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Different Sustainable
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Mediating Resistance: An NGO, a Community and the Struggle for a Different Sustainable Development in Vietnam

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Abstract

Vietnam is a country highly affected by ecological crises. The government seeks to mitigate and adapt to the climate crisis, biodiversity crisis, etc. through sustainable development policies within a framework of ecological modernisation. At the same time, the state uses these policies to stabilize its power. The sustainable development paradigm as a norm is therefore omni-present. Not all citizens agree with the government program of sustainable development, however, and occasional resistance takes place. Contemporary processes and actions of resistance to sustainable development policies in Vietnam have hardly been described in academic literature. This paper addresses the gap and illustrates how a farming community resists the narrative and shows how a Vietnamese NGO mediates the community's covert everyday resistance to overt forms and rightful resistance. It achieves case-based successes by making paradoxes between different discourses productive. The paper contributes to understanding the role of the sustainable development discourse in Vietnam and adds to the literature on resistance by enabling an in-depth look into the process of mediation between different forms of resistance.

Keywords

**Civil Society,
Ecological
Modernisation,
Governmentality,
Land Rights,
Narrative**

Introduction

Standing at the top of a hill, I marvel at the scenery below me. Chi and I have almost arrived at the village that is our destination, but Chi has decided we should get out of the car and utilise the viewpoint for some introductory remarks by her on the area. The air is fresh, especially after coming from polluted Hanoi, and the sun is reflected in the river below us. As far as the eye can see there is forest. But the scenery is not fully what I thought it would be. Chi, the founder of several Vietnamese non-governmental organisations (NGOs), explains that the scenery, that I thought was made of primary forests, are plantations for paper production. This is one of the core issues Chi is fighting against with her NGO and the communities affected by it. They want to replace plantations with agroecology that preserves primary forest. At the same time, they are concerned with the need of income generation for farmers. Bringing both together is supposed to achieve what they see as true sustainability: economic and social stability without ecological destruction. They are against commodifying land and selling its use rights to paper companies and want to preserve land with community land titles as it is – land for the community that members can jointly use. While projects such as this commodification of land and

financialization of nature are in line with the state's Sustainable Development Program, Chi's NGO and the community at large question that ecological modernisation narrative and consider alternative types of agriculture that do not require the commodification of land and recognise values that are not financialised. They contest the official narration of sustainable development. What sustainability is and what kind of development is desirable are highly complex questions. They elicit a range of different answers depending on who you ask, and who gets to answer them very much depends on who has power. In the Vietnamese context, the government and development agencies answer with a particular definition of the global sustainable development narrative to questions on environmental governance. The narrative appears in laws and policy papers, and on red banners hung across village streets by rural local authorities. It frames government policy that includes the government's urge for economic growth, the need to make growth human- and environmentally-friendly and legitimizes the Communist Party of Vietnam's (CPV) grip on power. The narrative departs from an understanding of development based on ideas of modernity (Ferguson 1994; Scott 1998)¹ and consequently an idea of sustainable development as ecological modernisation. It accepts that the root cause of the climate crisis and other environmental crises is anthropogenic. But, unlike ideas such as social-ecological transformation, it postulates that these can be resolved by environmental management within existing socio-economic systems (Hajer 1995; Wissen and Brand 2017).

Recent studies on resistance to development and modernisation projects in Vietnam have shown that there is resistance to methods of project implementation, but not to the idea of modernity and 'civilisation' behind the projects per se (Harms 2016; Pham 2023). For example, dispossessed people in Ho Chi Minh City claim higher compensation for their dispossessed land than what is offered by state authorities, but do not question the narratives of 'civilisation' and 'beauty' behind city development projects (Harms 2016). Studies on the work of NGOs and civil society in Vietnam portray these actors as largely stabilising the authoritarian system, in which they function by not questioning the development discourse in Vietnam, although they seek to democratise governance processes by strengthening socio-economically marginalised people (Wells-Dang 2011; Wong 2012; Wischermann 2018; Trinh 2022). Despite the lack of direct criticism, I argue, however, that the epistemological hegemony of the modern development discourse in general and the sustainable development discourse in the field of socio-ecological politics in particular are indeed contested by Vietnamese actors. The government's institutionalised norm-setting through the discourse of sustainable development is not as universally accepted and internalised by citizens as other studies have suggested. There are actors resisting its materialisation on the ground, accompanied by a consciousness of the ideological aspect of their resistance. In the case study presented in this paper, a community and an NGO resist the modern understanding of sustainable development to save the local environment and livelihoods.

This paper makes three points. First, it contributes knowledge to the specific case of Vietnam and its politics of sustainability by showing that the understanding of sustainable development in the Vietnamese state is framed as a case of modern ecological governmentality in an authoritarian context. Second, there is occasional resistance to this narrative. Even though not on a discursive level, forms of everyday resistance on the ground prove that the concept is not as unanimously accepted as may appear from the official and public sustainable development debate. This means, for example, that commodification and privatization of land are criticized as unwanted form of development by the community. Third, it is contributing to the wider understanding of how resistance works, how the mediation of different overt and covert forms of resistance functions, and how resisters use the paradoxes of narratives within these productively. The mediation process urges us to rethink the dichotomy of covert and overt

¹ Ideas of modernity refer to processes like rationalization, commodification, decontextualization, mechanization, industrialization.

forms of resistance and look more closely at what lies between ‘everyday resistance’ and ‘rightful resistance’ (O’Brien and Li 2006), and at how a translation between them occurs.

