

Hybrid civil society organizations in Vietnam: the case of the fishery union of Quang Ngai province

Huynh Ngoc Le¹, Nguyen Bang Nong^{2*}, Ha Tham Thu Nguyen³

^{1,2,3}Institute of Anthropology and Religious Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Science, Vietnam

Abstract

The universal application of the traditional social work model has faced growing criticism in non-Western contexts, particularly in developing countries like Vietnam and China, where the relationship between the state and social organizations is complex and multifaceted. This study addresses this gap by examining the Fisheries Trade Union in Quang Ngai province as a representative example of a hybrid civil society actor in Vietnam. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, which includes fieldwork and organizational analysis, we explore how the Union navigates its dual role as both a conduit for implementing state policies and an advocate for its members' negotiations to gain autonomy, despite significant institutional constraints. The study presents a novel model of organizational resilience and community empowerment that challenges the conventional state-society dichotomy prevalent in Western theories. This study uses ethnographic approach in over six months in 2024, with a combination of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, document analysis, and participant observation. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of hybrid organizational structures in non-Western settings, offering novel insights into their potential for fostering community-based social development and providing a more nuanced perspective for both researchers and policymakers. Qualitative analysis demonstrates that the Union sustains and advances itself by strategically balancing dual functions: executing state policy directives while representing and safeguarding the interests of the fishing community.

Keywords: civil society, fishery union, hybrid actor, organizations

*Corresponding author

E-mail : nongbangnguyen@gmail.com

Introduction

Civil society plays a crucial role in governance and global development (Matveieva et al., 2024; Nugmanovna, 2022; Saputra et al., 2023). According to Anheier & Toepler (2019), Civil Society Associations (CSAs) represent the interests of diverse groups of citizens, provide essential public services, foster community cohesion, and promote government accountability. However, traditional theory often emphasizes the complete independence of CSAs from the State, as it is based on studies of Western social models, particularly in developed democratic countries (Keane, 2003). This approach has limitations when applied to developing countries and countries with non-democratic regimes. In particular, when studying "hybrid" organizations with complex, overlapping, and interdependent relationships, especially with the State, these theories fail to provide a comprehensive explanation (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

The study of civil society has undergone various stages of development, reflecting changes in theoretical thinking and political practice. There are two main approaches to understanding civil society: the traditional approach, which is typically associated with the classical liberal school of thought, and the contemporary approach, which includes modern theories, such as the institutional school and the

post-structuralist approach. The traditional approach emphasizes the independence and counterbalance of civil society with the State, while the contemporary approach has expanded the concept of civil society to include "hybrid" organizational forms that exist between the State and civil society. This issue is particularly relevant in developing countries and in nations with less open democratic systems. To analyze the Fisheries Union in Vietnam, it is necessary to consider both traditional and contemporary theories of civil society to gain a comprehensive understanding of this organization in the current Vietnamese context.

Western scholars first introduced the concept of traditional civil society by studying the organizational and operational mechanisms of civil society organizations in developed countries. Keane (2003) and Jean LC et al. (1992) defined civil society as a voluntary space that exists outside the direct control of the State and the market.

Anheier et al., (2020) characterized this model as voluntaristic, nonprofit, autonomous, and able to advocate for policies that promote the community's common interests. From this perspective, civil society counters state power by monitoring, criticizing, and promoting democratization.

Bloom (2014) critiqued civil society's role in hybrid governance, showing how NGOs have shifted from service providers to market intermediaries. Based on Honduran case studies, the author found that supply chain opacity, conflicting goals, and exclusion risks undermine legitimacy. The article argued that multi-stakeholder collaborations often prioritized commercial interests, embedding NGOs within neoliberal systems despite development aims.

Anheier & Toepler (2019) examined the evolving relationship between G20 governments and civil society organizations, highlighting the gradual erosion of civic space. It critiqued outdated regulatory frameworks, identified diverse CSO roles, and called for differentiated, functional regulation. The study underscored tensions, opportunities, and the urgent need for reform to sustain civil society's contributions. Toepler et al., (2020) examined civil society in authoritarian and hybrid regimes, highlighting shrinking spaces for advocacy NGOs, the co-optation of service providers, and regime support for loyal organizations. Authors critiqued dual government postures of repression and collaboration, examined coping strategies, and questioned civil society's role in democratization amid global authoritarian resurgence and marketization pressures.

