

From cyberspace to the streets

Emerging environmental paradigm of justice and citizenship in Vietnam

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Vietnam's state-society relations in the arena of environmental governance have changed remarkably since online forums and social networks have become popular in promoting the more vibrant and active participation of civil society. Moving from the background to the forefront of the political scene, and from community level to a nation-wide scale, environmental activism, one of the most vocal branches of Vietnam's civil society, addresses environmental concerns as matters of justice. Intellectuals, scientists, tech-savvy netizens, urban youths, and others, have used social media to generate critical environmental discourse and social mobilization and have then translated such online activism into other forms of advocacy. All these people have come together virtually for discussions and to sign petitions, and physically in the streets to join protests, which primarily involve demands for ecological justice, environmental justice, and more civic participation in decision-making processes. The emergence of elite and grassroots environmental activism has forced the state to rethink its environmental politics and to consider citizens' basic rights to environmental decision-making and environmental citizenship.

What does environmental citizenship mean in Vietnam?

On social media, Vietnamese nationals share their collective understandings with regard to the sustainability of development and nature conservation. Such sentiments are circulated across the country, engendering nationwide environmental activism. Those people joining the movement are environmental citizens. Environmental citizenship refers to the rights and responsibilities towards the livability of citizens' ecological space, and the "responsibility of those who are occupying too much of that space to reduce their ecological footprint".¹ Prominently incorporated into policy making processes in many societies worldwide, environmental citizenship is "a means of promoting the goals of sustainability and environmental protection and integrating environmental concerns

into the modes of political engagement".² However, environmental citizenship in Vietnam during the past decade has been primarily manifested through environmental activism by groups of Vietnamese citizens, mostly the grassroots, challenging the state's monopoly in environmental politics. Such manifestations range from micro-acts of online participation (such as reposting images or posts/critical viewpoints from activists, 'liking' posts, posting comments and Facebook Live videos, signing petitions) to participation in physical protest events. Environmental citizenship in contemporary Vietnam has three modes of activism:

1. Activism for environmental justice, regarding all issues of environmental politics that involve fair/unfair distribution of environmental hazards, livelihood, inequality, power, benefits among humans, people's 'vulnerability to ecological disasters', their

exposure to environmental risks, and the lack of civic engagement in environmental politics over their immediate environment;

2. Activism for ecological justice, regarding justice for nature, nature conservation or moral relationship with nature.

3. Activism for both environmental justice and ecological justice.

In the following sections, typical environmental movements are discussed in an analytical framework to provide more insights into these modes of activism.

Nation-wide environmentalism, starting with intellectuals

The first symbolic environmental activism that showcased the emergence of environmental citizenship via social media was the anti-Bauxite Mining movement in 2009,

against the government's 'Master Plan' for "the exploration, mining, processing, and use of bauxite reserves" across the country.³ The Plan involved building seven different factories to process bauxite-alumina and alumina for mine clusters in five provinces of central highland areas. In response to such a massive project, widespread opposition with environmental concerns emerged, starting with the country's intellectuals. During the first half of 2009, diverse individuals and informal networks of prominent intellectuals, bloggers, domestic reporters, government scientists, and former political leaders – including General Vo Nguyen Giap, Vietnam's most popular military leader⁴ – joined a highly controversial public debate over the imminent harms the mining project might cause to environmental sustainability and local livelihoods.

They created a critical public advocacy against the state's hegemonic decision – mostly through workshops, seminars, articles, online discussions, and online petitions.⁵ The widespread reach of the anti-bauxite advocacy started from online reports about the workshops attended by the economists, environmentalists, experts on mining technology, and scholars of cultural and social studies from universities and institutions. These activists raised their disapproval of the bauxite project, drawing special concerns from the mainstream press. Environmental debates by these activists were based on specific quantitative technical data, especially cost-benefit analyses with evaluation of possible harms to land resources, employment, deforestation, loss of local traditional livelihoods and hundreds of millions of tons of red mud discharge. Many popular newspapers then followed to bring the 'bauxite debate' into the spotlight, instigating a massive concern for environmental risks of the project. Revolutionary hero General Vo Nguyen Giap, aged 98, sent the government a short letter, and then the most widely known and accomplished Vietnamese intellectuals sent a petition with 135 signatures. These elite activists then launched the Bauxite Vietnam website, the formal blog site for the petition.⁶ The website has become a platform for a few democratic voices to inspire many others to speak up and practice more on environmental citizenship and was still a point of departure for online environmentalism years later, instigating more public awareness about environmental issues in the country.