Everyday resistance describes actions that are based on and take place in people’s daily lives. The concept of rightful resistance describes institutionalized struggles that are legitimized through the resister’s reference to laws, policies and official state rhetoric. The forms are not mutually exclusive, however, in this paper, the different forms of resistance rely on paradox ideologies. The contrast of the narratives creates a tension between the resistance forms that the NGO and community use productively to achieve their goals.

The case study is based on an NGO based in Hanoi and a community in Central Vietnam where I undertook ethnographic work field work in 2020 and 2021. The NGO in this paper was founded in the 2000s and works on social and ecological issues. It was barred from operating for a while due to working on politically sensitive issues in an out-spoken, public way, and has been reshaped in different institutional forms over the years. I got to know its founder, whom I call Chi in this paper, while doing my field work. After numerous in-depth discussions on Marxism, land, and ‘interest groups’ (*nhóm lợi ích*) over dinner, she offered to take me to one of the communities, with which she has been working for over 20 years. It would be an eleven-hour drive down to the village in central Vietnam, where I would get the chance to learn about the NGO’s work. In project proposals to donors, the work falls into the category of ‘sustainable development’. But from Chi’s description, it sounded more like strategically organised acts of resistance to the province’s land and agriculture politics and the idea of development behind them.

According to government statistics, the hamlet I am arriving at one warm fall afternoon has an area of roughly 12,000 ha and is populated by about 1,000 households containing 3,000 people. Agriculture, forestry and fishing provide about half the community’s income, and trade and services make up the rest. The NGO has worked in this area since before the road we took was built. Such a long relationship between an NGO and a community is unusual. Project-funding cycles of three to six years are the norm for NGOs, and the theory of change is based on this timeframe. The NGO has not concerned themselves with those cycles, building equally long-term partnerships with the communities and with international donors to promote agroecology, and a new project promoting sustainable tourism.

I went with Chi to visit the houses of four community members and made two day-trips with five community members to forests, rivers and caves in the community area. During that time, I got the chance to conduct formal qualitative interviews. I also got Chi’s permission to record our conversations on the road. I was permitted to participate in and record two community meetings at which strategies for future activities were discussed. On the way to the hamlet we stopped to visit a different project nearby and I got the chance to talk to a project manager, who I call Lan here, in depth. The data should be understood taking into consideration the biases prevalent in the research process: My positionality as a researcher as a *white*, female outsider coming into the community together with representatives from the NGO.

I conducted a discourse analysis of the sustainable development narrative using grounded coding of selected government and NGO publications and government policies. Where available, I used both the Vietnamese and English language versions of publications to understand the process of translation of key terms; if only one language version was available, I relied on that. For context I rely on additional 27 qualitative interviews with representatives from the NGO sector and government officials in Vietnam.

The paper starts with an in-depth description of the relationship between NGOs and the Vietnamese state, and the latter’s adaptation of the sustainable development narrative. It then focuses on the case study and traces different forms of resistance to the commodification of land in the name of sustainable development. Below is a description of the mediation of resistance.

The Vietnamese state, NGOs and power

Vietnam is an authoritarian state under the rule of the CPV. The rule is structured horizontally from the national down to the communal level and thereby reaches all parts of the country. The CPV has established a parallel inner-party organisational system. In theory, both bottom-up and top-down processes should take place within the system. Practically, policy decisions are made at the national level and then handed down for implementation. Beside the party and government structures there are mass organisations such as the Fatherland Front, the Farmer's Union and the Women's Union, whose purpose is to offer an organisational structure for people with different interests and include them in the overall CPV structure.

The 'responsive-repressive system' (Kerkvliet 2019) limits spaces for civil society beyond the CPV network and limits freedom rights even within it. On the repressive side, what in the Vietnamese context are called socio-political organisations (*tổ chức xã hội chính trị*) are only allowed to operate within a set administrative corset. The Vietnamese equivalent of NGOs and civil-society organisations must register under a relevant authority, and all organisations have to apply for permits for each project and activity. Since 2021, there has been a rise in the rejection of such applications following a reshuffling of the responsibility for granting permits, restricting the space in which NGOs can work even further and expanding the power of the state and the CPV. Activists, journalists, and other professionals fear surveillance, revocation of their passports, and even imprisonment, as recently seen in the cases of detention of the NGO professionals Nguyễn Thị Khanh (2021) and Ngô Thị Tố Nhiên and Hoàng Thị Minh Hồng (2023). In this context resistance is rare and more difficult, but not impossible.

The responsive side of the state becomes visible, for example, in singular, localised protests against pollution, or debates on specific policies which allow diversified input during the law-making process (O'Rourke 2004; Bui 2013; Pham 2023). Rightful resistance (O'Brien and Li 2006) has appeared throughout communities in Vietnam with occasional successes (Pham 2023), as has edge-balling. Edge-balling captures how actors across power relations use behaviour codes to gain advantage from state policies and address injustices in their implementation (Wei and Nguyen 2021). In my case study, rightful resistance and edge-balling are not the local community's resistance of choice. Edge-balling accepts shared ideas of justice and decency, but the community in this case study rejects fundamental sustainable development ideas. Neither does the community seek to resist loudly and publicly, as in rightful resistance. The NGO becomes a rightful resister by taking everyday resistance to state institutions: it pledges allegiance to core values, challenges misconduct by businesses and government authorities through official state discourse, and knows how to exploit symbolic and material capital to achieve social and ecological justice. The NGO creates space for different definitions of sustainable development within its practice of mediating resistance. It is a blurry space between everyday resistance and rightful resistance, as discussed later in this paper.