Esposito et al., (2021) examined value creation in hybrid organizations and the role of social impact assessment (SIA). Using interviews, interventionist methods, and document analysis, the authors applied the value chain framework to measure social and economic change. The research result showed how public resources generate measurable impact through SIA's counterfactual approach.

Scholars criticize the universality of the traditional social work model when practitioners apply it to non-Western societies, particularly in developing countries or in countries with different political systems, such as Vietnam and China. One of the main limitations of this model is its inability to account for the existence and role of traditional social organizations or those with complex relationships with the State. This limitation is particularly evident in the case of China, which presents a challenge to traditional Western academic frameworks on two fronts. First, the existence of deep-rooted, traditional forms of association, such as family-based organizations (家族组织-jiazuzuzhi) and temple-based organizations (庙会组织-miaohuizuzhi), is not adequately explained by theories that primarily focus on the autonomy of civil society from the

State. As scholar Teets (2024) points out, excluding these entities results in an incomplete and problematic understanding of Chinese society, thereby demonstrating the limitations of applying a Western-centric lens. In another example, the traditional model also fails to fully capture the complexity of hybrid civil society organizations, which defy the clear-cut state–society dichotomy. A prime example is the "Shuangbai" project (双百计划-shuangbai jihua), a model of social service provision where the government, rather than contracting with existing NGOs, directly hires and manages social workers on a contract basis. This arrangement creates a unique structure where services are delivered through a seemingly market-oriented approach while remaining under the strict control of government agencies. The existence of such a model, as analyzed in the research by Meng and Gray (2024), highlights how the traditional social work framework struggles to account for organizations that operate in a gray area, possessing a complex, symbiotic relationship with the State rather than a purely independent or oppositional one.

Mati (2020), in his study of civil society in Kenya, argued that, viewed through Gramsci, civil society was inherently political, while development involved power over resources and values. African states promoted "apolitical" development roles, sidelining political ones. Using literature, interviews, and media from Kenya's colonial to present era, this article showed civil society's dual roles were complementary, shaping diverse state–society relations.

Pinz et al., (2024) examined nonprofit microfinance organizations in Peru and Bolivia as hybrid entities balancing social and economic logics. Using value configuration analysis, the authors showed that organizational culture was crucial for integrating competing demands. Aligning goals hierarchically enabled stability, identity, and effective value creation, advancing theory on hybridity and nonprofit management practices.

In some countries, the boundary between the State and social organizations is less clearly defined than Western theories would suggest. Mass organizations or professional associations can serve as both channels for implementing government policies and platforms for individuals to voice their aspirations. This relationship is not always confrontational but can also be cooperative, negotiated, and even interdependent. Consequently, it produces a "hybrid" space that traditional theories struggle to capture (Kerkvliet & Marr, 2004). This limitation has prompted the development of new, more flexible concepts better suited to practical application.

To address the limitations of traditional theory, the concept of "hybrid civil society actor" was developed as a valuable tool for analyzing social organizations with complex relationships. This concept describes organizations that exist in a "gray area" of the political space, neither completely independent of the State nor fully integrated into it (Levitsky et al., 2010). These hybrid actors have a complex identity, characterized by: (1) intertwined relationships with the State. State agencies maintain close ties with them and may provide funding or direction, yet the State does not entirely control them; (2) dual functions. These organizations act as both an "extended arm" of the State to implement policies and as a forum to protect the interests and represent the voices of their members before the State; (3), a relative degree of autonomy. Despite some dependence on State management, these organizations can still make decisions about their internal activities, mobilize informal resources, and advocate for policies subtly; (4) flexibility and adaptability. The ability to navigate between the requirements of the State and the needs of the community allows these hybrid entities to survive and thrive in complex political environments. This concept is particularly relevant for

analyzing social organizations in Southeast Asian countries, where the relationship between the State and society is often cooperative rather than confrontational. These organizations do not need to be completely independent to make meaningful contributions to society's governance and development.

