnamese Union of Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA) (Le, Nguyễn, Phạm, & Phuong, 2018, p.7). Shortly after, the state began welcoming outside development actors. Grassroots organizations began developing partnerships with well-endowed international organizations to carry out social protection programming and wealth generation. The government welcomed the presence of international organizations to compensate for state neglect caused by liberal economic retrenchment policies. While these organizations existed to support those in need, they did not engage in public debate about government policy.

The Socio-Economic Development Strategy, developed in 2000, formally recognized the presence and importance of civil society organizations in Vietnamese Society. As a result, the government challenged CSOs to:

1. “Strengthen the decentralization process through the Grassroots Democracy Decree i.e. enhancing accountability of governments at the provincial, district and commune level.
2. Enhance the participation of poorer communities in the development planning, implementation and monitoring- i.e. strengthening the voice of poorer citizens in policy making and implementation.
3. Support service delivery for poverty elimination with particular focus on HIV/AIDS and social safety nets i.e. improving access to the hard to reach” (Sabharwal & Than, 2005, p.1).

Despite this plan, there was no defined legal framework that would allow civil society organizations to

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CBO</td>
<td>Community Based Organization</td>
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<td>CSR</td>
<td>Corporate Social Responsibility</td>
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<td>CPV</td>
<td>Communist Party of Vietnam</td>
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<td>CSO</td>
<td>Civil Society Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>DOLISA</td>
<td>Department of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs</td>
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<td>FDI</td>
<td>Foreign Direct Investment</td>
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<td>HCMC</td>
<td>Ho Chi Minh City</td>
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<td>IDA</td>
<td>International Development Association</td>
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<td>INGO</td>
<td>International Non-governmental Agency</td>
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<td>IO</td>
<td>International Organization</td>
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<td>MDG</td>
<td>Millennium Development Goal</td>
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<td>MOLISA</td>
<td>Ministry of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental Organization</td>
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<td>ODA</td>
<td>Official Development Assistance</td>
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<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<td>SDG</td>
<td>Sustainable Development Goal</td>
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<td>USD</td>
<td>United States Dollar</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund</td>
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<td>VUSTA</td>
<td>Vietnamese Union of Science and Technology Associations</td>
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<td>WB</td>
<td>World Bank</td>
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easily register with the government. Instead, depending on an organization’s mission, they were approved and overseen by different agencies, ministries, departments, or associations. The first set of CSOs were science and technology based, so many thereafter were registered under VUSTA. The lack of clear procedures and extensive line of authority poses ongoing obstacles for CSOs in the formalization of their organizations, therefore limiting their ability to grow and raise capital (Taylor, Nguyễn, Phạm, & Huỳnh, 2012, p.6).

The Vietnamese government has consistently amended the law to establish control over the autonomy of the growing non-profit sector. The most recent issuance of Decree 45 confirms these motivations, making certain provisions stricter, especially those pertaining to policy criticisms. In the end, state agencies and CSOs have an ‘ask–give’ relationship. The state decides if an organization can become a CSO and implement their projects. While organizations may be classified as non-governmental, local officials intently monitor the activities of NGOs. The government is not often involved in the planning, funding, or execution of many of these organizations. However, it wields the power to suspend organizations or activities it does not condone. In recent years, a Law of Associations was proposed to the National Assembly to formalize and simplify the registration process. However, this proposal was turned down in 2016 because it included unconstitutional provisions and restricted international aid (Viet Nam News, 2016).

The Business Sector and CSOs

The business sector has the weakest relationship with CSOs. A survey given to 115 members of civil society groups in Viet Nam cited a weak relationship between their organizations and the business sector; see Figure 1 (Le, Nguyễn, Phạm, & Phuong, 2018, p.55). This lack of cooperation stems from the close connection between business and the state that is reminiscent of Viet Nam’s former command economy. Many Vietnamese businesses dedicate significant capital to sustain ties with government officials, who in turn vouch for businesses. Businesses protect these relationships by refraining from donating to organizations the government may not condone.