Everyday resistance has played a key role in societal transformations in Vietnam in the past. Kerkvliet, (2005) for example, argues that the everyday resistance of cooperative members resulted in CPV cadres implementing a land reform in the 1980s. Cooperative land was left unplanted, making private use of agricultural land possible again. The case of land use remains central in protests and political tension in Vietnam today, and is the main point of contestation in the present case study. While Kerkvliet describes how the forming of cooperatives led to contention, in my case it is the commodification of land that is seen as the problem. The case study shows that farmers can contest the de-communalisation of land, too. They are against the commercial use of community land by a paper production company and seek to keep land-use rights in the hands of the community. In both cases, their power over the use of land has been curtailed by the state, sparking protest.

To understand the power dynamics in which NGOs are embedded, it is important to point out that in practice they are not a hundred per cent non-governmental. They are part of

a co-dependent network with government institutions and have an active role in governance (Petras 1999). This is true not only in authoritarian settings such as Vietnam but also in democracies, where NGOs can rely on government funding and participate in policymaking expert committees. NGOs function within the system, possibly seeking to change but not fundamental reform it, which is in line with the role of NGOs in ecological modernisation theory. They can easily become supporters of state structures while manoeuvring their work within it and shed aspects of resistance from their work (Weller 2006). Still, they perceive themselves and are perceived by other actors as part of a component that is not the state. In my interviews with over 20 representatives from international and Vietnamese NGOs, all of my interlocutors positioned themselves organizationally outside the state, including NGO representatives who were formerly state employees. They see the state as a target group for advocacy work and cooperating partner in achieving their goals and not understand themselves as a state-attached organization.

With this self-perception in mind, NGOs are governance but not government actors, and can position themselves in both bottom-up and top-down policy processes. They define themselves by a range of characteristics including being non-profit, non-governmental and through morality, and can therefore be either emancipatory or governance groups (Doherty and Doyle 2018). Governance groups are embedded in the neoliberal framework, as they do not position themselves in a discourse that is critical of the political-economical system and its norms. Emancipatory groups are, at least on a discourse level, critical of power structures and seek to create networks across scales and spaces for alternative narratives and new actors to emerge. Case studies in Vietnam suggest that NGOs in the country are governance groups (Wong 2012; Wischermann and Dang 2017), but the present case study shows how an NGO can navigate its positionality and be a governance group on paper and an emancipatory group in practice.

Encountering the NGO and talking to Lan and Chi stood out from the interviews I conducted with NGO representatives. For the majority of people I met, it seemed clear that working with the state and the private sector was the only functional option to do any work at all, and that the mass organisations, local Party chapters, and enterprises were essential cooperation partners. Systemic analysis for the cause of ecological crises were hardly brought up and solutions for the crises were placed on the ‘moral citizen’ (Nguyen 2018) by encouraging citizens to change their individual behaviour and urging policymakers to create better legal frameworks with clear implementation plans for the individuals to follow. Unlike the majority of interlocutors, Lan and Chi quoted Marx and traced how the current system produces environmental injustice. They presented concepts they were working with, mapping them on the big whiteboard in the NGO’s main meeting room while offering me organic green tea and fruit from their project site. They pointed out that cooperating with institutions in the system was unavoidable if they wanted to be permitted to function in Vietnam. Seeking the formers’ cooperation did not contradict the systemic criticism they voiced, in their view, but it made it possible to practice a different understanding of sustainable development legally in their projects. The NGO thereby holds up the system within which it functions, but at the same time in some cases it can support and enact resistance that seeks to transform parts of the system. It contributes to transformation through community development, but not by reframing issues or substituting for government action. I contend that these contrasting roles of the NGO become compatible when looking at them as acts of mediating resistance in the realm of sustainable development. The case study tells us that roles that appear as paradoxes are central to the functioning of resistance in Vietnam. Despite the influence on the organisational structure and agenda the state has on the NGO through the repressive regime, there is still space to navigate and resist the state’s governmentality structures.

The state narrative

The sustainable development discourse as a normative approach for Vietnam's environmental governmentality originated in the global sphere, and since its introduction in 1987 by the United Nations' Brundtland Commission has been brought conceptually closer to an understanding of ecological modernisation. At various international fora, sustainable development has been characterized through concepts such as green growth, green jobs, and stems from a technocratic and scientised understanding of environment (Bernstein 2005). Sustainable development has become a policy framework formed by the anthropocentric and rational agenda of ecological modernisation (Krueger 2014), whose main characteristics are a central role for science and technology for solutions to environmental deterioration ('scientisation'); the importance of the market economy for environmental reform; decentralised governance through the stronger emergence of international regimes and the rising importance of non-state actors (including privatisation); social movements positioning themselves alongside the state rather than in discursive opposition to it; and agreement that the ecological crisis is urgent and can be solved within the existing political-economic framework (Mol 2003). Moreover, sustainable development is part of a discursive tradition of the development paradigm, carrying colonial power relations (Ferguson 1994). Commodification, financialisation and privatisation have all been part of the concept as also the practice of sustainable development, both internationally and in Vietnam.