In recent years, Vietnamese scientists have made significant progress in studying civil society. However, most of these studies have focused on international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local organizations, and mass organizations (Kerkvliet & Marr, 2004). Consequently, a gap remains in research on "hybrid" organizations, such as the Chinese Association and the Vietnam Fisheries Union (VFU). These organizations function as both mass organizations and societal actors. Therefore, analyzing fisheries unions as "hybrid civil society actors" enables a more comprehensive understanding of their complex nature in Vietnam's contemporary context. It also highlights how they operate, adapt, and contribute uniquely to governance and social development. The Vietnam General Confederation of Labor manages the VFU, and the Party Committee guides it, yet the VFU maintains a high level of autonomy. It represents the fishing community, protects their legitimate rights, and proactively advocates for policy and community support.

To address this gap, the paper will examine the Vietnam Fisheries Trade Union in Quang Ngai province as a "hybrid civil society actor" (Hasenfeld & Gidron, 2005). Drawing on empirical data and theories on hybrid civil society from scholars such as Hasenfeld & Gidron (2005) and Norlund (2007), the study will explore three main aspects: (1) the dual role of the Trade Union as both a mediator between the State and fishermen and a representative as well as protector of community interests; (2) the complex interaction between the Trade Union and local authorities, reflecting the intertwining of administrative and community logic; (3) the level of autonomy of the Trade Union, as well as the limitations on this autonomy, highlighting the "hybrid" nature of the organization's structure and operations. By analyzing these factors, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of mass organizations in Vietnam and to offer an alternative perspective on civil society during Vietnam's transformation.

Research Method

This study utilized an ethnographic case study approach to examine the role of the Fisheries Trade Union in Quang Ngai Province as a hybrid civil society actor. The fieldwork was conducted over six months, from March to August 2024, enabling sustained engagement with local communities and union members. The research employed a combination of methods, including semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), document analysis, and participant observation.

The researcher made participant observation a crucial aspect of the ethnographic process by attending union meetings, accompanying fishermen on coastal trips, and participating in informal gatherings such as community meals and religious ceremonies. These immersive experiences built trust and gave the researcher access to nuanced social dynamics that interviews alone would not have revealed. The researcher interpreted the distinction between performance and genuine sentiment through repeated interactions and contextual familiarity.

The ethnographic data collected through interviews, field observations, and document analysis revealed several consistent patterns in the structure and functioning of the Fisheries Trade Union in Quang Ngai Province. These findings were organized into three thematic areas that emerged inductively from the data: (1) the Union's dual

role as both a state conduit and a community advocate, (2) its mechanisms of interaction with government authorities, and (3) its autonomy and resourcefulness in sustaining operations. Each theme was reflected in recurring practices and perceptions reported by participants and observed during fieldwork, and together they illustrate the Union's hybrid nature within Vietnam's governance landscape.

A total of 12 in-depth interviews were conducted with union leaders, fishermen, and local officials, selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation across roles, age groups, and geographic areas within the province. FGDs were also held with groups of fishermen to explore collective perceptions of the Union's role and legitimacy. Researchers thematically coded the qualitative data with NVivo software. They began with open coding and then applied axial coding to identify patterns related to autonomy, interaction with the state, and community embeddedness. Field notes and transcripts were triangulated to ensure analytical rigor and to capture both verbal and non-verbal dimensions of social life.

This ethnographic approach allowed the researcher not only to document institutional structures but also to interpret the lived experiences, symbolic practices, and moral economies that underpin the Union's hybrid identity. For example, acts of voluntary contribution and mutual aid were not merely financial transactions but expressions of trust, reciprocity, and community solidarity. These practices reflected a moral economy in which social obligations and symbolic gestures carry as much weight as formal governance mechanisms. Observing these interactions over time enabled the researcher to distinguish between performative compliance and genuine commitment.

Researchers made informed consent the cornerstone of the study. They clearly explained the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits to all participants in their native language. They assured participants that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty or consequence. Researchers recorded all interviews and discussions only after obtaining explicit verbal consent.