The anti-Bauxite Mining movement demonstrated how the popularity of the Internet has facilitated the much wider production and circulation of environmental knowledge and environmental concerns. For the first time in Vietnam, digital networks could mobilize collective sentiments and actions for environmental and ecological justice. The movement could mobilize

Fig. 1: Bauxite Vietnam Website in its original format before 7 July 2009. (Image Courtesy of Jason Morris, see endnote 5). Other websites existed upon which these intellectuals had been posting their blogs and commentaries for several years. However, none of them had attracted so much mainstream attention as did Bauxite Vietnam then. By the time the website was successfully hacked and paralyzed in December of 2009, it had registered some 17 million hits (Morris, J. 2013:124).



individuals from diverse groups (intellectuals, members of parliaments, environmental activists, pro-democracy activists, retired high-ranking officials, and many others) and it marked the emergence of the quest for environmental citizenship in the state's decision-making process.

The government's response included arrests of high-profile bloggers during May and June of 2009. In addition, in July 2009, it imposed strict censorship on scientific research and scholarly works, while intimidating the leaders of the Bauxite Vietnam website until early 2010. Although the movement could not suspend the project, it posed a "considerable challenge to the party-state on the ground of critical environmental knowledge".⁷ During the years following the bauxite mining controversy, a growing population of environmental citizens across the country, mostly urban youth, have been exposed to diverse critical environmental discourses on digital platforms, especially Facebook. These young individuals have put in huge amounts of energy to practice their environmental citizenship, to become environmental activists and citizen journalists. The #SaveSonDoong movement that emerged years later shows the youths' passion for nature conservation in pursuit of ecological justice.

#SaveSonDoong: a hashtag of ecological justice

Son Doong cave in Quang Binh province is the world's largest cave, and has only been accessible since 2013. Just a very limited number of tourists are allowed to visit the cave, and only through eco-tours organized by tour company Oxalis. In early 2014, the mainstream news reported that the Quang Binh provincial authority planned to allow the Sun Group – the country's biggest cable car operator – to build a cable car that would traverse the cave. The cable car would mean that the 800 visitors per hour would increase to 1,000 people per hour. This would be a direct threat to the cave's pristine ecosystems.⁸

In response, a group of young environmentalists led by the young teacher Le Nguyen Thien Huong,⁹ created collective and organized forums to mobilize social attention and action to save the cave from the environmental damages that the cable car would most certainly cause. The movement started with a Facebook fan page and a website, using the hashtag #SaveSonDoong. The Facebook fan page quickly attracted hundreds of thousands of followers, drawing much attention from the mainstream media. A subsequent online petition quickly received 173,729 signatures. The petition was sent to Vietnam's then Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, UNESCO World Heritage Center, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, and Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism.

Campaign organizers mobilized Vietnamese celebrities to join a video and photo series in an effort to spread the message of the #SaveSonDoong movement. A 57-second video clip titled 'Save Sơn Đoòng' was published on a YouTube channel, featuring 10 famous young individuals, who together – with a few words by each – created a complete message to the public: "Let's together save Son Doong by joining hands to prevent the construction of cable cars into the cave". As of 6 March 2020, the video had been watched 17,129 times.¹⁰ The video and photos were shared on their Facebook fan page and the website 'savesondoong.org'. Celebrities changed their Facebook profile pictures into the #SaveSonDoong sign. Followers were mobilized to take photos with #SaveSonDoong signs to post onto their personal Facebook pages.

The campaign quickly raised public awareness and the hashtag #SaveSonDoong was highlighted through domestic mass media, including national television news channel VTV and Ho Chi Minh City TV (HTV). The discourse of nature conservation was extended to a greater public after media briefings attended by large numbers of journalists were released. The campaign's leader, Le Nguyen Thien Huong, was featured in the 'Welcome New Day' program broadcast by HTV, a daily 30-minute news report from

6:30 to 7:00 a.m., in a 3:36 minute report about the #SaveSonDoong movement. In this TV report, she explained the urgency of conservation and need for action to save the cave. Other campaign supporters wearing #SaveSonDoong T-shirts were also featured in the report, with each person giving a few words to make a complete message. An impressive excerpt from that message is that "Five billion years of nature's creation would be destroyed by a drill".