Before the *Đổi Mới* renovation politics in 1986, Vietnamese environmental policy was characterised by the impact of wars and the building of a socialist republic whose goal was to lift its people out of poverty through industrialisation and modernisation. Lan confirmed in a conversation that when she was young, economic development was seen as the key to rebuilding the country but that the emphasis on poverty reduction has shifted to a pure desire to make money. The state's official economic political narrative shifted from socialist ideology in the direction of a market economy with an orientation towards socialism (*kinh tế thị trường định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa*). The government allowed private businesses and ownership, initiated a process of integration into the global economy and set GDP-based growth targets. Socio-economic development (*phát triển kinh tế xã hội*) is an overall guidance for policy-making, with sustainable development (*phát triển bền vững*) being a concept within this framework (Behrens 2022) that conceptually defines law-making and the execution of laws in the environmental realm.

Environmental rule (McElwee 2016) linked environmental management with the social control of people throughout both periods, controlling the human-nature relationship in normative and cultural approaches. Alongside marketisation, including privatisation and commodification, scientisation and the rise of international actors, are key characteristics in the state's environmental policy. The latter, for example, bring forward global climate and environmental regimes through international treaties, development aid, etc., whereas in other countries there is strong resistance to these processes, as also to the concept of ecological modernisation and sustainable development within that framework. So far, the scholarship has not described resistance to sustainable development in Vietnam beyond anthropological descriptions of alternative human-nature relations in ethnic minority areas (Lundberg 2004; Whitney et al. 2016). The authoritarian control mechanism has streamlined the sustainable development discourse as normative, making the decentralisation of ecological modernisation possible within the state's tactics and analyses of environmental crises. Decentralisation under this governmentality framework, then, means that citizens are rendered moral (Nguyen 2018) and can engage in the institutionalised waste clean-up campaigns that many NGOs organise and support. It also means that businesses and market forces can proceed with commodification, for example of forests. The CPV maintains its authoritarian system and grip on power with its epistemologically hegemonic definition (Pham 2020) of the narrative of sustainable development. The narrative is

systemic and defines what is desirable, in what kind of economic framework, what is sustainable, and what is not. The CPV uses it as governmental tool to exert power over the population (see Arantes 2023 for a similar analysis of China).

Fortier (2010) and McElwee (2012) have analysed the Vietnamese government policies accordingly and found a strong presence of ecological modernist language. For example, Fortier (2010, 235) finds a strong commitment to economic growth and the opportunity for developing new sites of accumulation in a low-carbon economy. McElwee (2012) identifies payments for environmental services as tool in forest conservation. Elsewhere, I have shown that the state exerts control via its sustainable development narrative. Four trends are central here (Behrens 2022): first, sustainable development has clear social and economic pillars, the ecological pillar is much weaker. This is apparent, for example, in the subordination of sustainable development to the government's large-scale socio-economic development agenda. In practice, therefore, sustainable development in Vietnam means, for example, classifying plantations as forest, measuring their carbon capacity and scientifically looking at how the commodification of timber can be achieved simultaneously with carbon capture and storage. Second, the social storylines in the narrative change over time according to political priorities. While there was a strong focus on limiting overpopulation and eradicating hunger in the 1990s, in the last two decades the focus has moved to green growth, public health and national security. Third, connecting the narrative across scales is strategically used to strengthen the multilateral approach in foreign relations by making Vietnam part of the global sustainable development regime rather than developing its own narratives. The localisation of the discourse then allows enough space to adapt the narrative for population control within the state's governmentality. Thereby, fourth, sustainable development becomes a universality that allows different actors to project their understanding of the narrative onto it and use it for their own agendas. For the Vietnamese state, this happens within certain limits and path dependencies of ecological modernisation and the need to stabilise the governmentality through norms. Any interpretation that goes beyond the official state one would be systemic criticism and challenge the authoritarian rule.

NGOs that seek permits to work in Vietnam have to act in this given narrative frame. NGO publications show few alternative narratives (Behrens 2022), and the NGO of this case study is an example for it. In publications, the NGO places its work within the framework of the sustainable development narrative and uses all the ecological modernisation buzzwords: green growth, forest management, ecosystem services, etc. They use the language that defines the government narrative and do not openly challenge the dominating concepts. The choice of language can be understood as a strategy to survive in the authoritarian system's epistemological dominance, where all publications are thoroughly checked by government authorities before publication. The organisation needs permission to continue its work in the Vietnamese political context and needs funding from international donors, therefore they are taking up narratives in the printed material that must to go through the censorship board. Resistance to the sustainable development paradigm does not materialise in the publications, on paper NGOs are governance groups not emancipatory groups like on the ground.

But while resistance to the specific understanding of sustainable development is hardly happening at the discursive level, the discourse is contested through practical efforts. Acts of everyday resistance can be observed in the practical implementation of sustainable development projects on the ground, not only for the 'weak' but also for the non-poor, the middle classes that dominates the NGO scene. These acts can be translated from covert to overt and formalised by working within the state system yet still opposing the actual discourses through action. The discourse is not as unchallenged, as portrayed elsewhere, and it causes resistance that extends to the discourse itself.

The epistemological dominance of this narrative can be undesirable for local communities, because policies in its name are not always to their benefit and do not always agree with local understandings of nature and how the relationship between people's livelihoods and nature

should look. This is problematic, because the government's development agenda leaves very little space for alternative livelihood concepts or alternative development pathways. Agroecology and community ownership are alternatives to the privatisation and commodification of land, as in this paper's case study. The meaning of land for societal relations in community-making would be another option compared to the financialisation of forests by measuring their carbon sink potential (Sikor 2013).

