



# Agency and Created Space among Civil Society Networks in Vietnam

Andrew Wells-Dang  
University of Birmingham  
17 June 2010

# Civil Society Networks?

- ◆ Humans are fundamentally relational. We build social networks which link to communities, cities and nations.
- ◆ Networks = “the forms of relationships and roles among people that together construct politics” (David Knoke)
- ◆ Civil society may be conceived as a process of network building

# Characteristics of CS networks

- ◆ Have a purpose to advocate in the public interest, as the network understands this
- ◆ Members can be individuals, organizations, or both
- ◆ Cross boundaries of government, business and NGO sectors, as well as national borders
- ◆ Networks take different forms in different social & political contexts. Social movements, campaigns, and coalitions are specific instances of CS networks

# Networks in Vietnam

- ◆ Models of civil society as a “third sector” of NGOs, or as an autonomous public sphere, do not easily apply in persistent authoritarian settings such as Vietnam (and China)
- ◆ Yet networks are observed to exist and engage in advocacy; how do they do it?

# Bright Future Group - History

*(Nhóm vì tương lai tươi sáng)*

- ◆ Formed in mid-1980s among 7 women and men with mobility impairments in Hanoi who met while attending university
- ◆ Applied to register as a club, was denied
- ◆ Group met regularly, operated as an informal network

# Bright Future Group - Structure

- ◆ Horizontal structure. Membership has remained small (~20)
- ◆ Some members are government employees (or retired employees), others have international connections, others activists. Group appreciates this diversity and uses it consciously
- ◆ Members became core of Hanoi Association of Disabled Persons (formed 2006)
- ◆ Older members see problems in recruiting new, younger PWD who are less committed

# Bright Future Group – Advocacy

- ◆ Pressed for equal rights for PWD in education, employment, accessible construction
- ◆ Members have had significant impact on laws, most recently 2010 Law on Disability
- ◆ Some members speak in way officials want to hear, others are more confrontational
- ◆ 2007: some members supported disabled veterans in effort to stop ban on 3-wheeled vehicles (tuk-tuks)



# External relations

- ◆ Links with regional disability movement and international NGOs seen as very important – but for exposure and contacts, not funding
- ◆ INGOs invite members to speak at conferences, etc. – gives them credibility, incl with VN govt
- ◆ Network has had some external project funding (now Independent Living – Nippon Foundation) but this is not main area of effort





# Reunification Park network

- ◆ Formed organically in 2007 around campaign to prevent privatization of large Hanoi park
- ◆ Includes scientists, academics, retired officials, and a few NGOs
- ◆ By 2009, when another company started to build a hotel on park land, the network was better organized and prepared
- ◆ After this victory, operates on an ad hoc basis; no formal structure or identity – a response to perceptions of political opportunity

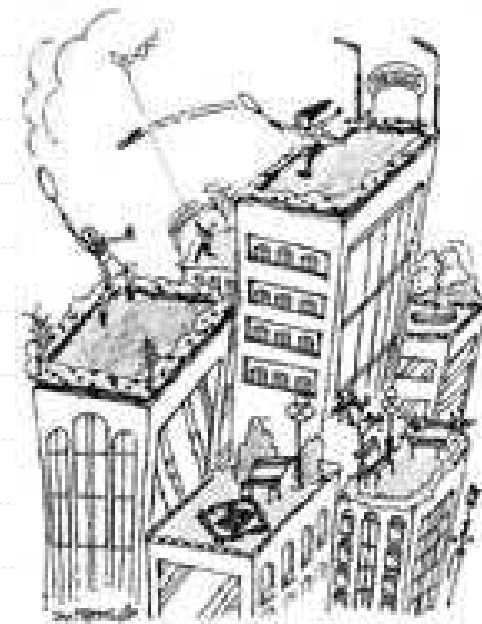
# Reunification Park - Advocacy

- ◆ Use of media key to pressuring corporations and city government
- ◆ Used allies in central government and some parts of city to oppose corrupt private interests
- ◆ Public opinion clearly on side of the network
- ◆ NGO roles = research, organizing workshops, “herding cats”
- ◆ A form of “jujitsu advocacy” – while relationships with government are still crucial