Researchers protected participants' anonymity and confidentiality by de-identifying all personal identifying information. They used pseudonyms for individuals, organizations, and specific locations to prevent their identities from being traced. They saved all data, including interview transcripts and field notes, securely in password-protected files and will retain it for five years before securely destroying it. They presented the study's findings in aggregate form and used direct quotes only when doing so did not compromise the speakers' identities. By committing to these ethical practices, researchers ensured the integrity of their research and safeguarded the well-being of the community they studied.

Result and Discussion

Fisheries Union-A Case Study of "Hybrid Subjects"

The Fisheries Union in Quang Ngai province is a typical example of a "hybrid civil society actor" - a term used here to emphasize its dual role in both implementing state directives and representing grassroots interests. While the original Vietnamese version referred to it as a "subject", this study adopts the term "actor" to align with international literature, which conceptualizes civil society entities as dynamic agents capable of negotiation, adaptation, and influence within governance structures. Firstly, its position within the political system is noteworthy. Although fishermen voluntarily formed the Union to represent and safeguard their legitimate rights, it remains under the control of the Quang Ngai Provincial Federation of Labor and operates according to direct instructions from the Party Committee. These factors

highlight the Union's official ties to and reliance on the State's political system. Moreover, the Union functions as an "extended arm" of the government, implementing policies and managing fishing activities in alignment with its directives.

Furthermore, the organization operates on a voluntary and nonprofit basis. As stated in the source (PVS4), "the Union was established through the voluntary participation of fishermen, with no membership fees or salaries for leaders. The Union's Board of Directors covers all travel expenses, and we work for the people. When financial resources are needed, the Union mobilizes funds primarily through voluntary contributions from the fishing community and ship owners. Such practices highlight the Union's autonomy and social cohesion, which are key characteristics of a civil society organization. Moreover, the Fisheries Union plays a dual role. It not only implements state policies but also directly protects the rights of fishermen, provides legal support, resolves internal disputes, and supports their livelihoods, such as techniques and finding consumption markets. This role extends beyond the scope of a typical state organization, demonstrating the Union's function in representing the interests of a specific group of citizens. Lastly, the Union has a multi-dimensional interaction mechanism. Despite receiving top-down direction, the Union still has the space to negotiate and make policy recommendations (regarding issues such as the implementation of Decree 67 and Decision 48) with state agencies, creating a voice channel for fishermen. This interaction showcases that the Union is not just a passive recipient but also an active participant in its relationship with the government. Therefore, analyzing the Fisheries Union through the lens of "hybrid civil society actors" allows for a deeper understanding of the complex nature of social organizations in contemporary Vietnam. It also highlights how these organizations exist, adapt, and contribute uniquely to governance and social development. Taken together, these characteristics position the Fisheries Union as a compelling case of hybrid civil society in Vietnam, one that simultaneously reflects state alignment and grassroots responsiveness.

The Dual Role of the Union: Between the State and the Community

The findings indicate that the Fisheries Union operates simultaneously as an instrument for implementing state policies and as a civil society actor that protects the interests of its members. Empirical evidence shows that the Union plays a central role in translating and disseminating state regulations to fishing communities, particularly in relation to maritime security, environmental protection, and compliance with international standards such as IUU requirements. Through collaboration with the Department of Fisheries, the Union organized training activities, including two courses on IUU standards attended by 320 members, and provided detailed guidance on fishing quotas, restricted zones, and legal obligations in international waters. Union leaders not only communicated new regulations but also assisted fishermen in understanding the importance of compliance and in meeting technical and administrative requirements, such as vessel monitoring system installation and traceability documentation. These practices were consistently observed across multiple communes, including regular briefings in Binh Chau and targeted support for older fishermen in Tinh Ky, indicating that the Union's intermediary role is institutionally embedded rather than incidental. Participants frequently described the Union as a trusted bridge between the state and the fishing community, capable of translating complex legal frameworks into practical and actionable knowledge.

At the same time, the Union functioned as an advocate for fishermen's welfare by providing social, legal, and financial support, particularly during periods of heightened vulnerability. Interview data document instances of financial assistance following detention abroad, disaster relief funding for affected businesses, and ongoing support with extensive administrative procedures related to permits, vessel registration, and legal matters. The Union also mediated internal disputes among fishermen, facilitated access to government social welfare programs, and coordinated emergency responses at sea in collaboration with relevant authorities. These activities extended beyond individual assistance to include collective coordination, legal mediation, and crisis response, and they were carried out consistently across different localities. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the Fisheries Union maintains a dual role as both a policy intermediary and a representative body, reinforcing its significance within local governance and community resilience.