The #SaveSonDoong movement gained more steam with 'One day to save five million years', a whole-day event on 24 January 2015. The event included a display of international award-winning photos of Son Doong, previously featured in The Telegraph, New York Times and Outdoor Magazine. There was also a screening of the 'World's Biggest Cave' documentary by the National Geographic, and a debate/talk show on 'Heritage Preservation vs. Mass Tourism'. Interactive activities between activists and journalists facilitated the massive media coverage of the #SaveSonDoong campaign. Public advocacy was able to put pressure on the provincial authorities to have a dialogue with the people during a press conference in late 2014, in which the authorities promised to consider the environmental concerns over the cable construction plan.

In August 2017, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc endorsed a cable car line into the

National Park where Son Doong is located, yet requested a thorough study be conducted before construction. In response to the PM's in-principle agreement to the proposed 5.2 kilometer cable car project, activists initiated another petition on 8 September 2017. It too received over 170,000 signatures and was sent to the Prime Minister of Vietnam, UNESCO World Heritage Center, IUCN, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, and Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment. Furthermore, #SaveSonDoong Virtual Reality Exhibitions were organized on many campuses and other locations across the country – Da Nang, Ha Noi, Ho Chi Minh City and Can Tho. The organizers applied new technology to bring to life the science lessons of the world's most pristine ecosystem. At the events, guests could explore the Son Doong Cave virtually and learn more about the initiative to save it.

Then, on 9 April 2019, a representative of the Quang Binh provincial authority declared that the province would not approve proposals by developers to construct cable cars and there would be no construction in the core zone of the National Park. This marked the tremendous success of the more than four-year campaign by young environmentalists. The #SaveSonDoong movement by tech-savvy urban youths utilized the power of online social networks to mobilize the public into taking

action for ecological justice. It demonstrates the young citizens' desire to have their voices heard by the state. Online mobilization and event organization substantially contributed to raising public awareness of civic engagement in environmental politics (aka environmental citizenship) and social awareness of nature conservation and the human moral relationship with nature, among young Vietnamese people.

Fish need clean water, citizens need transparency

In early April 2016, fishermen from coastal villages of the Vung Ang port region encountered an alarming number of dead fish. Close to 70 tons of dead fish washed up along 125 miles of the coastline of Ha Tinh, Quang Tri, Quang Binh, and Thua Thien Hue. Locals suspected that the fish had been killed by chemicals discharged by the Formosa Ha Tinh Steel Plant, a subsidiary of Formosa Plastics Group, located in the Vung Ang Special Economic Zone. Amid rising accusations against the Taiwanese company, the mainstream press focused on the steel plant's wastewater treatment after three local divers found a hidden underwater pipeline leading from the plant to the ocean, releasing a black and yellow discharge. Online public activism soared by the end of April, with the hashtag #toichonca or #ichoosefish becoming



Fig. 2: Collage of famous Vietnamese urban youths and other young activists taking photos with the #SAVESONDOONG sign to endorse the campaign (posted on Facebook in January 2015) <https://tinyurl.com/FBSonDoong>



Fig. 3: On 1 May 2016, on King Ly Thai To Monument Square, one of Ha Noi's most famous landmarks, demonstrators held up signs demanding cleaner water and transparency of the state in its dealings with the Formosa disaster. Image Courtesy of Van Do, a Hanoi student who attended the protest.

a manifestation of national collective sentiment, bonding environmentalists and concerned citizens all across the country. In addition to online activism, an anonymous environmentalist created a petition on the White House's website, requesting that the American government intervene and evaluate the environmental disaster, and that President Obama raise the topic during his visit to Vietnam in May 2016. The petition received more than 128,000 signatures in just a few days.

After weeks of silence from the government, on 27 April, Vice Minister of Resources and Environment announced to the public that a toxic algae bloom could have been responsible, with a final result pending as a joint investigation by relevant state agencies and ministries were underway. The Communist administration was criticized on social media – such as Facebook and YouTube – for its slow response. Environmentalist Facebookers shared their speculations that the government was biased towards the steel plant, that it had supported it with favorable tax agreements and charged a bargain price for the real estate where the company had built its plant. On Facebook, thousands of people accused the company of irresponsible and unsustainable business practices.