In some cases, this unhappiness with development policies turns into what academic discourse would classify as resistance (Scott 1985; Vinthagen and Stellar 2020). Overt and covert forms exist alongside one another, as do intentionality and actions that do not consciously doubt the system itself, but nevertheless undermine its power structures. Discontent can translate to people simply doing things differently to how they are told to do them, or they can publicly doubt power relations, for example whether factory profits are worth more than fish as was the case of the Formosa incident in 2016² (Fan, Chiu and Mabon 2020; Pham 2023). The latter case sparked nation-wide street protests that demanded transparent government action and calls to prioritise ecological concerns over economic ones. All these actions can be sparked by simple discontent and translate into acts of resistance.

Resistance to the state's sustainable development agenda can materialise through active rejection of the implementation of specific policies in communities, as in the present case study. The community challenges sustainable development as the CPV understands it via community practices. These challenges appear as what Scott (1985) originally coined as everyday resistance, and are mediated by NGO intervention. NGOs thereby become mediators of resistance and in their action reflect their multiple positionalities. They are development and governance actors, and at the same time resisters. They move between covert and overt acts of resistance and translate everyday resistance into rightful resistance to navigate the structures and norms, knowledge and culture of governmentality. The paradoxes they overcome in the process of mediation become productive, they result in long-term change. The case is interesting because it brings up paradoxes in the resistance and the mediation of different forms of resistance that, although the actors want to escape the logic of ecological modernisation and sustainable development, still need that logic in order to achieve practical change.

There is no clear-cut categorisation that connects a particular kind of actor to a particular act of resistance or sustainability narrative; for instance, 'communities unanimously disapprove of the government development model', 'all state policies are uninterested in local needs', and 'NGOs are saviours' are not the reality. In my study, however, the community and NGO are aiming to decommodify land and oppose privatisation and the financialisation of landscapes. The fact that property rights still matter in the decommodification effort is an intriguing point that speaks to the navigation of power relations and is an example of *realpolitik* beyond the realm of international relations. The case is not typical of NGO work in Vietnam, but it shows that the official discourse *is* contested, making it worth a close look at how it is working, and what the community-NGO relationship in the process of resistance looks like.

The struggle for land-use rights

The NGO I have been following in Central Vietnam is pursuing two larger projects in the community we visit. One is the establishment of agroecology on community and private farmers' land, and has been ongoing for 20 years. The second project is only newly being discussed at the community meetings I attend, and seeks to establish a community-based tourism project. The two projects are connected by an underlying challenge: land rights. On paper, every household holds the use-rights to eight hectares of land, with an additional four hectares of

² The uncontrolled waste water discharge of a Taiwanese factory caused the mass death of fish in Central Vietnam and consequently the loss of livelihoods of fisher men in the region.

community land per household. Every household, the community members confirm, has its papers and its land titles. However, they do not know exactly where their land is, and if they do, they are not certain about their plots' borders. For the purpose of their agroecology concept, however, they choose to ignore potential boundaries of plots of land and set them according to how the plants grow. As one farmer puts it: 'I know my red book, but my land does not know where its border is'.³

Acts of everyday resistance to the practice of land policy go beyond this first very common example of ignoring borders. One story from the case study that illustrates everyday resistance is not about agriculture but tourism. The community is part of the wider area of one of Vietnam's popular tourist destinations for nature travel. The government authorities have handed the rights and responsibility for access and management of the tourist sites to private tour companies. In return for this exclusive access right the tour companies have sole responsibility for the area and must protect and conserve it. This means that although the rivers, mountains, caves and fields are officially on community territory, the community no longer have access to it. They have to ask the tour company for permission to enter the area.

Together with some members of the community and Chi, we visit one of the sites in the area. The community members see access to the area as their right; they have not asked permission to enter because this would mean accepting the tour operator's authority. When we try to access one of the caves (or in legal terms, attempt to trespass), we run into a tourist guide and a sherpa from the company, who are taking down a campsite. The tour guide is alarmed upon seeing our group; he approaches us and informs us that we are not allowed to enter the area. After some discussion, the group decides to drop its negotiations for entry. But this is not because they are giving up on entering the area. Instead, they know a back way to where we want to go. Moving away from the main tourist site entrance, with their local knowledge they soon find the back entrance and we arrive at our destination. This is not the first time this has happened; the others tell me. This is an encounter that has taken place many times already. Trespassing functions as a way of resisting the imposed power structure regarding land access.

In the evening, back in the village, the group discusses what has happened, and with input from the NGO they start to develop a plan for formalising their resistance, playing by some of the rules of market logic but still rejecting the commodification narrative behind it. The plan is to found an own-community enterprise that can apply for access rights to the land. The community enterprise could provide a diversification of income for the community and potentially retain young people who are not interested in farming in the area. The community members are not enthusiastic at this idea initially, since, they say, they do not identify as entrepreneurs, are not seeking profit, and are critical of the institutionalisation and financialization of the environment required for the plan. They simply want access to their land and to take care of nature, through whatever means available to them. For them, taking care of nature, as they elaborate and later show me, means farming in a way that feeds them but is not destructive to the ecological system. One of the farmers shows me the banana trees in his garden, which both generate income for him at the market and at the same time provide nutrition for other plants he raises. Mixing them with a number of other plants ensures that the water level in the area does not fall, protecting the village from drought and erosion. Taking care of nature also means protecting land used for worship, including shrines and temples that we visit, and for leisure activities such as swimming. Taking care of nature, in sum, means protecting one's own immediate environment and holistic livelihood. The stakes in the face of destruction are therefore high.

