Whose Development? A Critical Analysis of Governmental Discourse on Sustainable Development for Coastal Areas in Vietnam

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Abstract

Poor communities in the Global South are reportedly the most vulnerable to consequences of climate change, such as natural disasters, droughts and floods, and loss of biodiversity. Vietnam is reported to be amongst the most vulnerable areas to climate change impacts. Thus, it is paramount to look into the government's strategies for sustainable development. This project instrumentalizes post-development theory to critically analyze Vietnam's discourse on sustainable development in order to gain a better understanding of the country's development dynamics, as well as to investigate the assumptions and power relations underpinning discourse.

Abstrakt

Fattige samfund i det globale syd er angiveligt de mest sårbare over for konsekvenserne af klimaændringer, såsom naturkatastrofer, tørke og oversvømmelser og tab af biodiversitet. Vietnam er rapporteret at være blandt de mest sårbare områder over for klimaforandringer. Derfor er det altafgørende at se nærmere på regeringens strategier for bæredygtig udvikling. Dette projekt instrumentaliserer post-udviklingsteori til kritisk at analysere Vietnams diskurs om bæredygtig udvikling med henblik på at opnå en bedre forståelse af landets udviklingsdynamik, samt at undersøge de antagelser og magtforhold, der ligger til grund for diskursen.

Key words: sustainable development, climate change-development nexus, post-development, Vietnam, discourse analysis.

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Sustainable Development in Vietnam

It is reported that the effects of climate change will be unequally felt throughout the world, with the global South being more vulnerable to its disastrous consequences (Bruun & Casse, 2013, p. 2). Vietnam is amongst the States expected to be significantly affected in the future (Fortier, 2010, p. 230). Vietnam's acute vulnerability to climatic change is attributed to the country's exposure to natural phenomena such as sea-level rise; the vulnerability of socioeconomic structures to these natural elements; and low levels of adaptability. In addition to this exacerbated vulnerability, Vietnam presents a unique case due to its specific political paradigm. The country is governed by a one-party State, with the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) exercising dominating most aspects of society (London, 2023a, pp. 1-2). The centralized nature of governance and decision-making processes may impact the country's ability to effectively respond and adapt to the challenges posed by climate change.

This context contrasts with the country's impressive economic boom in the last decades that has earned the praise of the international community (London, 2023a, p.2). As such, there is interest in exploring Vietnam's development in key profitable areas such as shrimp farming and tourism, that thrive in coastal areas in particular. The intersection of these themes – the pursuit of development, and strategies to deal with climate change – is referred to here as the *climate change-development nexus*, to represent the scope of research interest into coastal areas in Vietnam. Sustainable development represents this intersection in that it emerged as an international institutional response to the role of the development practices in exacerbating the conditions leading to climate change (Rist, 2019, p. 180).

Indeed, Vietnam is simultaneously still largely misunderstood, and a unique case where immensely complex themes intersect, namely autocracy, climate change, and development. However, research tends to move away from addressing these intersections, focusing instead

on climate vulnerability; adaptation; livelihood strategies; and entrepreneurship. Research

lacks integrated approaches that would allow it to integrate Vietnam into broader

Development and sustainability debates. It is paramount to dedicate more research to

understanding Vietnam's discourse on sustainable development in an integrated manner that

addresses complex interconnections. This project pertains to exploring Vietnam's

development discourse in an integrated manner, considering the external influence of

western-conceptualized development, as well as internal power relations, to paint a picture of

the complexity of the *climate change-development nexus* in Vietnam. The objective is

twofold: it relates first to gaining a better understanding of the country, and second, to

extrapolating the findings to integrate Vietnam into broader development debates surrounding

such issues as the possibility for sustainable development under capitalism and globalization

forces, the case for post-development, and the obstacles to pursuing sustainability. To achieve

this, the following research question was formulated:

How can post-development theory be used to critically analyze the development discourse

of the government of Vietnam in regard to the sustainable development of coastal areas?

1. *What is the current discourse?*

2. *What are the assumptions and power dynamics underlying the current discourse?*

3. *What are the discursive and lived effects of the discourse?*

4. *How can it be disrupted?*

To answer the research question, post-development theory is instrumentalized due to its

contributions to the critical questioning of development's origins, achievements and driving

forces. Regarding methodology, the theory is applied through a qualitative approach with a

single country study of Vietnam, with the purpose of achieving an intensive, in-depth

investigation of the country (Landman & Carvalho, 2016, p. 117). Further, the analysis is

focused on discourse analysis, instrumentalizing the method *What's the Problem Represented*

to Be? (WPR), which is applied to Vietnam's *Strategy for Sustainable Development of Vietnam's Ocean Economy by 2030, with visions towards 2045*. Overall, this combination of theory and methods is applied to provide insights into development dynamics in Vietnam, in addition to corroborating certain aspects of critical theories of development (Landman & Carvalho, 2016, pp. 117,118).

The project is structured according to five sections. First, a literature review provides insights into how the knowledge accumulation process has progressed surrounding the project's themes. Following this, the theory section provides an explanation of post-development theory, along with the theoretical framework and respective critical concepts. The Methodology section follows this and consists of an exposition of the case and material choices, along with an explanation of the chosen methods. The analysis section contains the discourse analysis of the chosen material, as well as a section to posit findings and discuss them thoroughly. Finally, a brief conclusion incorporates a summary of the findings, an answer to the research question, as well as a reflection on the knowledge acquired, limitations, gaps, and further research.

Literature Review

The unique conditions of the country's coastal areas, which are of immense socio-economic importance, have fueled research into how climate change has impacted communities living along the coast of Vietnam. As such, the *climate change-development nexus* is present across literature on coastal areas, with research tendencies ranging from climate vulnerability to climate adaptation, livelihood strategies, and entrepreneurship.

Ngoc et al. (2022) highlight the relevance of fishing villages for the economic and social development of Vietnam, providing valuable context into the forming and functioning of fishing villages in the Northern region of Vietnam and placing them in the context of climate

change by diving into its current biophysical impacts on fishing activities of locals, namely natural disasters. The study makes valuable contributions to the field of study through its focus on the impacts of climate change related natural hazards on fishery communities' and findings that point to a governmental need to invest in natural disaster preparedness. Tran et al. (2019) complement this by studying community perceptions about climate change in Northern Vietnam, based on primary and secondary data collected in 2015, as well as impacts of climate change on livelihoods. The study focused on the biophysical impacts of climate change concluded climate change-related natural hazards have negatively impacted rice crops and livestock productivity. Ngoc et al. (2022) and Tran et al. (2019) suggest that the negative impacts highlighted in their studies can be addressed by the government, who ought to intervene more proactively in predicting and preparing for natural disasters.

Avelino et al. (2018) and Huynh et al. (2021) bring vulnerability to the center of the discussion through indicator assessment frameworks. Avelino et al. (2018) conduct a study that approaches climate adaptation of fishery villages in Vietnam through a methodological perspective. Hence, the authors propose a survey tool to rapidly assess vulnerability levels, which is then applied to two coastal wards in the Binh Thuan province, Southern Vietnam. Findings reveal the studied areas are highly vulnerable to climate change impacts and unlikely to successfully adapt due to the communities' dependence on fisheries and the topography of the area. In turn, Huynh et al. (2021) highlight the lack of data and studies focused specifically on the vulnerability of fishery-based livelihoods *vis a vis* their relevance as research subjects rooted in their role as sources of income and food security for entire coastal communities, as well as the high vulnerability to climate change impacts. The authors employ an indicator-based vulnerability assessment framework to examine vulnerability of fishery-based livelihoods at the household level in two Central Vietnam communities. Interestingly, the results are quite different from those of Avelino et al, who find that the

examined communities are (implicitly homogeneously) very vulnerable and unlikely to adapt. In turn, Huynh et al. (2021) conclude that the nature and degree of livelihood vulnerability are varied depending on a household's own characteristics.

Vulnerability assessment frameworks are an interesting tool for researchers, policy makers and aid agencies alike, since current times make it paramount to be aware of which areas are the most vulnerable to climate change impacts, particularly in relation to one another. However, there are some limitations that are worth addressing, particularly the time frame inherent to the tool. Indeed, it captures only a snippet of the picture, thus excluding important historical context and emerging, changing, or resilient patterns visible only through a long-term approach. Additionally, while socio-economic factors were included in the survey, which has been established as imperative to understand the risk to which a community is exposed, these were arbitrarily chosen by the authors. Avelino et al. focus on indicators such as education and existence of alternative income, but these may not correspond to the actual needs and priorities of the investigated areas. In this sense, it could be pertinent to incorporate local stakeholder's perceptions in the process of designing indicators moving forward.

Mabon et al. (2021) address this to some extent, by highlighting how top-down strategies aimed at supporting sustainable livelihoods are confronted by the heterogenous, diversified experiences of vulnerability of the locals. The study thus provides a valuable perspective by moving away from the umbrella term *poor* to explore different types and levels of vulnerability in order to assess conditions for changes in modes of livelihoods in Thang Binh District, Central Vietnam. Of particular interest in the findings is the conclusion that government-led policy is welcomed by locals but often inflexible, which constitutes the biggest challenge for most to access support.

Huynh et al. (2021), Betcherman & Marschke (2016) and Thanh et al. (2021) shift the focus of the discussion towards active community adaptation – that is, the strategies that have

been put in place by these vulnerable communities to adapt their livelihoods. Huynh et al.
(2021) employ socio-economic indicators such as education and social support to analyze
adaptive livelihood strategies, investigating two coastal communities in Central Vietnam. The
authors make two findings which put together are very relevant: first, the influence of climate
and non-climate stressors pressed households to develop numerous adaptation strategies,
which varied depending on socio-economic factors; second, the role of local government in
this process was very limited. This speaks to an underlying out-of-synch relationship between
local government and community that is repeatedly mentioned in some form or another,
mostly implicitly, in literature regarding adaptation of coastal communities in Vietnam.
Betcherman & Marschke (2016) and Thanh et al. (2021) make a paramount contribution to
knowledge accumulation by focusing on capturing patterns across time, employing
methodologies that allow for long-term analysis of changes in livelihoods of different coastal
communities. Betcherman & Marschke investigate the effects on livelihoods of aquaculture
and structural changes in the Vietnamese economy over the course of a decade (2002-2012).
Findings report considerable changes in livelihood patterns amongst twelve coastal
communes in two provinces, one in Central, and one in Southern, Vietnam. Interestingly,
findings also suggest the shift to aquaculture has not benefited the studied communities, who
have reportedly grown to include other means of income in their lives, facilitated by new
opportunities emerging with the changing economy. Thanh et al. (2021) in turn employ a
forty-year timeframe to observe the dynamics that have emerged with the transition to
aquaculture, and how these may have influenced the livelihood trajectories of two small
fishery villages around the Tam Giang Lagoon in Central Vietnam. The study identifies three
trajectories which represent the paths available to fishery-based livelihoods. This is an
important finding in that it underlines the fact that vulnerability is not a homogenous concept
that rains down on a community equally but affects people differently.

Several authors have taken interest in tourism and its role in Vietnam's strategy for sustainable development. Tuyen et al. (2023), Powell et al. (2018), and Long (2012) focus on community perceptions of tourism to investigate how the industry has impacted specific communities. Long (2012) aims to contribute to the sustainable development of tourism by examining residents of the islands of HaLong Bay's perceptions and attitudes towards the development of the tourism sector and its impacts. Findings showed that respondents viewed tourism positively and would support tourism development, mainly for economic purposes. Moreover, respondents proved to have contradictory views on the environmental impacts of tourism. These findings clash with those of Tuyen et al. (2023), who employ a similar approach in Thua Thien Hue, Central Vietnam, to conclude that tourism has impacted culture preservation unexpectedly and failed to provide locals with increased income and job opportunities. Indeed, the authors bring a more nuanced character to the discussion by showcasing some of the shortcomings of community-based tourism. Powell et al. (2018) build on efforts to inform the development of the tourism sector by using household survey techniques to investigate perceptions of community environmental, social, and economic resilience in northern Vietnam. The study makes a significant contribution in showing evidence of income diversification strategies and makes an important contribution in highlighting the several dimensions of local communities' resilience. Tung (2020,) argues that there is a need for a change in the tourism development strategy to meet sustainable development demands. The author employs a market-oriented study that investigates the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the country's tourism industry, in order to make policy recommendations. The author thus contributes to the discussion by employing a market-oriented perspective that showcases the economic growth potential the tourism industry represents. Le-Thi-Ngoc & Nguyen (2021) bring a more critical approach to the discussion, instrumentalizing the concept of *ecoambiguity* to study how tourism activities

have impacted an ethnic Khmer village in southern Vietnam. The article highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of tourism development and posits a critique of mainstream policy strategies by arguing they have been misguided in their economic focus and assumptions about bringing prosperity to local communities.