There are also very few initiatives in written law that encourage businesses to donate to a charitable organization. PricewaterhouseCoopers found that “donations are generally non-deductible, except certain donations for education, health care, natural disasters, building charitable homes for the poor, or scientific research” (Pricewaterhouse Cooper, 2019). Recognized CSOs for tax deductions are ultimately decided by the

<table>
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<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>TYPES OF ORGANIZATIONS INCLUDED IN CATEGORY</th>
<th>RELATION TO THE STATE</th>
<th>VIETNAMESE DEFINITION</th>
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| Mass Organizations | 1. Women’s Union  
2. Farmers’ Association  
3. Youth Organization  
4. War Veterans Association  
5. Worker’s Organization (VNGL) | Fatherland Front | Socio-Political Organizations |
| Professional Associations and Umbrella Organizations | 1. Umbrella organizations like Red Cross, VUSTA, VUAL, Cooperative Alliance, etc.  
2. Professional Associations | 1. Fatherland Front  
2. Registered with an umbrella organization, Center, or provincial organization | 1. Socio-Professional Associations  
2. Social and professional associations; some belong to the NGOs |
| VNGOs | Charity, Research NGOs, Consultancy NGOs, Educational NGOs, Health NGOs | VUSTA, Line Ministries, Provincial or District People’s Committees | Social Organizations, NGOs |
| Community-based Organizations | Service and development or livelihoods-oriented, faith-based organizations, neighborhood groups, family clans, recreational groups | Indirect affiliation to other organizations or Civil Code  
Many are not registered | Rural collaborative groups, faith-based organizations, neighborhood groups, family clans |

**TABLE 1.** Typology of Civil Society Organizations in Viet Nam  
(Taken from Civil Society in Vietnam: A Comparative Study of Civil Society Organizations in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, 2012, p.8)
government, creating systemic inequity. Due to the state's influence on business and its lacking policies, there is little development of corporate responsibility as there are no incentives to have financial relationships with CSOs. This lack of tax incentives or deductions also discourages charity from individuals (Pricewaterhouse Cooper, 2019).

History of International Aid in Viet Nam

Since opening to global involvement, Viet Nam has been a major recipient of development aid from bilateral and multilateral donors. IOs like the World Bank and UNICEF and international non-governmental organizations like World Relief and Save the Children became drivers of a capitalist market economy in adherence to the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). By 2015, all of Viet Nam's MDGs had been met and it remains one of the strongest of the World Bank's borrowers. Within 30 years, Viet Nam's poverty rate experienced a sharp decline, from 70% to 6% (World Bank, 2019). Investment remained relatively strong, even as Viet Nam took the spot as the fastest growing economy in Southeast Asia ("Vietnam fastest-growing economy", 2019). Decades after the first round of foreign aid crossed its borders, the OECD found that Viet Nam was the fourth largest recipient of development assistance- receiving 2.308 billion USD in 2017 (Bony-Cisternes, 2019, p.2).

While international aid remains a robust part of civil society, investment numbers have begun to decline. The classification of Viet Nam as a middle-income country in 2012 was monumental, implying that adequate economic strength, independence, and capacity building was achieved. As a result, international donors like the International Development Association - an arm of the World Bank- began withdrawing. Not only has aid been dwindling, but the aid that enters Viet Nam is starting to be allocated towards a new set of global interests. For example, the EU decided to allocate its 2014-2020 allowance (400 million EUR) to the protection of the environment and climate change (Bony-Cisternes, 2019, p.4). As climate change is addressed, funding for existing non-environmental pursuits is abandoned. Consequently, CSOs are forced to explore alternative, sustainable funding methods often within the domestic private sector. However, CSOs face a major obstacle in a lack of financial and human capital necessary for building their organization's capacity. Accounts from the non-profits leaders discussed in this research mention that in the past NGOs did not have to focus time, energy, and staff to generate funds for their organizations. Today, innovative forms of fundraising need to be generated, such as crowdfunding, corporate responsibility, public events, and grant writing; otherwise, civil society will recede.