Mechanisms of Interaction: Cooperation and Negotiation

The findings show that the relationship between the Fisheries Union and local authorities is characterized by both formal cooperation and structured institutional engagement. The Union functioned as an official communication channel between fishermen and government agencies, with Union representatives regularly attending meetings organized by district and provincial fisheries offices. In these meetings, the Union not only received policy directives but also conveyed feedback from fishing communities, including detailed reports on catch volumes, equipment damage, security incidents at sea, and economic constraints faced by fishermen. Testimonies from local officials indicate that the Union played a crucial role in enabling effective policy dissemination and enforcement, particularly given the extended periods fishermen spend at sea. In both Tinh Ky and Binh Chau communes, the Union participated in joint task forces with the Border Guard to monitor compliance with IUU regulations, collecting and compiling data from member vessels on routes, catch volumes, and potential violations, including reports submitted anonymously to reduce conflict with enforcement agencies. These collaborative arrangements were institutionalized through memoranda of understanding signed in 2024, underscoring the formalized nature of the Union's cooperation with state authorities and its contribution to informed decision making in fisheries governance.

Alongside formal cooperation, the Union demonstrated a capacity for informal negotiation and advocacy to address regulatory gaps and urgent community needs. When government regulations were perceived as misaligned with fishing realities, the Union consolidated members' concerns and submitted petitions to management agencies, such as advocating for an increase in the number of supported offshore fishing trips to sustain livelihoods. Union leaders also relied on long standing personal relationships with local officials to coordinate emergency responses, enabling them to bypass lengthy bureaucratic procedures in search and rescue operations or to mobilize financial assistance quickly. Empirical cases from Binh Chau illustrate how informal communication with district police resolved disputes over confiscated fishing gear within a short period, while interactions with local Party officials resulted in temporary delays in implementing new vessel registration fees during periods of economic hardship. These practices demonstrate that the Fisheries Union was not merely a compliant intermediary but a dynamic actor that strategically combined formal institutional roles with informal negotiation to protect community interests. This multilayered interaction allowed the Union to respond effectively to routine

administrative demands as well as unexpected crises, reinforcing its position as a capable civil society actor within a complex governance environment.

The Union's Autonomy and Resourcefulness

The findings indicate that the Union's autonomy was grounded in a distinctive voluntary contribution model that operated independently of official state funding or mandatory membership fees. Instead, the Union relied entirely on voluntary contributions from ship owners, which varied according to economic conditions and individual capacity. These contributions were flexible in both form and timing, encompassing financial support as well as in kind assistance such as fuel, food, or labor, and were typically offered following successful fishing trips or abundant harvests. While this model exposed the Union to financial uncertainty during periods of economic downturn, it also reduced dependence on external actors and allowed the organization to retain operational independence. The contribution system functioned as a community based mechanism of mutual support, reflecting shared responsibility rather than formal obligation.

Beyond material resources, voluntary contributions embodied significant social capital rooted in trust, reciprocity, and collective identity. Interview data reveal that members' willingness to contribute was closely linked to their positive experiences of support from the Union during times of hardship, reinforcing a cycle of mutual assistance. The Union further strengthened this social capital through community activities, including events celebrating safe returns from long fishing voyages and ceremonies honoring fishermen who lost their lives at sea. These practices fostered solidarity and reinforced emotional bonds within the fishing community. Collectively, this dense network of trust enabled the Union to mobilize resources effectively, compensate for financial limitations, and advocate more credibly on behalf of its members, thereby enhancing its organizational resilience and autonomy.

Discussions

The empirical results of this study demonstrate that the Fisheries Trade Union in Quang Ngai is a prime example of a "hybrid civil society actor," an organization that challenges the traditional dualistic view of civil society as entirely independent of the state (Keane, 2003). The Union's dual function, acting simultaneously as a conduit for state interests and a defender of fishermen's rights, reflects Vietnam's unique political context and provides a novel framework for analyzing social organizations in non-Western contexts (Min, 2022). The following discussion interprets these findings, links them to existing theories, and highlights the broader implications of this case study.