Beyond tourism as a strategy of adaptation, Vo et al. (2021) concern themselves with the reasons why people choose to adapt in the first place. Indeed, the authors investigate the determinants influencing adaptation decisions in Thua Thien Hue Province, Central Vietnam. The study's findings distinguish between the factors that impacted decision making positively and negatively, which gives relevant insight into the needs and priorities of the studied populations. Despite this pertinent perspective, the study was conducted on farmers, rather than fishery-dependent households. Hence it could prove useful to apply the same angle on fishers living in areas deemed highly vulnerable. Nguyen et al. (2018) do this to some extent by analyzing a single, understudied, factor influencing decision making: social dynamics. The authors highlight that the role group dynamics and social learning play in informing locals' decision making is severely misunderstood and understudied. The study focuses on shrimp farmers in Ben Tre Province, along the Mekong Delta, Southern Vietnam, and finds that social dynamics greatly influenced farmer's decisions regarding converting to a government-sponsored, sustainable aquaculture system (integrated mangrove-shrimp farming).

These contributions showcase the tendency in literature to focus either on the natural aspects of climate change consequences, or community vulnerability to these same impacts. Both tendencies speak to the treatment of climate change adaptation as its own separate issue, ignoring how human activities play an instrumental role in exacerbating vulnerability. Fly (2016) addresses this gap by referring specifically to market-based economic reform and rural-urban migration have impacted negatively on food security, particularly for the (growing number of) elderly-only households in rural Vietnam. Fly focuses on Duong Hả I, a

shrimp farming village in the Mekong Delta, Southern Vietnam, and makes an important connection between an industry transition to intensive shrimp aquaculture and food insecurity for the elderly, by establishing that aquaculture resulted in higher debt, which lead to young adults to migrate to urban areas and resulted in the elderly members of households to stay behind. Fly makes an important contribution by addressing an under-studied and overlooked aspect of both rural-urban migration and coastal livelihoods, once again expanding on the umbrella term *poor* and exploring different levels of vulnerability. Still, the author studies aquaculture as its own issue and does not connect it to the wider socio-political context of the country.

Veettil et al. (2022) draw attention to the role human activities play in exacerbating the consequences of natural phenomena whose occurrence is accelerated by climate change. The study approaches climate adaptation from a land management perspective, investigating shoreline changes in Southern Vietnam over the last two decades and suggesting that reforestation of certain areas along the coast could serve as bio shields against natural hazards. Phu et al. (2022) inform on the relevance of aquaculture for global food security vis a vis the unintended consequences of the practice for the environment, in particular those of sediment degradation for coastal waters. Huong et al. (2021) zoom in on the environmental degradation of sandy beaches across the Northeastern coast of Vietnam due to the pivotal role these ecosystems play in human welfare and environmental conservation. Importantly, the authors focus on the impact of social-economic development activities on the environment, finding that tourism development and urbanization are the main factors accelerating the degradation of sandy beaches. They go on to suggest that policy makers must integrate socio-economic factors in coastal management programs to respond to the issue.

Ha & Van Dijk (2013) place fishery-based livelihoods in the larger context of resource conservation, overfishing, and bad management of the fishing industry, analyzing strategies

for adaptation at the local level in Ca Mau, Southern Vietnam. Importantly, Ha & Van Dijk directly address a frequently overlooked tension between resource conservation and livelihood sustainability, since the study finds that overexploitation is unavoidable due to, amongst other factors, limited alternative sources of income. The study goes on to suggest that policy for sustainable development ought to reconcile resource conservation with livelihood sustainability, fishery management and socio-economic goals.

Nguyen et al. (2017) instrumentalize the occurrence of storms between 2008-2013 in Central Vietnam to highlight the monetary cost involved both directly and for long term adaptation, zooming in on the importance and cost of hazard prevention and management. Thus, there is a valuable contribution in the sense of investigating the anthropogenic factors exacerbating vulnerability. Indeed, the study posits local stakeholders' valuable perception that climate adaptation ought to be extended beyond technical measures, to include land use planning and management and socioeconomic development planning, with authors suggesting financial support should be focused in these problem areas.

Indeed, Ruddle (1998), Nguyen et al. (2018), and Leithäuser & Holzhacker (2020) address management styles while focusing on local stakeholders, thus representing an alternative approach in that they highlight traditional and informal institutions and forms of knowledge, as well as the role these play in fishery-based livelihoods. Ruddle (1998) looks beyond the modernization of the industry to investigate management systems led by traditional local stakeholder organizations that still exist in Vietnam, especially in Central and Southern regions. The author investigates the structure of these community-based systems, whose authority is legitimized by traditional religious beliefs, and suggests that these can potentially benefit fisheries management throughout Vietnam if adapted to modern conditions. These findings are similar to those of Nguyen et al. (2018), who focuses on informal institutions such as fisher groups and fishing community norms related to religious beliefs, and reports

that these are capable of enhancing formal fisheries management for Sustainable Development. Leithäuser & Holzhacker (2020) focus in particular on local ecological knowledge to understand fishery-based communities as complex networks with multiple actors that diverge in interests and adaptive behaviors. Notably, this study focused in Central Vietnam addresses the different and often conflicting interests of locals, something rarely mentioned and discussed in literature regarding this theme.

Research into climate vulnerability and adaptation of fishery-dependent coastal communities in Vietnam can and has been critiqued from several perspectives. Ruddle & Davis (2011) question the dynamics and effects of local ecological knowledge of fishers for sustainability, reporting that the dependence on the sector for income may influence how fishers perceive and interact with ecosystems in a less positive way than academic research suggests. This raises an important point regarding how problematic it might be to expect highly vulnerable people to act in ways deemed responsible and sustainable. Boonstra & Hanh (2015) draw attention to the very use of the concept of adaptation to describe human behavior responding to climate change, critiquing it and questioning its methodological and theoretical viability. Based on an understanding that human behavior is not optimal, as implied by adaptation research, Boonstra & Hanh explore the proposed alternative concept of traps, which better encapsulates the sub-optimal and maladaptive behavior that humans display.

There are prominent gaps in literature surrounding this theme. Firstly, strategies and vulnerabilities have been predominantly studied from a household or individual perspective, with social dynamics and collective behavior receiving little attention. Literature also tendentially zoom in on one specific region or province, with very little research into a comprehensive analysis across Vietnam. Additionally, the strained relationship between local government and community adaptation has only been addressed from one perspective, in

which authors investigate adaptation strategies in communities and then make policy recommendations. Generally, research lacks integration across sectors, areas of intervention, and levels of authority. This speaks to the largely missing anchoring of research on Development Theories, with research being disproportionately focused on technic approaches or local perspectives disengaged from the larger context. This hinders studies on the climate change-development nexus in Vietnam from contributing to broader Development and sustainability debates.

One explanation for this tendency may relate to the political climate in Vietnam, currently ruled by a one-party authoritarian regime. Vietnam's socio-political context is fundamentally shaped by the CPV, which has dominated every aspect of public life since the country's independence and continues to do so today (London, 2023a, p. 2). Institutionally, the state of Vietnam is composed of the CPV and the government, which includes the legislative organ (National Assembly) and the administrative organs (Prime Minister's Office and ministries) (Heng, 2004, p. 144). The CPV exercises control over these state institutions, as well as over the existing mass organizations charged with representing interest groups, albeit indirectly. In Vietnam, interest group politics play a significant role, with sector or region related interests surpassing the weight of political alignments that oppose reform and tradition-oriented groups (Kleinen, 2015, p. 25). Moreover, politics in Vietnam involves power relations amongst actors from within and outside the regime, which makes it difficult to separate the private and public spheres (Gainsborough, 2010, 182). In recent history, Vietnam has undergone significant transformations, transitioning from a violent 20th century marked by struggles for independence and war to becoming one of the world's fastest-growing economies since the 1990s (London, 2023a, p. 2). The country's economic reforms have been gradual, with the central authorities promoting foreign direct investment (FDI) and engagement in global value chains. Yet, the opening of markets has not changed the

centralized nature of the regime, and regulation of speech, ideas, and information remains tightly monitored.

Thus, to put it mildly, it is plausible that Vietnam-based researchers may not be encouraged to employ more politically loaded approaches. Still, some authors have pushed for this. Bruun (2020) takes a critical stance on the development trajectories in Vietnam, arguing that the single-party government has contributed to a culture rooted in economic growth that is out of tune with the environmental reality, which fuels environmental degradation. The author questions the government's role in shaping community perceptions about climate change and calls for more integrated approaches that consider the complexity of observed processes of change. Moreover, the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) documented investigations that highlight the risks and problems associated with shrimp farming in Vietnam, connecting it to environmental degradation of coastal areas of significant ecologic and economic importance (EJF, 2003). The report suggests that the state of shrimp farming may contribute to more social inequity and conflicts over resource-use.

In addition, Bruun & Casse (2013) place central Vietnam in the international debate on climate change in the Global South, particularly in terms of socio-economic impacts. The authors make an important contribution by highlighting a gap in the international climate change debate between the privileging of technical approaches and research based on local environmental data collection and socio-economic analysis. Importantly, the authors call for integrated approaches that consider the complexity of observed processes of change, which are influenced not only by climate change impacts but also by policy changes, marketization, economic growth, and human interventions on the environment. Lastly, Bruun & Rubin (2023) draw attention to the political context in Vietnam, incorporating the current authoritarian regime into environmental governance research. The authors examine the most prominent features of recent collaborative governance efforts for water management in

Vietnam, arguing that technocratic measures and authoritarian dominance are two prominent features affecting environmental governance.

In summary, this exploration of literature on the *climate change-development nexus* on coastal areas reveals some tendencies in research focus. There is a strong inclination for researchers to address climate adaptation as its own issue, by either focusing on the natural aspects of climate change consequences or on assessing vulnerability and communities' livelihood trajectories in the context of climate change, including strategies employed to adapt such as entrepreneurship. This gap has been addressed to some extent by authors investigating how industries such as tourism have impacted communities and calling for the integration of land management into further research. Additionally, while most studies focus on institutional dimensions, some authors have employed alternative approaches which highlight the role of informality in the livelihoods of fishing communities.

Still, literature broadly lacks a comprehensive integration of climate adaptation and sustainable development across sectors, areas of intervention, and levels of authority. There is a visible gap whereby climate adaptation is understood separately from the governmental strategy for, and understanding of, the sustainable development of coastal communities. Additionally, little attention has been paid to the discursive practices shaping and fueling the tendency to address climate adaptation from a technical, managerial perspective, and how these relate to discourse on sustainable development. This hinders studies on the climate change-development nexus in Vietnam from contributing to broader Development and sustainability debates and is likely connected to the fact that the political climate in Vietnam is characterized by a one-party authoritarian regime which rules over and dominates most aspects of society. Integrated approaches to the climate change-development nexus and how it relates to government discourse remain scarce. It is then paramount to dedicate more research to understanding this relationship. One way of contributing to this is to employ

Development Theories to investigate development discourse, and what effects it has on the population.

Theory

This section is dedicated to exposing the theoretical framework for the analysis. As such, a brief overview of Post-development theory will be given, followed by an in-depth explanation of the authors and concepts used in the analysis.

Post-development Theory

Post-development theory is an umbrella term for a vast, varied body of literature that emerged during the 1990s as a controversial field of thought in contemporary development studies, having since sparked intense debate and contributed immensely to discussions surrounding development, sustainability, and the Global South (Matthews, 2018, pp. 1-2). Post-development theorists shed light on the false promise of development, positing it has yet to be fulfilled, particularly in bringing prosperity to the Global South, by pointing to the persistence of issues such as poverty and inequality (Rist, 1997, p. 20; Ferguson, 1996, p. 15; Sachs, 2021, p. xv). These scholars argue development has not only failed, but it created problems, specifically an increased dependence of the Global South on the West. This critique is deepened by claims that the problem cannot be explained by mere issues of implementation of development projects, rather it stems from the very idea of development (Matthews, 2018, p. 5).

The subsections below expand on instrumental authors that marked Post-development thinking: James Ferguson, and Gilbert Rist, and Wolfgang Sachs.

James Ferguson

In the book *The Anti-Politics Machine*, Ferguson (1996, p. 9, 17) makes an anthropological study of the development industry on Lesotho, using the theoretical legacy of Foucault regarding power and discourse. Ferguson argues that development has not delivered its promise of bringing about prosperity and economic growth to the Global South, which is visible in the failure of most rural development projects. The study draws attention to the *development apparatus*, a system whereby development employees, consultants and experts dedicate themselves to producing measures, plans, and development programs, these last being the most common output of development assistance (p. 8). It is a phenomenon visible worldwide, with multiple similar development institutions that employ *experts* and construct problems in the same distinct way.

Ferguson (1996, pp. 17, 21) critiques the development apparatus for its discursive order which constructs the underdeveloped as a homogeneous body of passive peasants. This fuels a technocratic rationale whereby development experts reduce complex anthropological problems to technical ones. These projects have a depoliticizing role in that they are meant to intervene without getting mixed with politics, which creates an enormous contradiction, since the problems they aim at alleviating are integrated in highly complex socio-political contexts. This entire logic results in development projects having unintentional outcomes for the areas acted on, which Ferguson describes as anonymous constellations of power, and which he refers to as the Anti-Politics Machine.