Importance of Child-Focused CSOs in HCMC

Ho Chi Minh City has attracted rural migrants in large credence to weak rural development initiatives within the Mekong Delta and Central Viet Nam. Climate change
has threatened the present and future profitability and sustainability of agricultural production and tourism. Therefore, residents seek out higher-paying positions in factories or the informal sector in hopes of delivering remittances to families left behind in rural communities. As a result, HCMC is among the world’s fastest growing cities, expanding from a population of 5 million in 1999, to about 13 million in 2019 (World Bank, 2019). In 2015 UNICEF found that 36% of HCMC’s population were temporary residents, suggesting that there is a great proportion of inter-provincial migrants (2017, p.35).

Many migrants with families choose to bring their children along during the move to keep their families united and provide better educational opportunities for their children. UNICEF, in collaboration with the HCMC People’s Committee, created a report titled the Situation Analysis of Children in HCMC in 2017 in response to the influx of migrant children in HCMC. This report outlined the city’s goal of establishing a Child Friendly City (CFC) with the aim of protecting children’s rights as outlined by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The city’s planning and budgeting focused on the CRC’s four pillars: “every child survives and thrives, every child learns, every child is protected, and every child participates” (Kurukulasuriya, Nguyen, Phan, & Tran, 2017, p.16). This report found that while the city is making progress in these areas, disparities continue to grow, particularly for disadvantaged groups, such as: children with disabilities, impoverished children, and the children of migrants. A lack of birth documentation, temporary housing, and migrant status creates barriers to entry in primary and secondary education. This can influence a child’s physical and emotional health, as well as their access to adequate and sustainable shelter. In the 1990s, international and local CSOs began pop-up around the city to support disadvantaged children such as: street children, child laborers, migrants, and those living with HIV/AIDS. These organizations provide educational, physical, and emotional support to disadvantaged populations in urban areas, funded by predominantly international networks.

Understanding the history of civil society in Viet Nam and how it is situated within the law is important in comprehending many of the hierarchical and structural challenges that CSO leaders currently face. Just as well, understanding the role that international investment has played in response to the adoption of a market economy and growing demand for child-focused support services highlights the motivation behind this research.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Research Methods and Sampling**

This study was designed to answer the question: what financial and organizational challenges do child-focused civil society organizations currently face and where do they derive from? To help answer this question, research was gathered from primary and secondary sources over the course of a month in HCMC. Because it is an urban center that receives a high number of economic migrants, there is a large network of CSOs that exist to support these populations. As a result, HCMC was the most pragmatic place of study. CSOs in HCMC tend to be comprised of smaller-scale community organizations focused on services for disadvantaged groups like children and migrants, whereas CSOs in Hanoi tend to be institutes and centers that are more closely linked with the government. Through the advisor the interviewer was connected to a series of leaders within various local civil society organizations in HCMC that work with vulnerable populations of children. A variety of large civil society organizations, such as UNICEF and Save the Children, were also contacted but no response was received. To gain various perspectives on the issue, the interviewer conducted five semi-structured interviews guided by a set of questions tailored to the professional positionality of the interviewee (see Appendix A for a full list of interviewees and Appendix B for a sample of interview questions). Interviews were determined to be the best form of data collection given that each organization had a unique story that would best be told in an informal dialogue. The interviewer would be able to ask follow-up questions that offered more detail about the organization, its history, and present day challenges. All of the interviewees were the primary leaders of their respective organizations, so they were able to speak extensively on the history, mission, financials, challenges, etc, of their organizations. The interview questions prompted discussions on the importance of their organization; the structure and administrative hierarchies that exist; their financial histories; and the challenges they are currently facing. These questions helped guide the qualitative research affording the interviewer a better understanding of the challenges non-governmental support networks face in today’s climate. Interviews were conducted in-person and tailored to the availability of the interviewee. Most of the interviews were conducted in English, however one required the use of a local translator. Due to the limited time and in-country connections, convenience and snowball sampling were used to garner interviewees. A short description of the organizations successfully visited are located in the section below.