Chi explains that generating an income and protecting the ecosystem are not mutually exclusive but potentially mutually supportive: 'Not a business with money at all, but a business with community character'.⁴ The business would be collectively owned and would not seek to

³ *'Mình chưa biết là cái số đỏ đó nhưng mà cái đất của mình không biết ranh giới ở đâu.'*

⁴ *'không phải doanh nghiệp là có tiền đâu, doanh nghiệp mà mang tính chất cộng đồng.'*

profit beyond what is necessary to secure livelihoods and preserve the area's ecology. The tour company we encountered earlier did not have the same ecological standards as the community; for example, we saw how they had created plastic waste in the area. The limit to accumulation of profits for the community business is not a hard number; instead, it is understood as the spectrum to relieve communities from poverty without impoverishing the nature. What this means in practice is for now still up for negotiation. The NGO uses its own power over the community to try to convince them of formalisation and to a certain extent to financialising the landscape for tourism purposes. At the same time, it tries to undermine the power relation towards the company and the state with their underlying logic of commodifying land and making profits.

The NGO's agenda is shaped by its aims of poverty reduction and environmental protection, but not according to eco-modern understanding. Members of the NGO have a more general picture in mind, tied to an analysis of the metabolic rift and eventually aiming at socio-ecological transformation. Inspired by this bigger target, they are trying to implement a change in the community that can be replicated as a model elsewhere, and moves beyond the geographic place by creating connections between it and other places. The community, in contrast, is focused on its own space and on restricting its resistance to a particular location. It is conscious of systemic questions, but is not intentionally seeking to alter the governmentality concerned beyond the community's borders. The NGO works with this consciousness and connects the resistance to the discourse level through its work.

Although moving within the community's borders, the farmers' awareness of the systemic issues behind their problems is evident when we return to the question of agricultural land rights. The community's farmers point out several times that they have an underlying problem with the authorities' and enterprises' knowledge and awareness of and lack of respect for the farming community. One farmer states: 'They still think that farmers are ignorant people who are the worst at farming'.⁵ Instead, they are convinced that 'the real farmer has a true freedom and independence on condition that he has the right to use the land, not as hired labour for companies, corporations; no one is free like a farmer'.⁶ In relation to the processes happening around them, a farmer states: 'People like us understand very well that if we can't keep the forest, can't have more impact on the forest, we can't produce water; without producing water, we will lose water; if we lose blood, we will die'.⁷ The process of maintaining water, forest and ultimately livelihoods does not contradict actual rights to land. However, from their experience on the ground it does contradict modernist agriculture's embedded growth- and profit-oriented market structures that allow for the commodification of actors whose understanding of sustainable development does not include ecological and social concerns. The resistance is not against the legal framework but the 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault 2007). Agroecology becomes a counter-practice challenging ruling norms.

At a previous meeting Lan had justified the use of the agroecology concept. She explained that the problem with the state-led conduct lies in the desire to accumulate money and capital, to make profit that does not serve the public good and destroys nature. During our trip Chi explained that companies come into the region and contract with local farmers to use their land for acacia plantations, and then encroach on community land from there. The monoculture has started to destroy local ecosystems and cause flooding; the farmers explain that the trees that once stabilised the soil in the area are gone, which is why the water supply in the area has dropped. Now the NGO is seeking to help convert the plantations back to diversely planted

⁵ *'Cứ tưởng họ là nông dân là những người dốt nát là những người kém cỏi nhất là làm nông.'*

⁶ *'Người nông dân thực sự là có một sự tự do và độc lập đích thực với điều kiện là phải có chủ quyền sử dụng đất chứ không phải là làm thuê cho các cái công ty, các cái tập đoàn, chẳng còn ai tự do như người nông dân cả.'*

⁷ *'dân như chúng tôi thì hiểu rất rõ rồi là nếu mà không giữ được rừng, không tác động thêm rừng thì không thể là sinh ra nước mà không sinh ra nước là mất nước, là con người mất máu, sẽ chết. Đó là một sự nguy cơ'*

areas. Money needs to be involved in the transformation process so that the farmers do not lose their income while transitioning. Bananas, for example, are used as intermediate crop for basic income and to restore the soil, as we have seen in one farmer's garden. They are only a temporary solution, however, since farmers can only earn as much as is needed for urgent necessities from selling them.

Another farmer recounts how she encountered conflict with farmers on surrounding plots when she started to use manual and animal labour rather than machines and changed from chemical pesticides to organic materials following the NGO's concept of agroecology. Her farming techniques did not fit in with the widespread idea of modernity. In the farming community, she was perceived as 'backward' (*lạc hậu*). Agroecology thereby becomes resistance to a dominant discourse and creates tension between the narrative of how farmers should practice a modern, developed agriculture and alternative ideas. The tension become tangible in discussions between farmers from different communities. The NGO institutionalizes agroecology in the process of mediating resistance concerning the re-allocation of land-use rights. The community needs the legal land titles and therefore rightful resistance in order to obtain them. But once obtained they use the land for 'non-modern' farming in opposition to the ecological modernisation narrative of agriculture.

The legal land-use titles are important in order to stop the spread of the paper company in the area. The enterprise driving the mono-crop acacia plantations uses the knowledge gap between the farmers on one side and the company and the provincial government on the other for its own strategical gain. According to community members, the company identified plots of land that had not been used due to the lack of clarity about its ownership, and added them to the plantations legally leased from the farmers. One community member explains: 'But now if you ask someone where their forest is, they say "I don't know". But ask them if they have a red book⁸, and they say "I have two here". That's it – they don't know where the forest is. [The acacia companies] exploit what is mine, but I don't know about it'.⁹ Since people of the community do not know that those plots are their own, there is no one to complain about the enterprises' activities. Knowledge is power for all actors. In this case, the state only integrates community actors into its conduct by making them potential commodifiers and privatisers when giving them the option to lease their land-use rights to business entities. Beyond this economic role, they are barred from participating in land processes and decision-making about commodification processes, creating grounds for resistance and NGO mediation.