Gilbert Rist

In the book *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith*, Gilbert Rist (2019, p. 2, 12) employs a genealogical approach to trace the origins and dynamics of development as concept and practice throughout Western history, from Aristotle's philosophy to the rise of Globalization at the turning of the twenty-first century.

The author shows development is a historically distinct, global phenomenon through which the world is divided into the *developed* and the *developing*. The author attributes the shortcomings of development to the contradictions in the intellectual tradition it is rooted in (p. 238). Indeed, development is deeply connected to the idea of infinite, ever-growing progress, which is both Western in nature and contradictory with the reality of nature's natural limits. On the other hand, Rist pinpoints the appeal of development in its seductive discourse that calls for indisputable goals such as poverty alleviation. Rist's most relevant contributions include deconstructing some of the universal truths modern development rests on, tracing the history of the phenomenon as an instrument of power with a colonial history that evolved into elite power within States; and most strikingly, the explanation of how the logic of the development apparatus mirrors that of any religion, namely Catholic Christianism.

Wolfgang Sachs

Sachs is particularly influential in regard to sustainability and sustainable development within post–development theory. Particularly, Sachs's key arguments throughout literature include heavy critiques of the growth-oriented economic model that underpins mainstream development thinking. He argues that the relentless pursuit of economic growth, driven by consumption and production, is inherently unsustainable and perpetuates social and environmental injustices (Sachs, 1999). Of particular relevance here is Sachs's *The development dictionary: a guide to knowledge as power*, an anthology where distinguished scholars and critics of development offer a comprehensive analysis of the fundamental concepts that have shaped the discourse on development since the second half of the twentieth century (Sachs, 2021). The book is structured according to essays, each expanding on a specific concept through a historical and anthropological lens to reveal its

inherent biases and limitations. By exposing the outdatedness and intellectual stagnation of these concepts, the authors make a compelling case for bidding farewell to the Eurocentric notion of development. In the essay titled *Environment*, Sachs (2021, p. 25) raises questions about the role of technology in development, which are expanded on below.

Theoretical Framework

Post-development theory does not provide a comprehensive, unified theoretical framework, nor does it provide an alternative framework to approach the problems the development apparatus sought to fix. Despite this, it remains a valuable conceptual tool for critically examining development discourse and consequently gain a better understanding of the Vietnamese case. As such, the theoretical framework for this analysis is comprised of a cluster of concepts resulting from the extraction and combination of key arguments from Ferguson, Rist, and Sachs. The choice in theoretical framework stems from the fact that the authors address some of the same concepts, even though their studies address divergent themes and have different research focuses.

Development as discourse

This concept refers to Ferguson's (1996, pp. 30, 68) argument that the development apparatus produces a particular discourse, with its own logic, and importantly, separate from academic discourse and literature. Ferguson argues this has nothing to do with incompetence from the people producing these documents, rather the difference between the development and academic discourse lies in the divergent institutional contexts within which they operate. Ferguson instrumentalizes the concept of development as discourse to explain the role those discursive practices play in constructing Lesotho as an underdeveloped nation and implying this underdevelopment is caused by the traditional of Lesotho.

Rist's (2019, pp. 90, 91) work complements this understanding by expanding on the genealogy of development, which proves how the distinct discourse has been constructed across western history. This frame permits understanding the process that led to the conceptualization of everlasting growth as natural, necessary, inevitable in the evolution that all societies go through. Additionally, history shows how this concept was utilized to further imperial power over colonies, legitimize colonial relations, and allow empires to pursue their national interests. Rist also accounts for how colonial relations were the basis and pillars upon which developmental logic emerged. The author then posits the pillars of development discourse, which correspond to (1) the primacy of growth and its causality relation with human development; (2) a contradictory acknowledgment of the inadequacy of development in leading to progress in the Global South, while maintaining that it is the only path to progress; (3) solidary and self-interest going hand in hand in justifications for development initiatives; and (4) the conviction that trade is the engine of growth without regard for the particularities of each nation/ region/ village. Conceptualizing development as discourse allows for explaining the role discursive practices play in shaping policy. Here, it is instrumentalized to:

1. Demonstrate that there is a distinct discourse on development in Vietnam;

2. Investigate the history of this discourse.

Technocratic and Depoliticizing

Sachs's (2021, p. 34) account of the *technocratization* of development complements the theoretical framework by placing development into the climate crisis problematic. He posits that sustainable development discourse calls for extensive management of the environment, with the capital, bureaucracy, and science-led development apparatus deploys agencies and experts that engineer, plan and implement several forms of management

programs with the promise to prevent climate catastrophe through this approach. The problem is that the hyper-focus on management implicates a disregard of intelligent self-limitation. Two assumptions underlie the current paradigm of intervention: first, that the perpetual state of society is one that pushes nature to the limit; and second, that the solution for the climate crisis is the optimization of environmental exploitation, rather than its minimization. As such, Sachs (2021, p. 35) argues the current approach is attempting to protect the environment without ever questioning the market-driven industrial system that put it in danger in the first place, claiming the development apparatus is focused on the survival of the market-driven system, rather than the environment. Indeed, Sachs pointed to the development discourse concerning environmental protection throughout the 1990s to show how it is mostly focused on new levels of administrative monitoring and control, reducing ecology to technical strategies surrounding resource efficiency and risk management. This comes alongside a refusal to address the logic of competitive productivism that is the root cause of environmental destruction. This *ecocratic* perception takes for granted the Western economic system and does not take into account non-western alternatives to the current system.

Sachs's concern with and critique of technocratic approaches to highly complex problems is complemented for the purpose of this analysis by Ferguson's account of how it depoliticizes development, which may aid in obscuring power relations. Indeed, in its technocratic approach, the development apparatus acts as a depoliticizing agent (Ferguson, 1996, p. 194). It allows development actors to intervene at will in highly complex areas without bringing politics into the matter, avoiding scrutiny and critique due to their noble intentions and depoliticized approach. It is paramount to consider that governments actually govern people, that they serve certain interests and certain classes, and that they too can

instrumentalize development projects (1996, pp. 193, 225). Considering this, the concept is instrumentalized to analyze:

1. How sustainable development discourse in Vietnam showcases technocratic and depoliticizing tendencies;

2. What wider context this approach ignores, to whose interest, and to what effects.

Methodology

This section pertains to posit and expand on the methods selected for the analysis. It incorporates an overview of the research design, an explanation of data collection, and an explanation of data analysis, respectively.

Research Design

This analysis takes a qualitative approach in that it uses a single country analysis with a case study in that it zooms in on Vietnam, particularly on coastal sustainable development policy. (Simons, 2020, p. 456). Simons (2020, pp. 456, 458) refers to a case study as an analysis which expands on a particular scenario inserted in a particular sociopolitical context, to highlight the complexities and contradictions inherent to the case in hand. Thus, it is useful in that it allows for understanding and representing complexity, as it permits the ambiguities that exist within the policy and respective context to be interpreted and represents a framework that showcases the different values and interests inherent to the case.

These features are of particular interest here because Vietnam is simultaneously still largely misunderstood (and understudied), and a unique case where immensely complex themes intersect, namely autocracy, climate change, and development. Additionally, the selection of the specific case of coastal sustainable development policy is justified by the fact that it allows one to go directly to the source to analyze governmental discourse. Further, it

allows for the completion of the functions of contextual description and theory confirmation, whereby the analysis provides relevant information about development dynamics in Vietnam, in addition to corroborating certain aspects of Post-development theory, in particular Ferguson's and Rist's key arguments extracted in the above section (Landman, & Carvalho, 2016, pp. 117-118). Both of these functions contribute to inserting a single case into wider development debates, thus contributing to knowledge production. Ultimately, a single country analysis with a case study serves the two-fold purpose of providing a better understanding of the country and permitting the extrapolation of the findings to relate Vietnam to broader sets of research questions in development debates.

The data analysis is conducted through document analysis, which focuses on already existing texts (Prior, 2020, p. 360). It is structured according to a policy analysis method that incorporates discourse analysis - the *What's the Problem Represented to Be?* (WPR) approach (Bacchi, 2009). Data collection thus rests on an extensive selection of documents grouped into two main categories: primary data, namely official reports and plans; and secondary data, which ranges from peer reviewed academic literature to news articles.

Data Collection

The form of data collected refers to documents, in accordance with document analysis. The selection is vast and varied, so as to further contribute to a comprehensive analysis. It consists of two main categories, with the first referring to primary material, namely the government of Vietnam's Resolution No. 26/NQ-CP (2020), which promulgates the *Government's Master Plan And 5-Year Plan For Implementation Of Resolution No. 36-Nq/Tw Dated October 22, 2018 By 8th Conference Of 12th Central Steering Committee Of The Communist Party On Strategy For Sustainable Development Of Vietnam's Ocean Economy By 2030, With Visions Towards 2045.* This represents the main document under

analysis, which presents the official vision of the government of Vietnam and thus informs on governmental sustainable development of coastal areas discourse. It is complemented by further documents and reports from major development institutions, specifically the World Bank's (2021) report titled *Creating markets in Vietnam: Bolstering the Private Sector during COVID-19 and Beyond: Relief, Restructuring, and Resilient Recovery*, as well as the UNDP's (2021) booklet titled *Sweet Success*. These documents are instrumental to complement the sociopolitical context informing discourse on development.

The second category of data relates to a comprehensive list of academic articles and books employing a critical perspective to Vietnamese coastal development in the context of climate change, so as to fill in the gaps left by official documents and further inform on obscured parts of Vietnam's sociopolitical context, thus instigating the critical dimension of analysis. Additionally, online news articles from big media outlets in Vietnam are utilized with the purpose of complementing the official governmental vision for sustainable development, as well as inform on how discourse is reproduced in the country.

The process of data collection entailed beginning by researching relevant existing texts that paint the sociopolitical context within which policy emerges in Vietnam, before departing to the research for primary data, which ensured more credibility and transparency to the project. Indeed, it is instrumental to be reflective about the data collection process, as it gives body and directs the analysis before it begins. Bacchi (2009, pp. 19-20) draws attention to the fact that the researcher is immersed in assumptions and problematizations characteristic of contemporaneity, so it is imperative to consider how this affects such decisions as the choice of material. Considering this, a guideline focused on reflectivity guided the entire process. It consists of instrumentalizing several types of text to complement the policy and get a fuller picture of the problematizations; considering the complexity of the policy,

acknowledging the existence of tensions and contradictions; and paying attention to the context the policy is inserted in.

Data Analysis

As aforementioned, document analysis is utilized to conduct the analysis. This method is non-reactive, meaning it is focused on already existing text, thus incorporating the study of official reports and plans, news articles, and peer reviewed academic literature (Prior, 2020, p. 360). This wide variety of data allows for the analysis to provide an understanding of the explicit or implicit values in policy and within the government which designs the policy. The data is analyzed according to the content and function of the documents. This entails focusing on the content of the document itself and examining what information it contains; considering the archeology of the policy, delving into how the content is created and evolves over time, thus viewing the policy through its historical trajectory; understanding how documents are utilized by individuals for specific purposes, treating them as a valuable resource; and understanding that documents are not merely passive containers of information, but often act as active agents in social interactions and organizational schemes, influencing and shaping social dynamics (Prior, 2020, pp. 366, 377).

Prior (2020, p. 376) explains that document analysis is a paramount entry point for discourse analysis. Indeed, The data is investigated according to the *What's the Problem Represented to be?* approach, which incorporates discourse analysis, thus allowing for representing governmental discourse on sustainable development (Bacchi, 2009). Further, Prior (2020, p. 361) highlights the typical units of analysis in document analysis, referring to words, grammatical structures, tenses, and themes. In this case, the units of analysis are organized according to the WPR approach, since it incorporates thematic sections which guide and organize the analysis.