**Collaborating Organizations**

The civil society organizations spoken with all exist as non-profit social protection services for disadvantaged children in HCMC. They provide educational opportunities, case work, shelter, food, legal aid, job skill building, counseling, family reintegration, etc. The details of each of the CSOs structure and mission are stated below.
Children’s House, District 8

The Children’s House was started by the Department and Ministry of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs in 1993 to support orphans and street children in District 8 in HCMC. Their mission is to care for and educate disadvantaged boys under the age of 14 so they may reunite with their families or build a successful and independent life with the skills they’ve built at the Children’s House. They currently house, feed, educate, and emotionally support 14 boys, while also giving them the necessary legal support to obtain personal identity papers. While the CSO was initiated by the Vietnamese government, they do not financially support the organization; they must rely on a variety of international and local donors, such as Chayra (Germany) and AtDta Foundation (Switzerland).

Thao Dan Social Protection Center

Thao Dan is a social protection center that was founded in 1992 to support street children, ages 6-18, in HCMC. At its inception, it supported a few dozen children; today they help an average of 160 children per year. Currently, children experiencing homelessness, those that are economically disadvantaged, or child laborers are referred to this organization for support. The mission of Thao Dan work is to provide opportunities for children to grow up happily in a safe and healthy environment. They have created a safe space for children to share their experiences and offer emotional support through social workers; provide legal assistance to aid educational and housing pursuits; and offer lunch and a space to play. They rely on a system of volunteers to help carry out programming and case work. Financial support comes from large international donors like UNICEF, to help maintain programming and a small staff.

Cau Han Project

Cau Han Project is one branch of the HCMC Child Welfare Association. The mission of the Cau Han Project is to provide education to disadvantaged children in District 7. This represents those who cannot enter the public-school system because they lack proper identification papers. The organization provides students 5-grade levels of free education, partial scholarships to attend public or private schools, social support services like counseling, and legal services. Their organization is supported by the government, but they must rely on international donors like Terre des Hommes (Germany) to carry out their programming.

Green Bamboo

The Green Bamboo project is another branch of the HCMC Child Welfare Association. A group of social workers opened Green Bamboo in 1994 to support street children in District one. In 1998 they began housing, providing meals, educating, and providing counseling/legal support for disadvantaged boys in the community. In the past they relied on international organizations to support their programming and staff, however international divestment has posed financial challenges for the sustainability of the organization.

Ethics

The topic in question was not inherently exploitative or invasive in nature. However, several precautions were taken to ensure the research was conducted in an ethical manner. The main concern was protecting the identity and emotions of the interviewees. The interviewer explicitly asked for verbal and written consent for permission to use names, titles, and organization names before conducting interviews. The interviewer would also state who they were and the purpose of the research prior to the conversation. Interviewees were invited to ask for clarification at any point and reminded of their ability to abstain from answering any questions. All interviews were conducted with the convenience of the interviewee in mind. At the conclusion of the interview the interviewer provided interviewees with their contact information to ensure the interviewer could be reached at any point with questions, comments, and concerns.

Empathy and gratitude were also maintained throughout the interview. While the interviewees were not compensated monetarily, they and translators were given a small gift to thank them for the time they spent aiding the research.

Limitations

There are several limitations that affected the authority and breadth of this research. First and foremost, the language barrier was a significant roadblock in research. Though interviews had primarily been conducted in English, the language barrier was still posed as a burden. This limited the breadth of the research because there were not as detailed, in-depth conversations as would have been ideal. Rewording or discarding certain questions were also necessary because of the language gap. Just as well, interviewees often gave answers that were only tangentially related or completely unrelated to the question asked which furthered the disconnect in understanding. The language barrier may also have affected data collection as inaccurate interpretations of verbal responses, even after repetition, may have been recorded. With more resources and/or time, this barrier could have been reduced.

The second consequence of the language barrier was the inability to gather and interpret data conducted in Vietnamese. The advisor and several interviewees had suggested several relevant studies written in Vietnamese.
that would have helped guide the research. As these could not be translated due to time constraints, reliance was placed on research conducted by international aid organizations like the World Bank, UNICEF, the United Nations, and other foreign research. This ultimately affected the thoroughness and bias of the research.