Without public attention, and without the knowledge of the community, economic actors are successful in lobbying state authorities for preferential land use. An NGO representative claims that the structures around the provincial government and the big vested-interest groups are 'mafia-like' but open to change. The possibility for change occurs because policy implementation is less of an institutionalized, systemic process, but rather relies on individual policy officers who do not remain in their positions long-term. According to Chi and the farmer, initially the farmers understood the issues but not the law, or how to ask for the execution of their rights to resolve the problems. This lack of knowledge can be taken advantage of by the company – as indeed has happened. This is why the NGO sees its role as informing farmers about their rights. One farmer explains: 'The most dangerous thing for me is that I just don't know I'm wrong. If the merchants and the companies come and cheat me now, I still go along with them every time. I don't understand anything. That's very dangerous.'¹⁰ Tackling this issue and formalising their resistance through knowledge transfer and production can therefore help to reclaim the farmers' land rights.

⁸ 'Red book' is the colloquial term for land use right certificates, based on the color of the certificate.

⁹ 'Nhưng mà giờ hỏi dân là rừng anh ở đâu là "tôi không biết". Mà hỏi anh có sổ đỏ thì "Tôi có hai sổ đây". Thế thôi, thế chứ biết rừng đâu. Người ta khai thác của mình đó mình có biết đâu.'

¹⁰ 'Nguy hiểm nhất là mình làm... mình không biết mình sai thôi. Nếu như bây giờ cái bọn thương lái và cái bọn công ty ấy, nó đến nó lừa đảo đây, mình cứ theo ào ào ào ào, mình chẳng hiểu gì cả, cái đây rất nguy hiểm.'

Institutionalisation as necessary means for successful resistance

The connection with local authorities is an important step in the process of mediating resistance. An NGO representative recounts how she has tried to support the community in meetings with the provincial authorities, pointing out that they and the company are in violation of the land laws. The government official admitted to ignoring the existing land titles and confirmed that he would transfer the use rights for the whole of the community land to the acacia company. Because he was in a more powerful position and there was no mechanism for accountability, he could do this without consequences. What helped in the negotiations with the government was research in the form of a land survey that helped to clarify some plots in relation to community land titles. In this instance, everyday resistance by disregarding the land borders was not enough. The community had to go a step further, and with the NGO's support were able to gather information and understand the legal framework. This understanding allowed them to formally challenge the provincial government and the company involved in this case. For that, scientisation was necessary. The community had to take over the narrative in order to be heard by the institutions in power to achieve this win. Even if values attached to the environment differ between actors, *realpolitik* and acting within the government's framework enable small changes on the ground, making paradoxes between the narratives productive instead of leading to a stalemate of opposing concepts.

Despite the conceptual dissimilarity among actors, the NGO is still trying to use the system itself to achieve change. The organisation, together with the communities it has been working with, supported selected key farmers to become part of the system by taking on official roles in the CPV and its mass organisations. One of the first key farmers used in this way is the secretary of the local Party chapter when I visit the project, and another is the leader of the Fatherland Front. This approach creates an overlap of roles and identities that seems paradoxical at first. Becoming part of the system makes the farmers more powerful. However, the strong stance of the provincial party chief at the next vertical level of the hierarchical party structure limits what is possible for these key figures. The individuals through the contrasting positionalities of being in a position of power and at the same time being governed, have internalised a 'third space' (Bhabha 1994) that fully belongs neither to the private farmer nor to the government official. Borrowed from Bhabha's theoretical framework, the in-between positionality of the individual challenges the binary opposition of the fixed categories of state official and citizens, and the governing and governed. The negotiation between them and the making of a hybrid identity is used strategically for change-making.

Institutionalising networks and sharing knowledge, experience and social networks within them is one way the NGO has formalised resistance. The NGO has transitioned covert everyday acts of resistance from single actions (ploughing a field manually rather than using heavy machinery, using land without knowing its boundaries, planting different crops to those perceived as profitable, trespassing) to overt strategic and formalised transformation. The formalised transformation happens within the law and the existing governance system and is a way of rightful resistance. The farmers have embraced the strategy introduced by the NGO from outside their community, but the NGO still holds power over resources.

The NGO's role as mediator

Johansson's and Vinthagen's (2020) proposed framework of analysing everyday resistance shows that in this story of the community and the NGO I have encountered both covert and overt action (non-conformity and trespassing, and research and policy advocacy). The community performs acts of everyday resistance that are mediated into overt forms by the NGO. State and business actors form the crucial context that defines which acts are possible and which are

not. The NGO itself is also in a relation of power with the state and other NGOs, which it navigates by choosing (non)conformity to ensure that it reaches its goals but also to survive in the system.

The NGO publicly exercises the role of governance organisation by not deviating from state-set discourses of sustainable development. In practice though, it acts as an emancipatory group and seeks to change power relations. Breaking the narrative and creating friction between words and action can be read as an act of resistance – a resistance that does not necessarily target systemic differences but is more concerned with acts that will have an immediate effect on the status quo. It makes use of rightful resistance by going public with its claims and bringing the attention of political decision-makers to the problem at stake. To handle the potential conflict of interests between the authorities and communities, the NGO articulates allegiance to the state's laws and socialist values, moving to an approved discourse. Indirectly, it places the political values of socialism against commodification, and navigates the paradox that this creates between the official state definition of sustainability and alternative concepts strategically and consciously, using its understanding of governmentality. Different forms of resistance are not mutually exclusive: they allow actors to form networks and alliances while maintaining their own positionality.