The WPR approach is a critical policy analysis methodology underpinned by the argument that policymaking constitutes and frames problems, and thus that governments actively shape problems by producing policy, rather than simply reacting to problems as though they were completely external (Bacchi, 2009, pp. 1, 25, 46). Thus, this approach invites the questioning of, and critical reflection about, the nature of policy itself, through the study of problem representations – problematizations – rather than that of "problems". WPR is particularly pertinent to uncover the premises and effects that representing problems entails. In practice, this method offers six questions that the researcher should pose in regard to a chosen policy, and which should result in a comprehensive and critical analysis that brings light to the implications of said policy (pp. 2, 48). The questions are as follows: (1) *What's the 'problem' represented to be in a specific policy?* This first step in the analysis consists of taking the policy proposals and engaging in an interpretive exercise with the goal of identifying the implied problems stemming from the policy under analysis. (2) *What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?* The second step involves a discourse analysis of the policy, rooted in Foucauldian archaeology, with the goal of uncovering the underlying conceptual logics that permit the policy to make sense. Particularly, it is important to extract key concepts, binaries, and categories from the material. (3) *How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?* Here, a form of Foucauldian genealogy comes into play, with the question inviting a reflection about the non-discursive practices which, over time, led to the formation of the problem representations identified in the first step of the analysis. It is also important at this point to recognize how competing problem representations coexist across time and space, from which it follows that the current reality could have been very different. (4) *What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?* This question marks the unfolding of the critical potential of this approach, as its objective relates

to interpreting the policy text to identify issues and perspectives that were left silenced and marginalized through the problem representations. (5) *What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?* The goal of this question is to identify the effects of specific problem representations so that they can be critically assessed to uncover how they create forms of harm that impact certain members of society more than others. Importantly, effects here are not understood as outcomes, rather as a more subtle form of influence. (6) *How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?* The final question incorporates a high level of critical thinking in that it invites the researcher to consider how it became possible for some problem representations to become dominant, as well as possible ways of challenging and disrupting them (Bacchi, 2009, pp. 9-48).

Finally, the process of data analysis is characterized as iterative, due to the self-correcting dynamic of the analysis that entailed on the one hand, reading and rereading the main documents multiple times to extract problem representations, binaries, key concepts, and categories, as well as critical arguments relating to several themes; and on the other hand, a constant reexamination of findings stemming from continuous data analysis (American Psychology Association, 2022). This, of course, results in a constant refining of the initial findings.

<div align="center">**Analysis**</div>

Master Plan Overview

March fifth of 2020 marked the date when Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc and the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam launched Resolution No. 26/NQ-CP, a Master Plan for implementing Resolution No. 36- NQ/TW, dated October 22, 2018, which introduced a *Strategy for Sustainable Development of Vietnam's Ocean Economy by 2030,*

with visions towards 2045 (The Government of Vietnam & Socialist Republic Of Vietnam, 2020) The Master Plan posited solutions regarding the economic development of Vietnam's 3260 kilometers coastline, which consists of more than three thousand islands and islets, as well as twenty-eight coastal provinces (VOV World, 2020).

As is the case with all policymaking, this strategy contains implicit problematizations that speak to assumptions. These are investigated below.

Implicit Problem Representations

In the document, two main objectives are listed as follows:

1. *For the master plan by 2030, with visions towards 2045:*

   Specify major guidelines, objectives, viewpoints, breakthrough tasks and main solutions for development of Vietnam's ocean economy by 2030, with visions towards 2045, which are put forward in Resolution No. 36-NQ/TW; identify key tasks, formulate the roadmap to performance of such tasks and assign tasks to relevant ministries, central authorities and local governments.

2. *For the 5-year plan by 2025:*

Identify key and urgent tasks that must be prioritized by 2025 to implement major guidelines, perform breakthrough tasks and adopt main solutions for development of Vietnam's ocean economy put forward in Resolution No. 36-NQ/TW. Assign in-charge bodies and cooperating bodies for tasks as appropriate to capacity and ability to mobilize resources of the economy, including state budget, private investment, foreign investment and development aid. Effective implementation of the 5-year plan by 2025 is a basic and crucial condition for the success of the master plan by 2030, with visions towards 2045." (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2020, A, I).

Thus, there are two time spans, short and long term, with particular but aligned proposals for each plan. Following this, each plan is structured according to the same six main *themes* of intervention, or solutions, for the sustainable development of the ocean's economy. These refer to marine and coastal zone management (point 1); ocean and coastal economy development (point 2); improvement of living conditions (point 3); science, technology and development of marine human resources (point 4); response to natural disasters and climate change (point 5); and national defense and security (point 6) (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2020, B, I-II). In the first theme, regarding solutions for marine and coastal zone management, a lot of attention is paid to managerial aspects of development, as seen in this snippet (see Appendix A for more detailed data):

Enhance effectiveness of cooperation between regulatory bodies, between the State and residential communities, enterprises and relevant parties via specific regulatory mechanisms and instruments. Strengthen organizational structure models and improve capacity for management of islands, archipelagoes, ocean banks, low-tide elevations and coastal areas (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2020, B, I- II).

In fact, this sets the tone for the entire strategy, since throughout each theme, efficient management measures are a recurring concern and priority. Importantly, the (very short) section on climate change proposals (point 5) echoes this managerial tone, being focused on adaptation and proposing more effective deployment of existing institutional, technological and market-based risk-reduction measures such as disaster preparedness, infrastructure, and water management measures. Technical measures such as surveys, updating of databases, and investment in equipment for warning systems related to natural disasters are also highlighted.

In contrast, the densest and most extensive part of the document relates to the second point, that of ocean and coastal economy development, which is itself divided into eight subsections, respectively outlining proposals for (a) ocean tourism; (b) maritime economy;

(c) extraction of oil, gas and other marine natural resources; (d) mariculture and commercial fishing; (e) renewable energy; (f) territorial waters development; and (g) marine and coastal infrastructure development. Throughout each subtheme, proposals are centered around technical solutions and investments, with a focus on modernization of sectors and infrastructure, with intent to increase Vietnam's competitiveness and integration. Special attention is given to coastal and maritime tourism efforts, boosting exploitation of natural resources and aquaculture, and technological advances in the renewable energy and mariculture sectors.

The language utilized throughout the document is highly suggestive of the problem representations implicit to the strategy. Namely, the word *management* and respective variants is used forty-seven times. The terms *technology,* and *competitiveness* are constantly brought up as well. In sum, this suggests that the governmental strategy for sustainable development contains implicit problem representations that perceive it to be hindered by inefficient management, and underdeveloped technology and infrastructure for such issues as water management, tourism, mariculture, and disaster preparedness. Moreover, the Resolution is evidently located within a web of related strategies and plans, which are helpful to sediment the implicit problem representations. Some of the most relevant plans mentioned include the *Strategy For Integrated Coastal Zone Management By 2020 With Visions Towards 2030* and the *Action Plan For Management Of Marine Plastic Litter By 2030*, which reflect the managerial focus.

There are additional problem representations present, namely, the sustainable development of the ocean economy is implicitly problematized through a market logic, with several proposals highlighting the importance of modernizing infrastructure, namely seaports, vessels and freighters; having a high tech and modern mariculture; and boosting exploitation of natural resources, all in the name of increasing the country's competitiveness in the

international market. Moreover, the document implies that the ocean's economic development may present a national defense threat, perceivable through the inclusion of an entire theme dedicated to security (point 6), as well as the repeating presence of proposals posited to serve "to help assert Vietnam's sovereignty" (2. d.).

Underlying Presuppositions and Assumptions

The problem representations above can only be made sense of by looking at the particular assumptions they are rooted in (Bacchi, 2009, pp. 5, 8). To discover this, discourse must be investigated, particularly to uncover the present meanings – conceptual logics – which allow the problem representations to make sense. Since meaning is created through particular use of language, this question entails looking at the binaries, key concepts, and categories present in the Resolution. The most relevant examples of this extraction are expanded on below (See Appendix B for full list of binaries, concepts and categories).

Indeed, there is a specific understanding of development underpinning the strategy. It is assumed that sustainable development can be achieved by focusing on modernization, productivity, and further integration in the global capitalist market logic. The binary of *modern/ backwards* is the backbone of the entire document, in association with *national/ international*. While modernity is consistently prioritized and appears as the primary focus, to the exclusion of tradition, the second binary represents more complex meanings. On the one hand, internationality is consistently brought up in the form of striving for the global integration of the Vietnamese ocean economy, as well as increasing competitiveness of economic sectors such as mariculture in international markets. In this sense, this conceptual logic complements the notion of modernity in that both signify a form of development turned towards market logic. On the other hand, the international arena emerges as a threat to, and something to be monitored by, the sovereign Vietnamese government, with numerous

patriotic assertions regarding the importance of "maintaining sovereignty and independence";

as well as paternalistic traces in assertions to "protect the national interest" and strengthening

"the collective force" (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2020, B, I, 2. d).

Thus, there is an underlying tension between the desire for global integration, and patriotic

and paternalistic characteristics centered around sovereignty and national interest.

Regarding categories, Bacchi (2009, p. 9) denotes that the categorization of people is

especially important for governmentality. Curiously, these do not take as much of a

prominent space in the document as binaries and key concepts. Despite this, a few groups are

mentioned throughout the proposals, namely local police forces, for whom modern training is

proposed; fishing communities, for which incentives are to be put in place so residents

change jobs; and tourists, whose presence is understood as a priority due to the several

proposals regarding investment in tourism services. Each of these categories symbolizes a

form of organizing behavior and people, that is always artificial to some extent, and which

serves a particular purpose (Bacchi, 2009, p. 9). Indeed, this permits understanding how the

government organizes particular social groups in terms of their role in development. Put very

simply, local police forces are an instrument of state power, thus they need *training* to

become more cohesive and effective; fishing communities are a vulnerable social group

whose livelihoods are threatened by climate change, hence they need *incentive* to change

jobs; and finally, tourists represent a promising source of income for the government, thus

investment in recreational *services* is needed in order to promote a higher influx of tourists.

Notably, this categorization showcases traces of paternalism, namely in the assumption that

local fishing communities are incapable of making decisions for themselves and require

guidance.

Lastly, several key concepts guide the problem representations, namely *sustainable*

development; ecotourism; and *living standards*. These function as *buzzwords* in the sense that

they are powerful in their normative resonance due to representing development goals that are universally accepted, while simultaneously being extremely vague and thus capable of having a multitude of different meanings (Cornwall, 2007, p. 472). Indeed, the buzzwords are mentioned numerous times without ever being expanded on, thus such proposals as promoting ecotourism become difficult to translate into concrete measures. At the same time, the terms lend legitimacy and increase the likelihood of public approval of Resolution No. 36. *Competitiveness* and *productivity* are another set of key concepts guiding the problem representations, invoking a sense of market-centrality throughout the policy. Indeed, the continuous mentions of sustainability appear to serve as anchors that legitimize more market-directed goals, much more directly represented in the actions within proposals.

Formation of the Problem Representations

At this point the goal is to identify the key aspects in development practices that have culminated in the identified problem representation of inefficient management and communication between authority bodies, as well as insufficient technical innovation. Thus, considering that a genealogical analysis requires an extremely comprehensive amount of archival work, this question is addressed by highlighting the processes and events that could be expanded on.

First, Rist (2019, p. 2) asserts how development rhetoric is not a given, but rather has been constructed within Western and specifically European traditions, thus, it is imperative to step outside of Vietnam and even Asia to understand the genealogy of the problem representations under analysis. Rist traces the roots of the development belief system throughout Western history and pinpoints the first major shift in the conception of development in the Enlightenment historical period, where previous accounts of development as naturally limited were abandoned and replaced with the assumption that development – or growth – equates to

infinite, ever-lasting progress (pp. 37, 238). This was solidified by nineteenth century Social Evolutionism, which popularized the conviction that all societies evolve through the same pathway towards growth and industrialization (p.40, 41). Of course, this asserted the industrialized West's superiority over all societies and legitimized the belief that these backwards lands ought to be assisted in becoming civilized (industrialized) faster.

Social evolutionism then became an instrument of power in late nineteenth century Colonialism. At the time, colonialist expansion at this time rested upon three pillars: the economic incentive to sustain capital accumulation; a philanthropic paternalism whereby colonizers believed to have the duty to civilize the savage societies; and the political determination to defend national interest by securing a relevant position in the context of European colonizer nations (Rist, 2019, pp. 52-57). Importantly, the post-WWII *development project* borrowed from colonialist tradition in numerous aspects, from the three pillars of incentive to specific intervention practices – even though these were brought up as innovative practices.

It was in the aftermath of WWII, with a fragile Europe in the hands of two superpowers with no interest in sustaining European colonies, that the concept of development emerged (Rist, 2019, pp. 70- 78). It was triggered by US President Truman's famous *Point Four*, whereby the President expressed the country's commitment to assist those *underdeveloped* areas in the world. This new terminology (underdevelopment) was revolutionary in reframing reality, evoking social evolutionist assumptions of growing in the direction of a final stage of development, and most importantly, asserting that the West had the power to bring about this change – to *develop* nations. This would be achieved through technical measures that put the enterprise beyond political debate, namely transfer of scientific knowledge, increase in productivity and opening of international trade to the free market, and would be measured and assessed through the new US dominated standard of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

The *developed/ underdeveloped* binary substituted the *colonizer/ colonized,* giving rise to a new relationship where every nation was to be treated as equal, and legitimized the postwar wave of decolonization (Rist, 2019, p. 75, 94-109). It was then necessary to show how these newly sovereign, *underdeveloped* states were supposed to promote growth, which was posited in 1960 in Rostow's *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, through the introduction of Modernization theory. Modernization theory inserted development into a social evolutionist paradigm whereby every society evolves through five stages of development that culminate in an Age of Mass Consumption. While this legitimized the industrialized North's obsession with economic growth, it also meant the promise of a better future for the new ruling classes of the Global South.