The limited amount of time dedicated to conducting research was also a significant barrier. While the advisor offered suggestions on several potential interviewees, reliance on child support services and the role of CSOs. However, given the foreign status of the researcher, there were a series of unexpected red tape necessary to get an interview. This process could not be afforded given scarce time and resources. In all, conducting research as a foreigner requires careful attention towards language and cultural barriers, as well as local knowledge.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Chronic Need

Rural-urban Migration

An inevitable challenge for many Vietnamese citizens is the ominous threat posed by climate change. In agricultural areas such as central Viet Nam and the Mekong Delta, climate change is affecting the salinity of the water and soil, making it harder for farmers to raise these crops. Just as well, homes and businesses are being destroyed in Central Viet Nam because of flooding and storms. The consequences of climate change are approaching too fast for communities and the government to instill resiliency measures. Representatives from Thao Dan and Cau Han confirmed that many children come to their organizations because their families are victims of poor agricultural yields in the Mekong Delta. Struggling families look towards big cities like HCMC for opportunity, hearing stories of wealth and prosperity. When asked if migration and the need for their services will slow in the coming years, all my interviewees stated, 'no', noting that any future in coastal/agricultural areas in Viet Nam is bleak.

Even provinces outside of HCMC that may not be impacted by climate change look to the city to achieve financial freedom. Dr. Nguyen from the University of Economics argued that the population increase in the city can be attested to growing inequality among regions/provinces. People only think of metropolitan areas to obtain economic mobility, causing economic migrants to flood to areas in and around HCMC. He also argued that land policy, such as tenure and quantity capacity, has forced families to relocate. A representative at Thao Dan confirmed this migrant profile, stating that many parents of the children who use their services were economic migrants, many of which now work long hours in Viet Nam's developing industrial sector. This changing economic system explains why their organization opened in the mid-1990s. Not only was this the period that the government opened to CSOs, but migration networks increased because of increased opportunity that resulted from foreign direct investment and a competitive market economy. More migrants mean more children that face challenging odds regarding educational and emotional support, requiring CSOs to build a larger capacity to serve these populations.

Lack of Documentation

One of the greatest challenges for children who utilize these CSOs is a lack of personal documentation. Many of the children that use these services do so because they lack the appropriate identification papers to attend public school. In speaking with Mr. Linh at the Children's House, he says that because the boys are orphaned or have migrated from other provinces, they lack birth documentation that is necessary to register for public school. Instead these boys must attend school sessions or have migrated from other provinces, they lack birth documentation that is necessary to register for public school. Instead these boys must attend school sessions for undocumented children that are shorter in length and less developed. Chii Huong from Cau Han discussed why so many children are undocumented in the provinces; over the years they found that families that give birth in hospitals leave before obtaining their child's birth certificate in order to avoid hospital costs. Families may also not be aware of the implications of not registering their children, and don't have the time or resources to pursue it later on. Many CSOs in HCMC, including the four I spoke with, devote considerable resources and time to help children obtain identification papers. These papers are critical for a child trying to attend school or receive basic healthcare services.
Weak Fundraising Capacity

One of the most striking findings from conversations with CSOs was realizing the lacking capacity for fundraising. For over two decades these organizations have had large, stable international donors to rely on. Now these networks are fading away, and organizations are left without the capacity to independently seek out funds. The capacity to fundraise was not built into the staffing or programming of these organizations, therefore strong networks of domestic donors do not exist. Chí Liệu commented on this sentiment, stating that before, “[her] organization just used money, now [they] have to get money.” She furthered stated that her skills are in social work, not fundraising. The decline of human capital in these small CSOs makes it almost impossible to dedicate the appropriate amount of time to find grants and sustainable donors to build a local network of financial support. Organizations like the LIN Center have entered the space to aid capacity building within these organizations through grant opportunities and consulting. Unfortunately, LIN does not have the human and financial capital necessary to aid such a large list of non-profit organizations in need of capacity building in HCMC.