Online activism led to thousands protesting on two consecutive Sundays (1 and 8 May 2016) in major cities, with the most crowded protest groups in Ha Noi at the Opera House, in the '30 April' Park in Ho Chi Minh City, and the affected areas of Ha Tinh province. In the coastal cities of Vung Tau, Da Nang, and Nha Trang, protesters gathered in groups of a few hundred. Protesters in all locations carried the same placards that read 'I love fish', and 'Fish die today, we die tomorrow', calling for Taiwanese investors to leave Vietnam. Other banners and signs read, 'please return a clean sea to us', 'stop discharging toxic waste into the sea' and most popularly 'Fish need clean water, citizens need transparency'. All the demonstrations were peaceful. Regrettably, those two first protests were suppressed by the state, with crowds forced to disperse after hours of marching along major streets of the cities and some key activists were arrested and taken into custody. People had also reported that key words such as 'ca chet' [dead fish], 'Formosa', and 'bieu tinh' [protest] were being blocked in their messages by mobile phone service providers. On 15 May 2016, the third Sunday of the nation-wide protests, the police (in uniforms and plainclothes), with more preventative measures and large-scale deployments, were quick to stop the crowds. Over three challenging Sundays of May, more than 500 people were arrested, and multiple protesters were beaten by the police.¹¹

On 29 June 2016, at the office of the Ministry of Resources and Environment, representatives of the company officially took responsibility and apologized to the Vietnamese people for causing the environmental disaster, pledging US\$500m for a cleanup and compensation, including assistance for fishermen. Local people expressed their dissatisfaction with the inadequate amount of compensation and

the non-transparent negotiations between the state and the company. No opinion polls or surveys had been conducted on the real economic loss and the plight of local livelihoods. Activists and environmentalists argued that the compensation amount could not match the damage if thoroughly calculated. Sporadic protests in these four impacted provinces continued on a smaller scale into 2018. With more heavy-handed measures to suppress protesters, the state arrested and jailed many key activists for their online 'subversive' discussions and social mobilization. Among the many arrested was the famous environmentalist blogger Nguyen Ngoc Nhu Quynh (known as Blogger Mother Mushroom).¹² She was very passionate about this issue, and contributed substantially to the online critical discussions.

Despite much stricter censorship and clampdowns, activism still continued in 2019, with online analyses of the aftermath of the incident that can be found on many activists' Facebook pages. Most recently, on 16 March 2019, 'Don't be afraid', a documentary film about civic movement for environmental and ecological justice after the 'fish death', was released in Ha Noi. Despite a lot of opposition, the documentary was successfully completed by Green Trees Group.¹³ Upon its release, the Ministry of Public Security arrested Cao Vinh Thinh, a key person involved in the production of the documentary. Hoang Binh, an important environmental activist of the group, was sentenced to 14 years in jail. The documentary was publicly screened in April in many of Ha Tinh's churches. It has been speculated that anti-government groups from overseas – rather than environmental and ecological justice groups – allied with the grassroots movement to mobilize protests. At times the movement might have carried with it other implications, blending environmental activism with political motives by some protesters whose linkages and identities are complex and difficult to identify. However, the common thread throughout the years of protests has been rational people practicing their environmental citizenship in a quest for environmental and ecological justice.

Conclusion

Over the last decade, environmental activism – as an arena of contestation in Vietnam's state-society relations – has challenged the state's legitimacy by opening up a new paradigm of ecological sustainability and equitable development. New narratives of society and nature amidst development and ecological degradation have led to greater demand for more representation of the people in environmental politics. Environmental activism for environmental commons in Vietnam has been extended beyond the scope of environmental justice for humans to include non-human environments, where ecological and social spheres are intertwined. In other words, such activism corresponds to the rights of humans and nature, in which ecological degradation goes hand-in-hand with social destruction. Environmental

movements by groups of citizens have framed nature in interconnection with communities; accordingly, any harm to nature would lead to damages of human habitat, livelihood and sustainability.

With public scrutiny as a counter-balance against hegemonic decisions, environmental governance is no more a monopoly of the state. Environmental activism in Vietnam demonstrates that social inclusion needs to be recognized in environmental decision-making, aka environmental citizenship, which should be considered as the practice of basic rights of citizens. Environmental justice movements – from cyberspace to the streets – showcase an emerging environmental citizenship from a critical citizenship. Such citizenship has not yet been recognized in Vietnam's environmental politics, but it is now reshaping state-society relations, in which environmental governance needs more civic engagement.