Even though Modernization's assumptions have since been acknowledged and critiqued, the theory continued underpinning development discourse and practice (Rist, 2019, p. 103). The UNDP and the World Bank – the leading development institutions – maintained the commitment to the goal of economic growth, as well as the focus on technological innovation and industrialization, throughout the decades that followed. Globalization marked the end of the twentieth century and with it the impossibility of ecological awareness, since it promoted and thrived on invisible waste, or rather the dissociation of production from consumption, and consumption from disposal (p. 187). It fueled the Global North's obsession with the free market and featured development institution's advocacy for privatizing infrastructure to increase productivity and profits (pp. 222-223, 234). Of course, there were several shifts in approach in the last decades, culminating in the introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in a rekindling of environmental concerns (pp. 183; 205; 223). While each new approach revitalized development and brought important acknowledgments and change, they did not sufficiently challenge the assumptions of infinite growth.

This international context, in which the West shaped development until development itself became a live entity shaping the world, must be considered to understand the problem representations. The social constructions which breathed life into development conditioned policy makers across the Global South, including Vietnam, to believe that modernizing industries to increase productivity, integrating into the free market, privatizing infrastructure and projects, and focusing on the managerial and technical will bring about *the good life* (Rist, 2019, pp. 214-215). However, the international context represents only a part of the picture and is but one of the influences informing the formation of the problem representations. It is then instrumental to turn to Vietnam's own historical processes to achieve a better understanding of the origins of the problem representations, as well as the reasons for certain problem representations remaining dominant while marginalizing alternatives.

The past century of Vietnamese history has been deeply intertwined with the emergence and solidification of the CPV, which possesses the monopoly on power, and ideology production and distribution (Kleinen, 2015, pp. 25-26). The CPV's rise to power can be traced back to Vietnam's struggles for independence while under French colonial control in the twentieth century (London, 2023b, p. 23). Indeed, the French imperial conflicts that the people of Vietnam were dragged into, fueled a revolutionary movement led by the organized political group that would become the CPV. These revolutionaries mobilized internal support by disseminating nationalist and patriotic sentiments rooted on the idea of a united, strong, socialist Vietnam (Kleinen, 2015, p. 13). The conflict culminated in the Vietnamese successfully defeating the French in 1954 (London, 2023b, p. 23). This symbolized an important victory for the CPV, since Vietnam was recognized as independent through the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north (CPV led) and the Republic of Vietnam in the south, which was US sponsored.

The CPV soon found itself engulfed in conflict on two fronts, with a civil war opposing the two national political powers, and the US offensive that became known as the American War (Vietnam War) (London, 2023a, p. 5). The conflict devastated the country, resulted in three million casualties and destroyed the country's infrastructure. However, in 1976, Vietnam achieved reunification, although it faced a trade embargo imposed by the United States (Kleinen, 2015, p. 13; London, 2023a, p. 6). The CPV thus reasserted its position as a symbol of patriotism, having led the nation first to colonial independence, and afterwards to US withdrawal from the conflict (London, 2023a, p. 6). It was only successful to some extent though, since it struggled to deliver prosperity and poverty alleviation to the people. Indeed, the 1970s witnessed incredibly high poverty rates that reached nearly 70%, which placed Vietnam as one of the poorest countries in the world at the time (Kleinen, 2015, p. 14).

Politically, the country went through a period of isolation from the West that lasted throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, when economic relations were centered on the USSR (Gainsborough, 2010, pp. 478-480). A small, political elite tied to the CPV dominated the decision-making processes and held significant authority compared to the underdeveloped government institutions. Relationships with citizens were mediated through an array of mass organizations owned by the CPV and responsible for interests of various social groups. Generally, the functioning of the country was defined by dynamics of corruption, money-grabbing, patronage, and connections, which were neatly packaged in a rhetoric sustained by paternalism, as seen by the Party's self-image as the nation's Defensor and a generalized perception that the CPV "knew best".

This image fell short as state authority became scattered in the face of raging poverty and discontent, and as the Party's attempt at centralization in the south proved a failure, the CPV launched the reforms known as *Đỏ̂i mởi* during the 1980s with the goal of economic renovation through marketization and liberalization of state-owned enterprises and

cooperatives, an initiative that was further propelled by the collapse of Soviet aid and the consequent opening of domestic markets to other regions (Kleinen, 2015, p. 15). Vietnam was thus exposed to neoliberal institutions, discourse, and practices, gradually becoming integrated into the global market and recovering economically, which earned the country praise from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The country embraced foreign investment, official development assistance, and saw rapid economic growth with accelerated exports and commoditization of land (Kleinen, 2015, pp. 9, 15; London, 2023a, p. 8). This was progressively extended throughout the turn of the century, resulting in higher living standards and income, as well as the rapid growth of the private sector.

These economic and political reforms marked the CPV's commitment to a pragmatic approach that shaped Vietnam as a market-Leninist state that combines free-market activities within the framework of autocratic one-party rule (Kleinen, 2015, p. 22). Indeed, power has become more dispersed, although it was not particularly concentrated during the pre-reform period (Gainsborough, 2010, pp. 480-482). Decision-makers in the post-reform era have had to consider a broader range of new business and regional interests, reflecting the expanding economy and the emergence of business interests loosely tied to the state. While there has been a reduction in tight state control and invasive surveillance by the security apparatus, the reform years have not resulted in a complete decrease in security apparatus control. The state's paternalistic nature remains intact, despite two decades of engagement with international development institutions, as evident in the slow progress and subsequent shelving of legislation pertaining to the regulation of civil society. In terms of the state's involvement in the economy, the reform era has witnessed changes, namely the State's retreat in significant sectors of the economy, as the private sector expanded. However, state actors

and those closely associated with the state continue to play a substantial role in the growth of Vietnam's business sector, making the state a direct participant in the economy.

This internal context is paramount to take into consideration if one is to comprehend the Party's problem representations. Indeed, it must be asserted that it is extremely difficult to analyze party politics due to the CPV's completely opaque relations and decision-making processes, allied to the interest group politics which are at work within the regime and which symbolize highly fragmented interests from sectorized political actors (Kleinen, 2015, pp. 19, 25). The scenario becomes even more complex considering that processes of state-formation are intrinsically unplanned processes, despite pretensions of planned economic and political innovations. Thus, it would be unwise to assume that there is a coherent, unified, and planned governmental full-on intent in promoting certain problem representations in the place of others. Despite this, it is important to recognize that the CPV's rule is still rooted in culture and ideology, with the priority being the protection of Vietnam's sovereignty externally, and the party's claim to dominance internally (Kleinen, 2015, pp. 9-11; London, 2023a, p. 8). Indeed, throughout its emergence and rise to power, the CPV has called on its (historically proven) indispensability as the people's Defensor to sustain legitimacy (London, 2023b, p. 36). Considering this, there are specific events and ideas which have solidified and reasserted the Party's legitimacy through the last century, namely the struggle for independence; the establishment of Vietnam as a sovereign state; the withdrawal of US troops from the country; and most importantly for the younger generations, the integration into a market logic, which actually played in favor of the CPV's dominance and claim to power (London, 2023a, p.2).

Within this context, it is logical that the Party has integrated those aspects into state rhetoric to keep pushing for the policy choices that have proved useful, namely a hyper focus on market expansion and progressive privatization, allied to paternalistic sentiments. Thus,

the problem representations can be made sense of by studying both the Western historical traditions that shaped the contemporary, market-oriented global understanding of development, and the internal history of Vietnam.

Silences and Alternative Perspectives

Silences and exclusions

The next step in the WPR analysis entails investigating the silences inherent to the managerial and technocratic problem representations of coastal Sustainable Development, namely which perspectives or issues are concealed or marginalized. Firstly, the technocratic problem representations serve to hide power relations and interests within the Party. This approach restricts policy debates to a narrow circle of experts and filters membership based on technocratic credentials and political legitimacy within the Vietnamese state (Fortier, 2010, pp. 238-239). Fortier points to how these circles for the discussion of climate change have been comprised of bio and geophysical scientists, and other sectoral specialists, which excludes participation from outside the natural science and economic development expertise, and thus prevents a wider, pluralist representation of interests.

Moreover, the Strategy reveals a governmental focus on infrastructures for water management, evidenced by numerous proposals transversal to most themes of the document (See Appendix C for full list of water management infrastructure-related proposals). Here, two examples are highlighted, regarding themes 2 and 5, respectively on Marine And Coastal Infrastructure Development; and The Environment.

> *"Invest in infrastructures for clean water and irrigation for development of economic sectors, daily living, tourism and services in coastal zones and on inhabited islands; build closed models of collection, classification, treatment and reuse of wastewater, household solid waste"* (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2020, B.I.2, B.I.5).

This policy focus provides a relevant example of the political economy of interests that underlies sustainable development discourse. Indeed, the investment in water-management infrastructure from a development logic has created new class interests and reinforced the existing power dynamics between elite actors including hydraulic technocrats, the Party, military members and other private actors (Biggs et al., 2009, p. 214, cited in Fortier, 2010, p. 239). The technocratic discourse is thus aligned with elite interests by providing opportunities to mobilize resources towards the major businesses of influential and involved actors, providing an opportunity to make a lot of profit through speculation and rent seeking (Fortier, 2010, p. 243).

Finally, the problem representations exclude a structural questioning of the causes of climate change, which would entail examining the meaning of prosperity, and most importantly, of sustainable development, which in turn would beg the question of how appropriate the current economic model is (Fortier, 2010, p. 243). The narrow perspective of the Master Plan overlooks the socially determined processes of production, distribution, and consumption that are connect GHG emissions and climate change (Fortier, 2010, pp. 237, 238). It fails to acknowledge the differentiated impacts on different groups and prioritizes technical and technological solutions over an integrated understanding of the natural, scientific, and social aspects of climate change.

Alternative Problem Representations

Investigating alternative problem representations presents an avenue to respond to the silences of the current approach. One potential alternative relates to collaborative participation in the policymaking process (Fortier, 2010, p. 243; Bruun & Rubin, 2022, p. 545). This approach recognizes the importance of involving a wider range of stakeholders, beyond the narrow domain of technocratic experts. By including diverse perspectives and

voices in decision-making, the Vietnamese government can tap into a wealth of knowledge and experience that can inform more comprehensive and inclusive policies. Further, the most blatant alternative problem representation would be one that addresses sustainable development through the limits of growth, which would open space for questioning Vietnam's current economic model. Moving beyond the confines of neoliberal growth and output maximization would allow for embracing a more holistic understanding of sustainability, open to different kinds of knowledge and less steered by economic interests (Fortier, 2010, p. 243).

Effects of the Problem Representations

Attention is now turned to the effects of specific problem representations within the Master Plan by assessing how these representations create forms of harm or influence certain societal members. For this purpose, three, overlapping kinds of effects are considered: discursive effects, subjectification effects and lived effects (Bacchi, 2009, p. 69).

Discursive Effects

Bacchi (2009, p. 69) conceptualizes discursive effects as those effects that emerge from the delimitation that problem representations create on what can be thought or said regarding the Strategy. Indeed, the problem representations of the Strategy make it challenging to question who stands to gain from the proposals, or rather, which interests are at play, as well as who stands to be harmed, or negatively impacted. Moreover, the problem representations make it difficult to question the market-based logic of development which gives shape to the Strategy.

Importantly, this section of the WPR analysis allows for focusing on the human effects of the policy, since policymaking is, of course, ultimately made by people, for people. This is of

extreme importance since the technocratic and scientific oriented problem representations within the Strategy do not contain many proposals that directly address the Vietnamese people – the subjects – at all, which makes it difficult to imagine how sustainable development affects, and is directed towards, the people. Fishing communities are vaguely mentioned throughout the document and their threatened livelihoods are briefly addressed through proposals to "incentivize alternative income sources for coastal residents" and "convert some commercial fishing jobs that are destructive to aquatic resources" (The Government of Vietnam & Socialist Republic Of Vietnam, 2020). This implicitly place the blame for overfishing on poor coastal communities, encouraging the perception of the problem in an individualistic way, and complicating its understanding as a structural issue.

Subjectification Effects

Indeed, the present problem representations create subjectification effects in the sense that they play a role in shaping how subjects are constituted by making certain subject positions available in discourse (Bacchi, 2009, pp. 69, 70). The effects are two-fold, accompanying how subjects are thought of; and how they think about themselves.

Throughout the document, three main subjects from whom action is required are brought up, namely police forces; coastal residents – particularly fishermen; and marine human resources, such as experts (See Appendix D for full list of proposals directed at these groups). Firstly, police training is highlighted in a proposal positing commitment to specialized training of police forces responsible for ensuring political security and the public order in territorial waters (The Government of Vietnam & Socialist Republic Of Vietnam, 2020). It conceptualizes police forces as upholders of state control by reasserting a centralized approach to governance and the state's role in managing and regulating coastal areas. It positions the police forces as the primary agents responsible for upholding political order and

social control, potentially limiting dissent voices. Moreover, this can be viewed as an exercise of power and control over coastal and island communities, which are themselves subjects. This proposal highlights the governmental perceptions of these communities as potential threats, agents of criminality, or mere subjects to be controlled (which is not to imply there are no other types of perceptions which compete and complement the above one).