Chi Huong said the future of financial freedom starts with emphasizing corporate social responsibility. As discussed earlier in the report, corporations have no responsibility to CSOs that support community development. She cited that the government has not instituted any policy to encourage or incentivize this behavior. One of the policies that she thinks could encourage this growth is tax incentives and advocacy work. The rise of internet mediums has improved transparency, inspiring a new relationship of trust between donors and CSOs. Chí Ngan explained that people within the community who donate to the registered non-profit to write off any of those donations on their taxes. This encourages donations from people with smaller personal wealth, as well as businesses. No such status exists in Vietnamese law. Chí Ngân explained that people within the community or neighborhood donate to their efforts through in-kind donations, such as notebooks, food, or clothing; Chí Linh told a similar narrative. There is not one reason for this decision, however people are not incentivized to even give the smallest of monetary donations because there is no government policy incentivizing action. She also noted that people who donate to organizations like to see the immediate impact or trajectory of their donation. By donating in-kind, such as notebooks or clothing, you can control the destiny of your investment. By streamlining the registration process for CSOs and restructuring CSO law, a system for tax-deductible donations could theoretically be built.

Non-profit Law & Tax Incentives

In places like the United States, CSOs often benefit from 501(c)3 status. This status, as defined in tax law, allows those who donate to the registered non-profit to write off any of those donations on their taxes. This encourages donations from people with smaller personal wealth, as well as businesses. No such status exists in Vietnamese law. Chí Ngân explained that people within the community or neighborhood donate to their efforts through in-kind donations, such as notebooks, food, or clothing; Chí Linh told a similar narrative. There is not one reason for this decision, however people are not incentivized to even give the smallest of monetary donations because there is no government policy incentivizing action. She also noted that people who donate to organizations like to see the immediate impact or trajectory of their donation. By donating in-kind, such as notebooks or clothing, you can control the destiny of your investment. By streamlining the registration process for CSOs and restructuring CSO law, a system for tax-deductible donations could theoretically be built.

Attitude Towards Migrants

Chí Ngân also explained her frustration with the government’s inattention towards migrants. She says that the government has sponsored reports citing a significant decrease in the population of street children/families in HCMC over the past decade. These studies were conducted by research institutions that must operate within the framework of the government. Her organization conducted research of their own, finding a higher number of disadvantaged peoples in HCMC. She said that the government lacks local knowledge of migrant settlement patterns, and therefore conducts inaccurate research. The consequences of inaccurate data are that it signals to international donors that their investment in CSOs might not be needed. Dr. Doan discussed that the city is constantly trying to paint HCMC as a rich and prosperous city; it would not be in the government’s interest to publish data that would challenge those goals. They are in the business to encourage investment and tourism to places like HCMC. In the future, independent research institutions that utilize local knowledge will have a greater role to play in development policy and CSO strength.
CONCLUSION

Over the course of a month, I conversed with a series of changemakers that have dedicated their lives to advocate on behalf of and improve the lives of disadvantaged children in HCMC. Twenty years ago, these local civil society organizations arose out of a need to support vulnerable children affected by the retrenchment period post Đổi Mới. While Việt Nam has achieved relative economic prosperity over the past twenty years, the need for these services remains robust. Climate change, growing income inequalities, and a rapidly changing economy have urged a new wave of rural-urban migration. The capacity to support these vulnerable populations is being challenged by the divestment of international aid; government policy; and a lacking financial capacity. The sustainability of this vital sub-sector of civil society is contingent on the active role of government policy change that would encourage domestic charity; demand CSR from the business sector; and aid capacity building measures for CSOs. The testimonies that this research has compiled hope to inspire and be utilized by community members in Việt Nam to demand action from the government. Just as well, this country’s history is not unique. Communities with similar histories plagued by imperialism and colonization have often received streams of international aid that have provided momentary relief, while undermining the sustainability and capacity of the organizations they are trying to aid.