# Media images

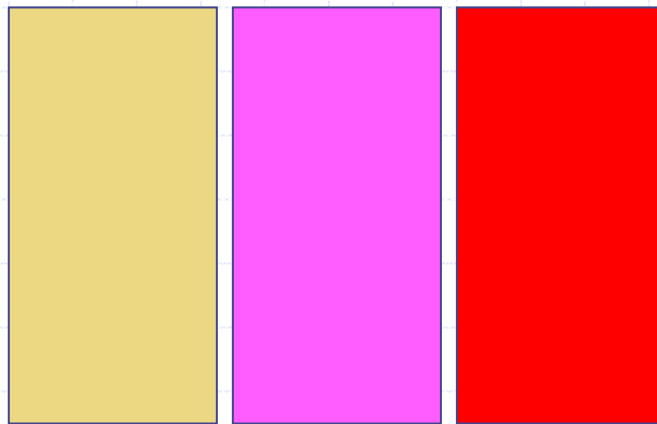




# Created Spaces (John Gaventa)

## Claimed/Created Spaces:

"claimed by less powerful actors from or against the power holders, or created more autonomously by them"



Closed/  
Uninvited

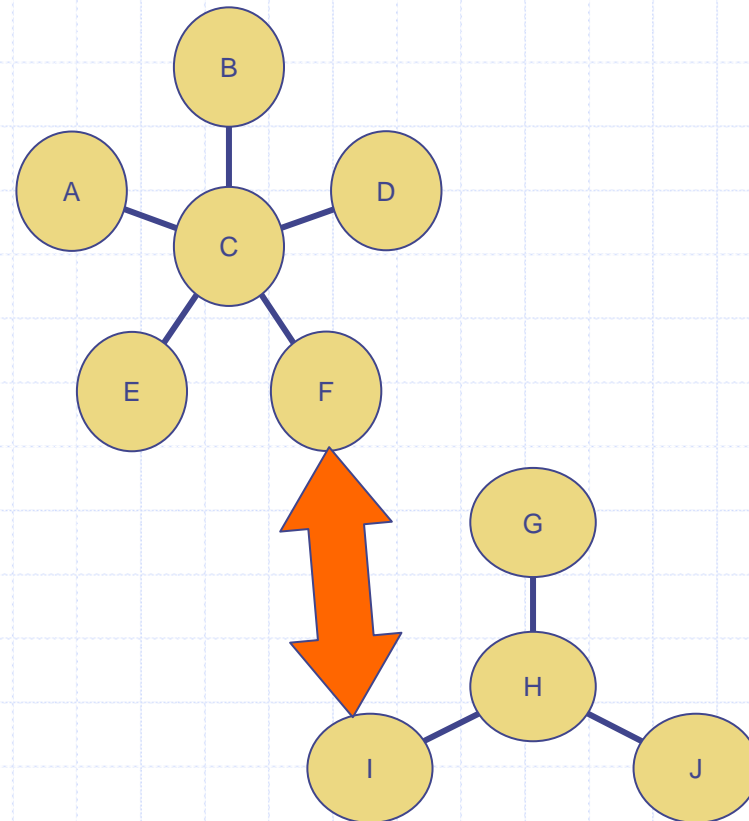
Invited

Claimed/  
Created

SPACES for participation

# Networks create political space...

- ◆ By expanding the web
- ◆ By linking previously unconnected nodes
- ◆ By leveraging other actors and resources (media, donors, international orgs.)





# In restrictive contexts:

- ◆ Networks stay small
- ◆ Informal; unregistered; below the surface
- ◆ Few physical assets
- ◆ Maintain focus on issue, not org. growth or broader political change
- ◆ Diverse membership, some with links to authorities, others independent
- ◆ Use multiple strategies; “amphibious”

# Compared to social mvt theory:

Charles Tilly: Effective  
[Euro-American]  
movements show  
public displays of

- Worthiness
- Unity
- Numbers
- Commitment

Vietnamese networks  
demonstrate:

- Worthiness
- Commitment
- Flexibility

# Do network members show agency?

- ◆ Existing literature on Vietnam (& China) is largely state-centred, ie theories of state corporatism that leave little space for agency of civil society actors
- ◆ Clearly, state legal structures do set limits on network advocacy
- ◆ Yet network members can and do engage (parts of) the state and mould political opportunity structures, through embedded and inside-outside advocacy strategies

# Transnational linkages

- ◆ Networks have benefited from int'l support mainly for exposure and connections (conferences, etc.), not project funding
- ◆ Donor-created networks tend to be unsustainable
- ◆ In all, relatively little cross-border networking; main focus is local/domestic
- ◆ Transnational links comprise one aspect of networks' strategies, but not sole or main one