Further, there are two different proposals regarding fishing communities, one to convert certain commercial fishing jobs, both legal and illegal, with the purpose of reducing the fishing effort; and another focused on encouraging coastal residents to change professions and engage in tourism business. It echoes the *Đổi mới* narrative in that it places emphasis on individual entrepreneurship and economic opportunities. This entails the placement of blame for destructive sectoral practices with fishing communities, at the local level of villages and individuals. These subjects are thus conceptualized as hindering sustainable development and are thought to be in need of integration into the capitalist free market logic that encapsulates Vietnam's economic boom. Of course, by rewarding certain types of behavior, namely entrepreneurship in the tourism sector, the government is also potentially affecting how these communities view themselves by encouraging productiveness and contribution to the service industry, while at the same time marginalizing every subject working outside of the formal economy.

Finally, the document prioritizes attracting high-quality personnel, scientists and experts to contribute to the development of Vietnam's seas and islands. These human resources can provide invaluable expertise. Notwithstanding, this reflects the preference and promotion of external, likely westernized insights, while simultaneously marginalizing fishing communities' local forms of knowledge. This implicitly reinforces the exclusion of indigenous and other alternative perspectives from the decision-making process.

Lived Effects

Finally, it is imperative to investigate how the problem representations may affect people's actual lives, particularly to investigate potential forms of harm and how different groups are affected in differentiated manners. Indeed, the problem representations within the document under analysis are consistent with the broader market-oriented logic that has been consolidated throughout all policy aspects in Vietnam. This logic has generated employment opportunities in service and industrial sectors, and the focus on infrastructure and technology has contributed to social resilience against extreme weather events at the national and provincial levels (Buch-Hansen et al., 2013, p. 36). However, the distribution of benefits is unequal and has exacerbated socio-economic differentiation, particularly between those engaged in high value-added off-farm activities and those employed in low value-added sectors like agriculture and fishing.

The lived effects within this logic of socio-economic differentiation are complex. On the one hand, living standards have increased, albeit unevenly, with improvements in rural-urban inequality in terms of access to services (London, 2023a, pp. 2, 3). On the other hand, income and asset inequality within urban areas has tended to increase, indicating disparities in wealth distribution. Moreover, the paradoxes resulting from economic growth and socio-economic differentiation are evident in the vulnerability and resilience dynamics. While the hydropower projects which the Resolution keeps pushing for have enhanced social resilience against adverse weather conditions, they also contribute to ecological vulnerability, exacerbating flooding during excessive rains and leading to water scarcity for irrigation during droughts (Buch-Hansen et al., 2013, p. 38; Bruun & Rubin, 2022, p. 540). The effects of these paradoxes are felt differently among households. Richer households, able to invest in safer structures, experience improved human security and health during flooding or heavy storms. In contrast, poorer households face greater risks during extreme weather events, as they remain heavily dependent on agriculture and lack the resources to mitigate the impacts.

Bruun & Rubin (2022, p. 540) draw attention to studies that have shown that these infrastructure initiatives have disproportionately effects on poor, small communities, prioritizing profit opportunities and often overlooking risks in the form of local sustainability impacts.

Production, Dissemination, and Disruption of Problem Representations

Finally, this section pertains to examine how the problem representations have been produced, disseminated, and defended, as well as how they could be challenged and disrupted (Bacchi, 2009, p. 71). To investigate this, it is important to look at the national and international levels.

Reproducing Dominant Problem Representations

Within Vietnam, the problem representations are obviously produced and reproduced through official governmental policymaking, with the Master Plan under analysis being one of many examples of official Party documents reinforcing technocratic, depoliticized, infrastructure and market-oriented problem representations.

In this context, the media play an instrumental role in co-constituting and disseminating the dominant problem representations. All official Vietnamese news media is owned by the state and has traditionally served as a propaganda tool to disseminate information to the masses (McKinley, 2013, p. 179-183). This media is considered a strategic industry, and the prime minister has made it clear that press privatization will remain banned in the foreseeable future. State-owned news organizations operate under varying levels of state control. Media coverage in Vietnam exhibits a narrow debate on climate change, heavily influenced by key stakeholders. The information about climate change that citizens receive through official media tends to reflect this limited perspective. Due to state ownership, Vietnam's media

struggles to uncover corruption and may hinder the disclosure of information to the public

regarding the conflict between economic prosperity and environmental protection. Moreover,

the rush for modernization often diverts people's attention from longer-term environmental

issues, particularly in poorer areas where environmental concerns are not yet a priority for

most individuals. Analyzing the headlines of major national news channels provides further

insight:

- "Vietnam's strategy for sustainable development of marine economy" (VietnamNet, 2020);

- "Vietnam's master plan for sustainable marine economic development" (VOV World, 2020);

- "Vietnam improves its position on Sustainable Development Goals" (VnExpress, 2019);

- "Vietnam's green economy expected to reach 300 billion USD by 2050" (Vietnamplus, 2023);

- "Vietnam ranks 49th in the Sustainable Development Index" (Vietnamplus, 2020).

These examples represent the bulk of media reporting on sustainable development issues.

Accordingly, every highlighted article is reminiscent of governmental discourse. The first

two articles highlighted refer to VietnamNet's and VOV World's publishing of the launching

of Resolution No. 36. VietnamNet's account presents a visually appealing video report with

images of pristine blue oceans, military symbols, and modern infrastructure, evoking a sense

of a technologically advanced country committed to national defense and international

cooperation (VietnamNet, 2020). This, allied to language that reasserts that "*the sea is a

component of the sacred national sovereignty of the Fatherland, is a living space, and a

gateway to international exchange*", reinforces an idea of development tied to technological

advances, modernization, and patriotism. Moreover, VOV World's coverage of the same

topic emphasizes three of the six areas of intervention, namely developing the marine economy; improving living conditions; and enhancing scientific and technological studies (VOV World, 2020). Interestingly, the news outlet uses very affirmative, positive language, literally speaking for the government by writing that "*Vietnam will pilot tours to islands…Vietnam will improve its socio-economic infrastructure*" (VOV World, 2020).

VnExpress reports on Vietnam's progress in Sustainable Development Goals, highlighting advancements in poverty reduction, health improvement, gender equality, economic growth, and climate action (VnExpress, 2019). Vietnamplus reports on Vietnam's green economy expectations and on the country's ranking on the SDGs, emphasizing the aim to reach $300 billion by 2050 through its green growth approach (Vietnamplus, 2023). Indeed, these media outlets tend to align their coverage with the government's narrative of sustainable development. Pieces on sustainable development are scarce and depoliticized, thus contributing to the production of the government's views on the matter.

At the international level, the problem representations have been produced and disseminated by major development institutions such as the World Bank and the UNDP. Regarding market-oriented understandings of sustainable development, The World Bank (2021, p. 9) launched the *Vietnam Country Private Sector Diagnostic* (CPSD) to examine opportunities and challenges, both cross-sector and sector-specific, to strengthen private sector development and facilitate investments in Vietnam. The report praises the role of the private sector in what is referred to as *"Vietnam's outstanding development journey"*. Specifically, attention is given to boosting investments which are said to have helped *"propel Vietnam to the ranks of a middle-income economy in one generation"*. The report also reasserts that Vietnam's ambition to become a high-income country by 2045 underpins its development trajectory through an increasing reliance and focus on productivity. The report highlights selected reform proposals, which include modernizing the regulatory framework of

businesses, opening markets to continue promoting competition, and improving core infrastructure (pp. 12, 26-31). Indeed, the World Bank reproduces the CPV's approach to, and posture regarding, development, by reiterating that focusing on developing a productive and diversified private sector will become imperative, and by promoting a market-oriented perspective which prioritizes becoming a high-income country.

Moreover, the UNDP has played a role in disseminating the CPV's technocratic, biophysical and infrastructure-oriented approaches to sustainable development. A relevant example is the 2022 booklet titled *Sweet Success*, which showcases a series of human success stories that celebrate the success of a UNDP-Green Climate Fund (GCF) project, aimed at improving the resilience of vulnerable coastal communities to climate change related Impacts (UNDP, 2022). The project thus mobilized financial and technical support to build resilient houses able to withstand floods and storms. Indeed, the booklet echoes the tendencies of the CPV's discourse on climate change in its focus on the biophysical aspects of climate change, namely the recurrence and intensification of natural disasters such as floods and landslides (UNDP, 2022, p. 13; Fortier, 2010). The document is also centered around the technical dimension of development and adaptation, namely infrastructure, technical skill, and sectoral knowledge (UNDP, 2022, p. 13). The booklet repeatedly evokes an image of a happy Vietnamese local resident, relying on personal testimonies from people impacted by the project. These are accompanied by photo portraits, thus providing a smiling face for each quote celebrating the project: *"I am very happy and do not feel worried anymore. Thank you so much for the project's support"*; *"Now, I am not afraid at all"* (pp. 7, 14). Each chapter is dedicated to the story of an individual whose life was changed for the better by the project. The booklet is strategic in its communication choices, creating a very effective narrative where international development experts come, build, and leave thousands of grateful locals with changed and improved lives. The public connects much more easily with the story of an

elderly woman living in a fragile home than with sheets upon sheets of numbers confirming the success of development problems. As such, this type of report plays a relevant role in legitimizing and disseminating the problem representations present in the CPV's policymaking, particularly their technocratic dimension.

Challenging and Disrupting the Dominant Problem Representations

To assess the possibilities to challenge the dominant representations of the problem, the role and limitations of civil society in Vietnam are investigated, as well as the role old and new forms of media can play. Indeed, it is a logical first step to look into civil society in Vietnam as a path for disrupting dominant discourse, since in the international context, the role of the civil society generally emphasizes human values such as solidarity, critical thinking, and emotion, and often play instrumental roles in challenging governments (Wells-Dang, 2012, p. 170). The particular case of Vietnam complicates this discussion, since the one-party state dominates, or pertains to dominate, all aspects of social life, owning and controlling "nongovernmental" organizations and media outlets to different extents (Heng, 2004, pp. 145-147). Despite this, there is a notorious gap between official Party policy and how society actually works, and the presence of activist social networks has been downplayed by literature on the subject (Wells-Dang, 2012, p. 5). The context of economic reforms at the turn of the century has somewhat relaxed government control over public speech, which has allowed a form of civil society to timidly emerge (Heng, 2004, pp. 145-147). This emergence has been a contested and negotiated experience at every stage, since the government still retains significant control over public organization (Heng, 2004, p. 148). In this complex context of social change, negotiation, and international influences, Vietnamese civil society networks have evolved through personal connections and flexible, often informal

structures. These networks engage in advocacy with authorities and elites, challenging systemic constraints and underscoring their agency (Wells-Dang, 2012, pp. 2, 5).

One of the preferred and most observed forms these networks take is through online presence (Wells-Dang, 2012, p. 146, 149, 176). Particularly, the incorporation of tech giant Facebook in Vietnam in 2007 contributed to an opening of online discussion, since the foreign ownership of the platform makes it more challenging for Vietnam to exert the kind of control observed in such autocracies as China. Activists thus flocked to the platform in hopes to pursue a counter-narrative to State-approved media. This space for open discussion was increasingly worrisome for the government, but Facebook remained popular and useful for activists (p. 153). A prominent example of activist success during the last decade in pushing against State propaganda is the revolt against Taiwan's Formosa Plastics' steel plant toxic discharge on the central coast, as online discussion forums led to organized civil society action that ultimately resulted in a rare victory for environmentalists (pp. 154-155). Indeed, as it became clear that entirely censoring Facebook and the like was impossible, the government switched strategies and made the decision to exploit the platform by o-opting it, which proved much more successful and remains the primary dynamic until current days. The government has thus taken proactive steps to shape public opinion through the internet, as evidenced by online spaces created and used by government officials to both reproduce State propaganda, and sometimes (curiously) to respond to public demands by exposing political scandals and covering sensitive subjects for the regime (George & Venkiteswaran, 2019, p. 56).

Further, there has been an intensive rise in disinformation sponsored by the government and carried out by a military cyber task force deployed in 2017, whose tasks officially refer to policing the internet to counter any opinions deemed toxic by the government (Luong, 2020, p. 156). Effectively, their purpose is to silence any dissident voices criticizing the government

in any way within social media, which has been efficiently carried out. This effort has been helped by governmental financial pressure on social media giants in the form of encouraging businesses to stop advertising through them until the social media platforms comply in silencing the toxic content, a successful measure visible in Facebook's 500 per cent increase in restricted content, in 2018 (Pearson, 2019). Thus, space for civil society action on the internet is contested and limited.