Further Research

Over the course of my research period I came across ideas that were beyond the scale of this research but would be interesting extensions on the topic. First and foremost, it would have been beneficial to meet with more local CSOs to obtain a larger sample size of the support networks available to disadvantaged children in HCMC. With a greater sample size, I would have gained a broader perspective of the challenges, successes, and ideas for the future of sustainable civil society capacity building.

Next, I would have liked to speak with larger INGOs in the area, such as UNICEF and Save the Children, to understand their reach and relationships in HCMC. What is the future of IOs in Việt Nam, given Việt Nam’s increased economic status and growing civil society? Are IOs trying to aid the capacity building of these organizations or are they merely providing short-term solutions? Are there elements of Vietnamese law that limit the reach or breadth of their programming?

Finally, as I met with interviewees and did more research on the role of corporate responsibility, I realized the growing importance of the business sector in the sustainability of civil society organizations. Speaking with large businesses in HCMC would uncover why they would or would not donate to different CSOs. Are businesses looking to be incentivized by government policy? What kind of CSOs would they be willing to donate to?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research project would not have been possible without the guidance and support of my advisors: Duong Van Thanh and Nguyễn Thị Minh Chau. I am extremely grateful for their unwavering support and dedication to help me pursue this research.

I would also like to thank all of the individuals that graciously agreed to take the time out of their busy schedules to share their stories, thoughts, and opinions: Lê Thị Ngân, Nguyễn Doan, Nguyễn Tri Linh, Tổng Thị Huống, and Nguyễn Thị Bích Liêu. Gaining these perspectives was a critical part of the research and afforded me a new outlook on community development that I plan to carry with me into my academic and professional pursuits. The complete index of organizations and individuals can be found in Appendix A. I would also like to thank the network of local students for their eagerness and willingness to aid our translation needs during the research process.
APPENDIX A: TABLE OF INTERVIEWEES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ORGANIZATION</th>
<th>CLASSIFICATION</th>
<th>CONTACT(S)</th>
<th>TRANSLATOR</th>
<th>DATE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children's House, D. 8</td>
<td>Civil Society Organization</td>
<td>Nguyen Trí Linh</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2019, October 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thao Dan Social Protection Center</td>
<td>Civil Society Organization</td>
<td>Lê Thị Ngàn</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2019, November 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Economics</td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Nguyen Doan</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2019, December 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cau Hân Project</td>
<td>Civil Society Organization</td>
<td>Tong Thị Huong</td>
<td>Nguyen Trong</td>
<td>2019, December 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Bamboo</td>
<td>Civil Society Organization</td>
<td>Nguyễn Thị BíchLieu</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2019, December 12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

APPENDIX B: GENERAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the mission/purpose of your organization?
   a. When and why was it created?
2. What is your role at the organization?
3. How many full/part-time employees and/or volunteers are involved?
4. What services are provided to clients?
5. What are the demographics of the children? (ie. age, gender, residency status, migrant status, household make-up, etc.)
   a. Has rapid rural-urban migration affected the population in need?
6. How has the organization changed over the years? (ie. staff size, mission, clientele)
7. Where does the organization get financial support?
   a. How has that changed over time?
   b. What is more important, international or domestic financial support?
8. What is your relationship with the government?
9. What are the current needs of your organization?
10. What are the biggest challenges that the children and/or your organization face?
REFERENCES


About the Author
Annalise is a junior from Addison, Illinois majoring in International Affairs with a concentration in International Development and minorinng in Sustainability. Annalise spent the fall of her junior year studying abroad in Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam. During that time she developed an interest in the history of international aid and rural-urban migration in Viet Nam and its relationship to the capacity of civil society organizations in urban areas. Annalise is currently serving as a communications and outreach intern for Immigrant Food, with previous experience at World Central Kitchen and FreshFarm.

Mentor Details
This article was prepared with mentorship from Nguyen Thi Minh Chau. Nguyen Thi Minh Chau is the head of the Research Center on Development and Consultancy at The Southern Institute of Social Sciences based in Ho Chi Minh City in Viet Nam.