In the Vietnamese context, this means that the NGO paradoxically strengthens the authoritarian system by playing according to its rules, but at the same time seeks to enhance values such as democracy, social justice and participation through a repertoire of acts of resistance. It helps to achieve development goals such as poverty reduction for the farmers but also questions the neo-liberal market framework of sustainable development through the NGO's projects while seeking to restore community land, founding a non-profit enterprise, and establishing holistic farming techniques. The farmers seek change and would like to see some fundamental reform, but take a step back from the latter to ensure their own immediate interest, which is securing their livelihoods. The NGO has successfully convinced community members to take on positions in the local chapter of the CPV. Thereby, the NGO is attempting to change the system from within. In this case it does not participate in controlling people and deflecting discontent but rather translates the discontent into rightful resistance, still with the aim of achieving the change the community wants to see. It seeks to use the space opened up by decentralisation by the state for the goals of the NGO work.

The extent of the NGO's control of the community is not clear, but it seems evident that it does not want to support stronger state control over the group. Instead, it seeks to instrumentalise the community's control of what is happening on the community's land to undermine the state's power in its vision of sustainable development. Institutionalised resistance can then encourage more everyday resistance. If it does encourage it needs further research similar to Lilja et al.'s (2017) report on a case in Cambodia, which looked at the process the other way around: from formalised resistance to everyday resistance. In summary, we can see that the layers, paradoxes and overlaps are crucial to understanding not only the power relations themselves but also resistance and its different repertoires, and the relation between the stakeholders.

Beyond this reflection on the oppressive structures that the NGO navigates, it is itself in a position of power. The NGO has accumulated resources in the form of both knowledge and access to financial support. Additionally, the social and cultural habitus make the NGO a gatekeeper for donors and networks. The long-term goal of securing land rights for agroecology and changing strategies and subgoals to meet the changing context and needs has created a basis of trust and personal relationships enabling mutual understanding between the NGO and the local community. The NGO nevertheless brings narratives practices thereof with them in order to change the farmers' awareness. While their narratives are adaptable and fluid, and change in response to the context, their practices remain defined with straightforward underlying values. The extent to which this power relationship is perceived by the community and to which

disagreements on agenda-setting, etc., are resolved between the NGO and the community require further investigation.

Making the connection back to what this means for the understanding of sustainable development, it shows that the narrative itself has a certain power because it is used by different actors to exert and navigate power relations. It is used by the state for its own agenda and as a mechanism within its governmentality. The ecological modernism of the Vietnamese government is reproduced by the NGO but resisted through practices that question underlying assumptions: nature and land as property to be exploited, the economic growth paradigm, and the status of private enterprises.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that the official sustainable development discourse in Vietnam is one of ecological modernisation that is used to strengthen the power of the CPV and its used in its governmentality. Resistance to the discourse and the policy practice thereof is not voiced in public debate due to the authoritarian context, but nevertheless exists, challenging the normative discourse of the Vietnamese state. I have shown how an NGO can become a mediator of resistance, helping to transform everyday resistance to rightful resistance as an actor that makes use of paradoxes to achieve practical goals on the ground. NGOs themselves are entangled in networks of power in an authoritarian context and have a specific idea of development and strategies for navigating governmentality. This paper considers a very specific case study in the Vietnamese context, contributing to knowledge on the concrete socio-political context. I have argued that in the case of Vietnam, the narrative space around sustainable development is locally limited to an ecological modernist understanding in agreement with the international universality of sustainable development beyond the nation-state.

The paper adds another piece to the mosaic of understanding resistance and the roles of NGOs from an anthropological approach. It connects to the wider question of what resisting development means. While other researchers have shown that local communities might support this version of development in Vietnam (Harms 2016) and describe NGOs' function as governance actors (Wong 2012), in this specific case study the community members oppose the development vision through the pursuit of alternative forms of agriculture and business-making, and the NGO moves between being a governance group and an emancipatory group.

One could argue that the community in the specific case of this paper seeks to commodify rather than commodify, bringing forward what an ecological reading of Marx understands as 'new abundance' in the creation of public goods rather than private property (Saito 2023). It seeks to reclaim community land and use it as such. In a post-socialist market economy, the NGO thereby refers back to socialist values, opposing the market economy. The community and the NGO could therefore claim to be the 'real' socialist actors in socialism, and through their land-use practice to be the 'real' sustainable actors in sustainable development. I did not have the chance to visit the community alone as I was unable to obtain a permit for this, and therefore the community's potential opposition to the NGO was not part of the research. Additionally, the research took place during the Covid pandemic: while Vietnam enjoyed a time of zero Covid when the rest of the world was in lockdown, my research was still possible, but only on an ad-hoc basis and only in informal settings. Without Covid, scheduled, formal interviews with actors beyond the community (for example the local government) would have been possible.

This case study should be followed in the long term to observe the impacts of resistance and generational change in the village as some of the key farmers reach retirement age. The community's younger generation uses social media and it would be interesting to see how these new tools have changed the narratives. Interviewing state and business actors would allow an

even deeper dive into the holistic political ecology of the case and enable different insights. This, however, remains unlikely, due to the power relations that are the subject of this research.

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