In regard to state-owned media, which does not enjoy the freedom new media does, Heng (2004, p. 152-154) points to an important mechanism underpinning the complex relationship between the state and the media, that enables a form of activism from within the system. The *struggle paradigm* is said to be present whenever journalists are able to bring up issues which contradict Party agenda by reporting on an official Party line. An example of this mechanism would be a journalist using an official anti-corruption campaign to legitimize exposing how a member of government has mobilized resources for a water-management project they have an economic interest in. The *struggle paradigm* thus represents an opportunity for hidden agendas by opening a space for journalists to address issues that otherwise would have been too controversial and threatening to the Party to be approved. It symbolizes the potential for disrupting dominant discourses from within the system.

Reforms and raging Globalization have introduced internet access and social media platforms to Vietnamese society, which has resulted to some extent in an openness of public debate. Despite this, these spaces have been co-opted by the government and are actively policed by State-sponsored forces. Regarding the traditional media, opportunities for disrupting dominant discourses remain very constrained, despite some space being opened through the struggle paradigm.

Findings

The general findings are succinctly summarized below. This is followed by a discussion of the implications of the analysis using post-development theory and existing critical research into Vietnam. The discussion is structured through four main themes, respectively Discourse; Power; Sustaining Development; and Disrupting Power. The findings exposed that the governmental strategy for sustainable development contains implicit problem representations that perceive it to be hindered by inefficient management, and underdeveloped technology and infrastructure for such issues as water management, tourism, mariculture, and disaster preparedness. There are additional problem representations present, namely, the implicit framing of development through a market and patriotic, paternalistic lens. The problem representations are further solidified by looking at the web of related strategies and plans that the Plan is intertwined with, which reflect the managerial focus.

These problem representations entail assumptions exposed through identified binaries, key concepts, and categories in the Strategy. It is assumed that sustainable development can be achieved by focusing on modernization, productivity, and further integration in the global capitalist market logic. At the same time, there is an underlying tension between the desire for global integration, and patriotic and paternalistic characteristics centered around sovereignty and national interest. This last aspect is reflected in the paternalistic categorization of social groups represented within the policy. Lastly, the document contains key concepts related to sustainability that serve as buzzwords, as well as market-oriented concepts which more directly inform the proposed actions in the document's measures.

This discourse is best understood through a genealogy of the problem representations. By investigating western-constructed ideas of development, as well as the recent history of CPV-led Vietnam, it becomes clear that the current discourse is informed by Vietnamese ideological traditions centered on money and paternalism, that have incorporated western ideas of development rooted in everlasting economic growth.

Of course, this discourse entails silences and marginalizes alternative problem representations. By presenting measures and investments as objective truths through a technocratic approach, the Strategy conceals the politically loaded interests of decisionmakers, excludes pluralist representation of interests, depoliticizes sustainable development, and silences comprehensive investigation of the social, economic, and political implications of climate change. These silences prevent a nuanced examination of interests, power dynamics, and the wider societal impact of policies and strategies. Considering this, alternative problem representations include collaborative participation in the policy-making process, as well as a perspective that addresses sustainable development through the limits of growth, which would open space for questioning Vietnam's current economic model.

Moreover, the problem representations present in the Strategy have effects that are best understood in three ways. The discursive effects limit critical questioning of interests and the market-driven logic behind the strategy, while neglecting the concerns of fishing communities. Subjectification effects reveal the positioning of local communities as subjects to be controlled; the placement of blame for disruptive practices with the fishing communities; and the reinforcement of the exclusion of local knowledge and perspectives. The lived effects demonstrate that the strategy's focus on economic growth and infrastructure results in complex, paradoxal benefits that are unequally distributed amongst the society.

Finally, the problem representations are produced and reproduced by policymaking, state-owned media, and at the international level through development institutions. However, economic reforms and raging Globalization have introduced internet access and social media platforms to Vietnamese society, which has resulted to some extent in an openness of public debate and may present a path for disrupting and challenging the system. Despite this, these spaces have been co-opted by the government and are actively policed by State-sponsored

forces. Regarding the traditional media, opportunities for disrupting dominant discourses remain very constrained, despite some space being opened through the struggle paradigm.

Discourse

The analysis shows that the problem representations speak to the broader conceptualizations surrounding development that stem from western history as evidenced by Rist's genealogy of development. Indeed, ideas created and proliferated, often violently, by the West, namely technocratic measures and market openness, are evident in the policy and thus Vietnamese discourse. This is consistent with James Ferguson's (1994, pp. 30, 32) observations in his analysis of development in Lesotho, namely that the development apparatus produces a particular discourse, with its own logic. He further explains that the logic of the development apparatus contributes to distorted constructions of underdeveloped countries, while also informing and guiding policymaking and. Indeed, this is visible in the World Bank and UNDP's praise of Vietnam as a success story, in a very clean narrative of a country that went from extreme poverty to an economic boom through marketization (Gainsborough, 2010, p. 484). These institutions thus promote a certain perception of Vietnam while legitimizing the current problem representations of sustainable development in the country.

However, looking at the external pressures and circumstances only explains the distinct discourse on development in Vietnam to some extent. It is not enough to explain the events in a country where State power is centralized, strong, and controlling. In fact, Vietnam's development problematic is very much shaped by cultural and ideological roots that have been part of Vietnam's history, namely paternalism and monetary focus. The centrality of money and paternalism are traced back to a time before the economic reforms that radically changed the economy, and they have prevailed throughout the process of reform

(Gainsborough, 2010, p. 482). This is evidently echoed throughout the policy in assumptions that certain groups are incapable of fending for themselves, a sense of self-appointed legitimacy to guide them, and the limited participation of any groups outside the elite in decision-making processes. Moreover, the focus on the market has been exhaustively evidenced throughout the document. Thus, the paternalistic, money centered historical roots of Vietnam have become intertwined with development logic, with the State incorporating international understandings of development into its self-image, while maintaining a strong grip on indigenous modes of thinking and operating (Gainsborough, 2010, p. 483).

The analysis shows there is indeed a very distinct discourse on development shaped by assumptions which inform policy making for the sustainable development of Vietnam's coast. It can be traced to both western history which created the global development logic, but Vietnam's own history, and the CPV's in particular, is extremely important in informing and shaping it. The findings thus align with Ferguson's (1996, p. 74) invaluable observation that development projects only make sense within the distinct developmental discourse, but beyond this, they demonstrate a much stronger State in terms of deciding which projects move forward in the country than what Ferguson's analysis suggests. This makes sense considering Ferguson's analysis is focused on external development projects. Nevertheless, the author's account of discourse remains extremely useful in the present case.

Power

Having established problem representations are historically shaped, the analysis also illustrates how the government may have a political, strong incentive to keep pushing for the current dominant problem representations. Considering that one of the main problem representations is centered around marketization, a short genealogy of the ascension of the CPV to power shows that the *Đổ i mo i* resulted in an economic boom that lifted Vietnam

from the extreme levels of poverty in the aftermath of the war and brought a sense of hope and prosperity to the country (London, 2023a, p. 2). From this perspective, the market-logic has proved successful from a certain perspective, and it has lent legitimacy to the regime that deployed it. As such, it makes sense that the government would keep pushing for marketization in development, and even in sustainable development, since this is the strategy that has proved successful historically and been praised abroad. Indeed, the analysis illustrates an underlying tension between the desire for global integration and the threats to the strong State opening the market entails, namely in the government's framing of the policy in terms of sovereignty, State power, and national interest. While it is true that political dominance has been somewhat relaxed in several aspects since the implementation of economic reforms, part coherence has prevailed and the process of global integration can overall be said to have breathed new life into the CPV's claim to dominance after a turbulent and bloody period of war. This is consistent with one-party regimes' tendency to have the ability to maintain elite coherence in the face of such challenges (Bruun & Rubin, 2022, pp. 539-540). The country's recent history thus provides some insight into the incentives the CPV may have for maintaining the commitment to increasing levels of economic growth in its pursuit of development.

The technocratic-centered discourse may also contribute to expanding the dominance of the government. Sachs (2021, p. 35) highlights how the strategies put in place to guarantee that decision-making at every level is aligned with the proposed goals (for sustainable development), inevitably entail increased centralization – a strong State. Sachs echoes Ferguson in his concern with and critique of technocratic approaches to highly complex problems. Indeed, Sachs pointed to the development discourse concerning environmental protection throughout the 1990s to show how it is mostly focused on new levels of administrative monitoring and control, reducing ecology to technical strategies surrounding

resource efficiency and risk management. The managerial style necessarily calls for centralization, thus serving the CPV's approach to governing. Further, since the strategies are presented as objective truths due to being anchored in technical and scientific expertise, the discourse justifies a call for unified, collective commitment to the Party's approach, while at the same time facilitating the silencing of dissident voices critical of the strategies. (Fortier, 2010, p. 239).

The implications of the problem representations go beyond the strengthening of the CPV as a collective whole. The findings show that the problem representations appear to serve power by obscuring opaque power relations of the political and economic national elites. To understand this, it is instrumental to turn to the style of practice discourse on sustainable development of coastal areas encourages. Vietnam subscribes to what is referred to as authoritarian environmentalism, characterized by hierarchical organizational systems and approaches that prioritize science-based management and technocratic remedies to environmental issues, deploying agencies and experts able to engineer, plan and implement multiple types of management programs, and asserting this strategy is capable of preventing climate catastrophic events (Sachs, 2021, p. 34). These agents have authority over individuals, society, and nature, and marginalize open discussions, raising awareness, and incorporating local knowledge (Bruun & Rubin, 2022, p. 539; Fortier, 2010, p. 235). The principal means of environmental governance in this context relate to a blend of policy and innovations in technology. Further, growth is perceived as paramount for increasing resilience and adaptability (Bäckstrand & Lövbrand, 2007, pp. 126–131). This is complemented by a perspective centered around the belief that economic growth is capable of coexisting with, and strengthening, a healthy environment (Meadows et al., 1974). This is visible in Vietnam's advocacy for sustainable development by means of the technocratic management of environmental crises (Fortier, 2010, p. 236).

By presenting measures and investments as objective truths through a technocratic approach, the problem representations leave in their trail the very loud silence of the decision makers' politically loaded interests; exclude pluralist representation of interests; depoliticize sustainable development; and silence comprehensive investigations of the social, economic, and political implications of climate change. These silences prevent a nuanced examination of interests, power dynamics, and the wider societal impact of policies and strategies. Fortier (2010, pp. 234-236, 240) expands on the many actors, including Party officials, who have enjoyed the privileges of market capitalist relations, pointing as an example to water management infrastructure projects in the Mekong Delta to illustrate the economic interests of elites. Such projects, fueled by a technocratic approach to development, present opportunities for certain actors to profit through allocation resources towards their businesses. This is not to imply that the many infrastructure-driven projects proposed in the Resolution are inherently harmful, rather that it is important to investigate the politically loaded interests underpinning them to understand how disproportionately heavy the incentive to go ahead may be in relation to the potential risks involved, for the actors involved in the decision-making process.

Moreover, the biophysical focus confines related policy debates to a narrow domain of experts, thus membership to circles that define climate change problems and solutions is filtered by both technocratic credentials and political legitimacy within the Vietnamese state (Fortier, 2010, p. 240). The extent to which a pluralist representation of interests can be achieved within governmental debate is constrained by the scientific expertise deemed necessary to fully understand climate change by CPV discourse. The result is an authoritative narrative that calls on unified, collective commitment to the leadership's approach and at the same time allows for dissident voices critical of strategies to be silenced easily. As such, both

the technocratic focus and calls for scientific expertise within sustainable development discourse in Vietnam serve to sustain and obscure power relations.

This speaks to Rist's account of how development may serve as an instrument of power. Rist (2019, p. 152) shows how, in the same way a combination of philanthropy and national interest were at the center of colonial invasion, today's political elites deploy development initiatives in the name of helping their people, while actually using it to further self-interest. These initiatives typically pertain to further economic growth, export raw materials at high prices, optimal exploitation of natural resources, and so forth, and are joint by the common point of allowing centralized control of the area. This means that state institutions are then able to appropriate external revenue, for the benefit of small elites. The point being extracted here is that development discourse legitimizes the expanding of the control a small elite gathers over the allocation of resources in Vietnam. Indeed, Rist (2019, pp. 75, 78) shows that rhetoric works just as well as the use of force in serving the interests of the powerful in convincing people that change is taking place by simply reframing reality (into a development problematic). In sum, the Vietnamese strategy characterized by a market logic, a managerial and technocratic approach, and a focus on scientific expertise and technology appear to legitimize a centralized government while reinforcing existing power relations in both politics and production, at the expense of a more participative and fair response (Fortier, 2010, p. 242).

