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EU Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society in Viet Nam

Based on the Council Conclusion of October 2012¹, the EU Delegation and EU Member States in Viet Nam have developed an EU Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Viet Nam (referred hereafter as "the CSO Roadmap"). The CSO Roadmap provides the basis for a common and dynamic EU strategic framework for EU's engagement with civil society in Viet Nam and is subject to a periodic review.

1. Civil Society² in Viet Nam

In Viet Nam, Civil Society Organizations are generally clustered in 5 big categories: mass organizations, socio-political professional organizations, Vietnamese Non-Governmental Organisations, community-based organizations and international non-governmental organizations. Hundreds of organizations at national level and thousands of organizations at provincial level belong to these broad categories. They are established according to different, and often complex, sets of regulations.

The fabric of civil society in Viet Nam is changing as new and younger organizations, networks and groups have appeared on the arena thus shaping the discussion of the state of civil society. The relationship between Civil Society, the State and the Party has also undergone significant changes in the last three decades. Doi Moi and the government's policy of "socialization" have enabled a more hospitable environment for citizen's groups. In addition, an urban middle class and the growth in internet use has facilitated increased access to information and general levels of awareness which again has impacted the State's previous monopoly on organizing civil society as part of the state system. The State has responded to the emergence of CSOs through elaborating a regulatory framework, which is complex and based on a system of approval and ongoing state supervision and management.

The debate on the role of civil society in Viet Nam has become more public. The government increasingly recognizes the positive contribution of civil society to the national development of Viet Nam. Service delivery is regarded as the most robust form of CSOs engagement in Viet Nam. Support to public services delivery with focus on socio-economic development, poverty reduction and community development is still regarded as core mandate for many CSOs. While CSOs engagement in policy and law making process is limited, a number of civil society organizations

¹ COM (2012) 492: The Roots of Democracy and Sustainable Development: Europe's Engagement with Civil Society in External Relations.

² The EU concept of CSOs as defined in the EC Communication embraces a wide range of actors with different roles and mandates. It includes all non-State actors, not-for-profit structures, non-partisan and non-violent, through which people organize to pursue shared objectives and ideals, whether political, cultural, social or economic. Civil society is given herewith a broad and open interpretation, in line with CIVICUS's definition as applied in the Civil Society Index Report for Viet Nam. CIVICUS defines civil society as: "the arena between the family, state and the market, where people associate to advance common interest" (CIVICUS 2005).

have established relations with government partners and are gradually engaging more in the policy process.

In terms of financing, Official Development Assistance (ODA) has been an important provider of funding to CSOs. The current concern among CSOs is however the shrinking funding opportunities and the expected decrease in grant ODA to Viet Nam. CSOs thus have to seek ways to diversify their financial sources and explore private or corporate philanthropy and/or corporate social responsibility sources. This requires CSOs to increase their visibility and/or credibility towards enterprises and corporations, the government and the public at large.

2. Current EU Engagement with Civil Society in Viet Nam

The extent of funding from EU Member States and the EU Delegation to CSOs varies in terms of total volumes, of size of individual grants and of funding mechanisms. Finland, Ireland, the United Kingdom and the EU Delegation operate, for instance, distinct CSO budget lines. Some EU Member States have established grant facilities as part of larger programmes, such as DANIDA³/Sida's⁴ Justice Initiative Facilitation Fund as well as the DANIDA/DFID's⁵ Public Participation and Accountability Facilitation Fund. Several EU Member States are also contributing to the One United Nations Plan and to specific programmes of the World Bank which have reached out to CSOs.

The engagement of the EU with civil society has increased remarkably over the past 2 decades, especially in the area of service delivery. However, the EU donors have gradually expanded their support beyond service delivery. Strengthening CSOs' capacities to engage in advocacy and policy processes, as well as forming alliances and networks to advance common goals, are increasingly seen as key for CSOs to effectively perform their role as independent development actors.

There is not, per se, an established EU structured dialogue with civil society. Meetings with civil society are organized often at bilateral level by EU Member States and the EU Delegation on specific, thematic issues. Under the EU - Viet Nam annual Human Rights Dialogue⁶, the EU also holds side-meetings with civil society groups in order to collate their views and concerns on relevant issues.

Finally, the Like-Minded Donor Group (LMDG) which includes EU Member States and the EU Delegation has established a specific Sub-Group on Civil Society in 2011. The purpose of the LMDG sub-group on civil society is information sharing which contributes to facilitate some harmonization of donor support.

3. EU Priorities

In response to the EU common analysis and objectives for enhanced civil society engagement, the following four areas will be given specific priority in Viet Nam by the EU Member States and the EU Delegation:

³ DANIDA: Danish International Development Agency

⁴ Sida: Swedish International Development Agency

⁵ DFID: The Department for International Development of the United Kingdom

⁶ EU – Viet Nam annual Human Rights Dialogue mechanism was initiated in 2001 and held twice a year. It was transformed in an annual capital-based Human rights dialogue in 2012. It constitutes a platform to engage Viet Nam on sensitive issues, and allows channeling EU concerns directly to the Vietnamese authorities in an open and constructive atmosphere. The dialogue is conducted in line with the EU's overall principles on the promotion of human rights and democratization throughout the world.

- ***Promote an improved enabling environment for civil society organizations in Viet Nam:*** The EU will support dialogue between the government, civil society actors, the private sector and the general public to build trust and understanding of the positive contribution of civil society in Viet Nam's development.
- ***Promote a meaningful and structured participation of CSOs in domestic policies:*** The EU will ensure that in new bilateral and thematic programmes and sector interventions, CSOs are mainstreamed so as to ensure their participation as partners in delivering services and in policy making. The EU will continue to support CSOs to meaningfully engage with government at national and provincial level in providing policy recommendations, in monitoring policy implementation as well as to establish networks/coalitions for enhanced policy impact.
- ***Strengthening CSOs' capacity to perform their roles more effectively:*** Capacity building for civil society is critical given the current enabling environment and actual operations of CSOs. The EU will support CSOs across a broad range of areas related to internal governance, sustainability and registration, capacities for improved service delivery to the most vulnerable and marginalized groups of society, capacities for advocacy and policy engagement, as well as capacities for increased integration in regional and international CSO networks.
- ***Ensuring EU political support to CSOs:*** the EU will support all types of civil society organizations to enhance their engagement in policy making process and to increase their representation and contribution in high-level forums and dialogues.