Environmental activism in Vietnam offers profound implications for the role of social media in broadening the scope of civil society, facilitating civic engagement in environmental politics and generating critical discourses of environmental and ecological justice to the masses. Online activism expands the reach of attitudes and actions that engender environmental citizenship. Through social media, environmental issues in Vietnam have been turned into justice issues, which are "socially constructed claims defined through collective processes".¹⁴ Social media has strengthened the agency and capability of social groups in their responses to social inequalities in association with environmental hazards. A closer look at how environmental citizenship manifests itself, both online and in the streets in the socio-political context of Vietnam, provides more empirical insights to help answer questions such as: "What could, should, and does an environmental citizen look like?", "To what extent can contemporary environmental concerns be aligned with citizen rights and duties across a range of political and socio-cultural contexts?", "Is it possible and/or desirable to encourage en masse enactments of particular attitudes and practices that could be labeled as acts of environmental citizenship?", "What sorts of environmental citizens are being 'worked up', through what means, and to what ends?"¹⁵ and "What are the possibilities and limitations of environmental citizenship in the pursuit of environmental and ecological justice?"

The above-mentioned examples of environmental movements have intensified the political culture of opposition and criticism. In an authoritarian context where people in power and economic groups dominate environmental decisions to the exclusion of people's involvement and at the expense of the environment, environmental activism carries democratic meanings at its core. At times, environmental activism faces heavy-handed suppression. With the cyber-security law effective as of 1 January 2019, environmental activism in Vietnam will continue to encounter censorship and suppression, especially when translated into street protests. The pathway of

environmental activism in Vietnam's civil society depends on the strong will and toughness of activists, their ways to navigate censorship, and international pressure on the Vietnamese government to respect the rights to environmental citizenship alongside other civil rights for its citizens.

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Notes

- 1 Dobson, A., 2010. *Environmental citizenship and pro-environmental behavior: Rapid research and evidence review*. London: SDRN, p.6.
- 2 Pallett, H. 2017. 'Environmental citizenship', in Richardson, D. et al. (eds) *International Encyclopedia of Geography: People, the Earth, Environment and Technology*. Wiley-Blackwell, p.1; <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118786352>.
- 3 The Prime Minister's Decision 167 is an official zoning plan (Quy Hoach) for bauxite exploration and mining across the country, in two phases – from 2007 to 2015 and from 2016 to 2025. (Governmental Portal, 2007)
- 4 The charismatic military commander who led North Vietnam forces to victory against the French Army, accelerating the end of French colonial rule in Indochina.
- 5 According to Jason Morris, these wide-ranging critiques started with discussions on social and environmental impacts of the project, then quickly became "embroiled with such divisive issues as national security, Sino-Viet relations and, not least of all, the relations of the communist party to the Vietnamese people"; see Morris, J. 2013. 'The Vietnamese Bauxite Mining Controversy: the Emergence of a New Oppositional Politics', PhD Thesis, UC Berkeley, p.1; <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3jz331g1>
- 6 www.boxitvn.net; accessed 5 March 2020
- 7 Bui, H.T. 2013. 'The development of civil society and dynamics of governance in Vietnam's one-party rule', *Global Change, Peace & Security* 25(1):77-93.
- 8 *Vietnam Insider*, <https://tinyurl.com/VI-cablecar>; accessed 5 March 2020.
- 9 Le Nguyen Thien Huong has worked in education in various capacities, and is currently a full-time admissions officer at Vietnam's Fulbright University, while dedicating her free time to the #SaveSonDoong campaign. Forbes Vietnam's 30 Under 30 honored her in its 2018 list for her efforts in nature conservation. In addition, she gave a TEDx talk in Ha Noi on 2 June 2018; <https://tinyurl.com/tedx-savesondoong>.
- 10 <https://tinyurl.com/sondoongvideo>
- 11 As reported in The New York Times, 8 June 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/NYT-toxicfish>; accessed 10 March 2020.
- 12 Mother Mushroom's environmental and political activism earned her an International Women of Courage Award from US First Lady Melania Trump in March 2017. She was released on 17 October 2018 to fly to the United States.
- 13 'Green Trees' is a non-profit civil society environmental protection organization in Vietnam. Its predecessor was a Facebook group called *Vi Mot Ha Noi Xanh* [For a Green Hanoi], founded on 30 March 2015, to protect trees in Hanoi from being felled massively as part of the project to 'overhaul and replace 6,700 urban trees' implemented by city authorities; <https://en.greentreesvn.org>
- 14 Taylor, D.E. 2000. 'The Rise of the Environmental Justice Paradigm: Injustice Framing and the Social Construction of Environmental Discourses', *American Behavioral Scientist* 43(4):509.
- 15 With reference to Luque, E. 2005. 'Researching environmental citizenship and its publics', *Environmental Politics* 14(2):211-225; and Hobson, K. 2013. 'On the making of the environmental citizen', *Environmental Politics* 22(1):56-72.