Sustaining Development

The analysis illuminates Vietnam's understanding of sustainable development. Buzzwords such as *sustainability* and *ecotourism* fill the document, and they appear to serve as a legitimizing factor for the continued sustaining of growth in Vietnam. It could be said that policies need such buzzwords to provide a unifying factor and enable policies to get public

approval, yet the analysis suggests this is not the case. Merely by assessing the small percentage of the Strategy dedicated to climate change adaptation and sustainability, *versus* the large portion that the economic growth through productivity and competitiveness occupies, it becomes apparent that the government understands sustainable development as the sustaining of development. Data reinforces this by exposing the explicit, continuous focus on continuing the exploitation of natural resources; investing in modernizing and expanding the scope of the tourism sector; prioritizing modernization of infrastructure; and continuing to expand aquaculture.

Paradoxically, these measures often include assertions that the implementation is to be aligned with environmental concerns, the protection of ecosystems, sustainability, and betterment of living standards. This is profoundly representative of the inherent contradictions of sustainable development in Vietnam. Indeed, the pursuit of market-centered problem representations persists despite evidence of the economic model's harmful impacts on several levels. First, the socio-economic impacts for Vietnam are complex. Rist (2019, p. 236) reports that it is true that significantly less people are surviving on less than one dollar per day in southeast Asia, as a consequence of economic growth. However, this has been accompanied by a widening of economic inequality and the declining consumption share of the poorest 20%. Moreover, while it is true that the reforms have generated employment opportunities in service and industrial sectors, and that the focus on infrastructure and technology has contributed to social resilience against extreme weather events at the national and provincial levels, the distribution of benefits has been unequal (Buch-Hansen et al., 2013, p. 36). Socio-economic differentiation has been exacerbated, particularly between those engaged in high value-added off-farm activities and those employed in low value-added sectors like agriculture and fishing. While hydropower projects have enhanced social resilience against adverse weather conditions, they also contribute to ecological vulnerability,

exacerbating flooding during excessive rains and leading to water scarcity for irrigation during droughts. These infrastructure initiatives have had grave effects in terms of levels of pollution and public health hazards, and disproportionately effects on poor, small communities, prioritizing profit opportunities and often overlooking risks in the form of local sustainability impacts (Fortier, 2010, p. 234; Buch-Hansen et al., 2013, p. 36). Further, the analysis shows that the government implicitly places the blame for disruptive practices on fishing communities, which, allied to an active encouragement of productiveness, potentially affects how these communities view themselves.

Secondly, the harmful environmental impacts of market-logic obsession world-wide have been repeatedly shown in literature (see Rist, 2019; Fortier, 2010; O'Connor, Martin & Arnoux, Rosemary, 1993). In Vietnam, it has positioned the country as not only vulnerable to climate change, but also an increasing contributor to the process of global warming (Dao, 2023, p. 378-381). The investment on aquaculture, industrialization, tourism, and the overexploitation of natural resources, evidenced in the analysis, contributes to increasing levels of pollution of the air and water system throughout the country. Regarding water, its quality and quantity levels in downstream areas and river basins is increasingly degraded, which affects social tensions in that it leads to conflict amongst social groups with divergent interests ranging from hydropower to aquaculture, and to domestic use. Hydropower development, mining, industrial activity and water management further affect the volume of suspended water waste by leading it to increase far beyond what is allowed by the national limit standard.

The effects extend to mangrove forests in coastal areas, which are disappearing at dangerous speed and decreasing in quality levels, as evidenced by the 80 percent decrease in the past half century of the Mekong Delta's mangrove forest (Dao, 2023, p. 383). Commercial shrimp farming bears some responsibility for this, as the practice entails

converting mangrove forest areas and the industry has been on the rise Local residents often engage in shrimp farming illegally by converting these important areas into farms, then affecting the environment through erosion and salt intrusion, and worsening the neighboring villages' vulnerability to storms and other climate change-related disasters. In regard to this problem, the analyzed Master Plan leaves little reassurance, mentioning illegal shrimp farming only in passing (two words), and reasserting that aquaculture is a sector to be invested in.

Thus, the current model is problematic on all fronts, which makes its pursuit contradictory. The previous section explains it to some extent, but Rist's concept of development as religion fills in some gaps and connects Vietnam's approach to a global tendency. Rist (2019, pp. 46, 216) denotes that development, like a religion, requires people to believe in it, even in the face of its incoherence and failures, which suggests that the idea of development is more important than development itself. The contradictions inherent to this belief are compared to religious belief, in that policymakers use development as a pretext to convert natural and social relations into commodities, and to widen the gap between rich and poor, without seeing anything contradictory in what they do. So too do Christians easily accept the gap between their belief in a world of love and the clashing reality of their practices. Parallelly, despite the undeniable challenges and negative consequences associated with the promotion of industrialization and technocratic measures, Vietnam remains steadfast in pursuing these policies that primarily serve the interests of the elite and further widen economic inequalities. Indeed, the belief in development has become deeply ingrained in the national narrative. The government, in its pursuit of rapid economic growth and modernization, presents development as a sacred goal that must be upheld at all costs. The idea of progress, often measured by GDP growth and infrastructure projects, has become the cornerstone of Vietnam's development discourse. This relentless pursuit of economic

expansion is perpetuated as a gospel, disseminated to the masses, and legitimized as the only path towards a prosperous future, as seen through State-owned media outlets.

However, this religious-like devotion to development has come at a significant cost (Rist (2019, pp. 46, 216). The prioritization of industrialization and technocratic solutions has resulted in the exploitation of natural resources, environmental degradation, and the displacement of local communities. The commodification of land and resources under the guise of development has led to the marginalization and disempowerment of vulnerable groups, exacerbating social inequalities. Moreover, the contradiction between the proclaimed goals of sustainable development and the actual practices implemented by the Vietnamese authorities is evident. The government's pursuit of economic growth often overrides environmental concerns, leading to the degradation of ecosystems and exacerbating the country's vulnerability to climate change. Vietnam's discourse thus perpetuates a business-as-usual approach, favoring short-term gains over long-term sustainability. Of course, this exacerbated faith also serves as a legitimizing force for the ruling elite. The concentration of power and decision-making within a narrow political circle further marginalizes grassroots participation and civil society voices. The state's control over development narratives and policies allows the elite to consolidate their interests, widening the gap between the rich and the poor. The promises of progress and prosperity often remain distant dreams for marginalized communities who bear the brunt of the negative impacts of development. By critically applying Rist's concept of development as religion to Vietnam, it becomes evident that the persistence of unsustainable practices and the contradictions between rhetoric and reality are deeply rooted in the country's development paradigm.

Sustaining development appears to be more urgent than sustainable development in Vietnam. Unfortunately, historical evidence shows that successful adaptation in the face of climatic variability and change has required radical changes in how societies organize their

economic, social, and cultural activities (Brooks et al., 2009, pp. 752, 753). Addressing the challenges of climate change and sustainable development necessitates rethinking patterns of production and consumption and challenging the notion of business as usual, which entails recognizing and challenging this blind faith in development.

Disrupting Power

Problem representations have been shown to be produced and reproduced by the state, the state-owned media outlets, and international institutions. These are marginalizing, intolerant of dissident views and alternative perspectives, and driven by incentives that have little to do with the climate crisis imperative. Interestingly, while the media plays a role in perpetuating the CPV's self-image and interests, it has also been exalted as a tool for civil society to push back and engage with power more effectively. From within the system, State-owned media outlets have begun to be influenced and pushed to cover news stories they would not otherwise cover, that are sensitive and possibly unflattering for the CPV. They have also sometimes proved capable of bringing up sensitive topics by framing them within a State-approved news piece, or even within State propaganda promotion, such as anti-corruption policy. Indeed, these instances are not so recurrent to signify political change and explicit challenging of the system. Still, they signify a continuous negotiation between State power and journalists, which is undoubtedly important to slowly disrupt and question problem representations, not only for the dissemination of critical journalism, but also to inform the audience on aspects of government that would otherwise not be spoken about.

Beyond the traditional media, George & Venkiteswaran (2019, pp. 52-53, 62) assert that the internet is an incredibly powerful technology with transformative potential, in part due to the fact it is harder to fully censor than traditional communication technologies. It has proved

to be an important tool to amplify marginalized views, mobilize civil society to engage with power, and progressively open a few cracks towards State openness and responsiveness.

However, one must exercise caution in proclaiming the victory of civil society through social media, as literature points out that the internet does not necessarily serve only the marginalized (George & Venkiteswaran, 2019, p. 53, 56). Indeed, Vietnam's regime has been very successful in co-opting this tool to perpetuate coercion and thus transforming the online space into as much of a threat as an opportunity for activists. In respect to this, the data reveals that the process of co-opting is not as straightforward as full censorship. In fact, State-sponsored online presence may act in a responsive and open way to public demands by exposing events and scandals potentially damaging for the CPV's image. George & Venkiteswaran suggest this illustrates the complexity of censorship and liberalization dynamics of online spaces, since governmental action is very much shaped by opaque political interests and changing contexts.

Beyond State co-opting, success stories from online activism in Vietnam have been scarce thus far, and caution is advised in promulgating the extraordinary potential of the internet excessively. While the level of effectiveness of all forms and representations of civil society remains very limited for now, Heng (2004, pp. 156, 157) makes an important point in highlighting that progress has been made in the form of establishing a number of precedents. Every time a small post achieves something unthinkable, that becomes a little less unthinkable. There is no denying that there is potential for activists to utilize the internet to progressively open up small spaces for discussions that question, critique and challenge the produced and reproduced problem representations, which clearly have detrimental effects on society and environment alike.

Conclusion

This project pertained to investigate Vietnam's development discourse in an integrated manner, considering the external influence of western conceptualized development, as well as internal power relations, to paint a picture of the complexity of tackling climate change adaptation in Vietnam. It allowed for a better understanding of the country, as well as the integration of the case of Vietnam into broader development debates surrounding the possibility for sustainable development under capitalism and globalization forces, the case for post-development, and the obstacles to pursuing sustainability. This was achieved through the positing of the following research question:

How can post-development theory be used to critically analyze the development discourse of the government of Vietnam regarding the sustainable development of coastal areas?

1. *What is the current discourse?*

2. *What are the assumptions and power dynamics underlying the current discourse?*

3. *What are the discursive and lived effects of the discourse?*

4. *How can it be disrupted?*

In response to the question, post-development theory, namely Ferguson, Rist, and Sachs's concepts, allowed for a critical analysis of the development discourse of the government of Vietnam regarding the sustainable development of coastal areas, that exposed the distinct discourse on sustainable development that exists in the country, as well as its technocratic and depoliticizing character. The current discourse is underpinned by a market logic; a desire for continuous modernization; a focus on technocratic measures and solutions for climate change adaptation; and a paternalistic, patriotic dimension. It entails assumptions that perceive development to equate to everlasting growth and is shaped and informed both by the international context and Vietnam's own ideological historical roots. Moreover, development discourse allows for obscuring power dynamics in Vietnam, namely amongst political and economic elites with opaque interests in promoting a certain form of sustainable

development, namely one that privileges technocratic projects and managerial approaches, and that prioritizes scientific expertise and focus on the biophysical aspects of climate change. The discourse entails effects that curtail the ability to critically question the underlying interests and market-driven logic behind the current approach to sustainable development. Further, the economic and development model it represents have had complex and paradoxical outcomes that are distributed unequally throughout society, as well as destructive impacts on the environment. Finally, the media represents a relevant pathway for disrupting this system, with traditional media showing signs of critical journalism in disguise, and new media fueled by the internet counting a few rare victories for environmental activism. The potential is undeniable, albeit still unachieved.

Indeed, the analysis illustrated how completely intertwined the themes of climate change, vulnerability, socio-political context, and development are, thus proving how instrumental it is to conduct integrated research into how these themes intersect in Vietnam. Further, it shed light on the complexity and uniqueness of the country's political system and exposed the ways in which dominant western accounts of development encounter and interact with the strong State of Vietnam.

Of course, much remains to be studied, investigated, and argued about. The fact that Vietnam is governed by an autocratic, opaque political party makes it difficult to obtain reliable data that aids in investigating power struggles in connection to climate change and sustainable development. This thus signified a substantial limitation to the project, that translated into the analysis depending largely on secondary data present in critical studies of Vietnam. Further, time and space constraints hindered the materialization of a comprehensive, extensive genealogy of the problem representations. Indeed, Vietnam is an extremely complex case and it is paramount for further studies to critically look at the nation's history, as well as the history that precedes Vietnam as a unified country. Regarding

gaps, it would have been fruitful to investigate the case from a different theoretical framework, namely Climate Justice, to gain a better understanding of the complexity and unequal patterns of vulnerability and burdens within the Vietnamese population.

Vietnam remains largely understudied from the perspective of critical, integrated frameworks. This project has introduced several aspects that ought to be further researched through development theories, namely the complex effects of the country's sustainable development approach on the population, to expand on how different areas, sectors, and classes are affected. Importantly, gender dimensions are currently understudied. A feminist perspective on sustainable development in Vietnam is instrumental to gain a better understanding of gender norms and gendered roles, despite the difficulty in obtaining data.

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