

## **Civil Society in Vietnam. Social Organisations and Approaches to New Concepts**

Irene Nørlund

### **Summary**

The concept of civil society is not familiar in the Vietnamese context, which is based on Marxist-Leninist concepts in the official political terminology of the one-party state maintained by the Communist Party. However, the term is increasingly being employed by scholars and practitioners, and even the state is beginning to open up to its use. The reasons for the change in the way the concept is perceived are partly due to international debates, the increasing role played by non-profit organisations and the change in Party policy, accepting the necessity of social work and education by organisations outside the state administration.

The Civil Society Index Project (CSI) is based on a common methodology developed by CIVICUS, a research NGO. This type of project has been carried out in almost 50 countries since 2004. The article presents the rationalities and methodology behind the project and the outcomes in Vietnam. The analysis is based on a combination of research using secondary sources and intensive assessments by the Stakeholder Assessment Group (SAG), which consists of members of civil society and a few representatives of the state. Civil society in Vietnam is felt to be of considerable size, with a multitude of organisations working at all levels. On the other hand, the organisations are limited by the rules and regulations in society, and in spite of their broad bases, the dedication they show is more pronounced in poverty-relieving efforts than in more challenging advocacy. The SAG pointed out limitations for the organisations, but by and large found that they had a reasonable amount of space in which to work in Vietnam. It was more negative as regards the broader impact of civil society.

Manuscript received on 2007-07-30, accepted on 2007-08-29

Keywords: civil society, Vietnam, organisations, social changes, World Values Survey – Vietnam, Civil Society Index, associations

### **1 Introduction**

Civil society is a new concept in Vietnam and is not widely recognised by the authorities there yet. However, a number of scholars and practitioners have begun to use the concept more frequently in recent years. This is due to the concept of civil society being increasingly used around the world and is also due to changes in