The Hybrid Nature of the Union: Between the State and Society

Our findings confirm that the Union plays the dual role of both an "extended arm" of the State and a civil society actor. In its capacity as a state-aligned organization, the Union effectively serves as a crucial channel for implementing government policies, a role consistent with that of mass organizations in Vietnam (Kerkvliet & Marr, 2004). This proactive role is evident in the Union's efforts to disseminate state policies, such as Vietnam's Decree No. 67/2014/ND-CP on fisheries development policy, and in its organization of training sessions on international standards, including the EU's yellow card (IUU) standard. The fact that the Union was able to mobilize 320 members to participate in these training courses underscores its unique position as a quasi-state actor, capable of extending the government's reach to a community that would

otherwise be difficult to reach due to its constant mobility at sea. However, the Union is not limited to this one-way flow of information. It also serves as a forum for gathering and conveying the voices of fishermen to the government, a characteristic of civil society organizations shaped not only by institutional regulations but also by the community's deeply ingrained cultural factors. This role is evident in the Union's provision of financial and legal support to fishermen detained overseas, such as in the case of a 39-year-old female fisherman who received support ranging from VND 5-7 million to 20-30 million. This concrete support goes beyond the administrative role of a state agency and demonstrates a genuine commitment to its members' welfare. The coexistence of these two seemingly contradictory functions demonstrates the effectiveness of the Union's hybrid nature in both meeting the demands of the State and protecting its members' interests. This phenomenon challenges the traditional dualistic conception of civil society (Keane, 2003) and suggests a new model where organizations can operate effectively by combining the interests of the state with the needs of the community.

Complex Mechanisms of Interaction and Hybrid Governance

The relationship between the Union and local authorities is not a simple one of compliance (Ladner et al., 2012; Mendez & Bachtler, 2024; Ríos et al., 2022), but rather a complex process of interaction that combines formal cooperation with informal negotiation. This dynamic interaction demonstrates that the Union is not a passive organization but a resilient entity capable of navigating its relationship with the state in pursuit of its dual purposes. This model aligns with the "hybrid governance" concept (Min, 2022), where non-state actors participate in social management alongside the government. Field data illustrates this with concrete examples. The Union enhances its formal "bridge" role in meetings with local authorities by skillfully negotiating informally. For example, the Union's petition for an increase in the number of supported offshore trips, along with its rapid, informal communication with the Border Guard in emergencies, demonstrates its ability to leverage personal connections and collective voice to bypass bureaucratic procedures and advocate for its members. This interaction represents a flexible mechanism where the Union skillfully balances administrative functions with its socio-cultural role, thereby creating space for citizen participation. This case suggests that participation need not always involve confrontation with the government; it can occur through cooperative channels, thereby contributing to social stability and development (Lam & Lam, 2013).

Internal Dynamics, Social Capital, and Sustainability

The internal power structure and operational mechanisms of the Union are also crucial for its hybrid nature and long-term sustainability. The research reveals that power within the Union is not strictly institutional but often resides in the personal prestige and extensive social networks of its leaders. Grounded in long-term maritime experience and deep community connections, their credibility enables them to mobilize resources and manage conflicts more effectively. This finding highlights the importance of "kinship networks" within the organization, which encompass cultural and social factors that promote trust and cohesion. These networks not only help the organization operate more smoothly than a purely administrative body would but also serve as important mechanisms for resolving disputes over rights and interests, such as the profit-sharing ratio between ship owners and fishermen. The Union also effectively

mediates conflicts between shipowners and fishermen, ensuring internal solidarity by harmonizing their interests.

Furthermore, the Union sustains itself through its voluntary operating model. By refusing mandatory fees and avoiding reliance on state budgets, the Union preserves autonomy in decision-making. This voluntary contribution model, although presenting financial challenges (Kelly, 2011), also fosters substantial "social capital" (Hoffmann & Putnam, 2003) and deep trust within the community. This model fosters a reciprocal relationship between the Union and its members: when the community faces hardship, the Union provides support, and when they "hit the jackpot," they are willing to contribute back. Fishermen's willingness to contribute voluntarily, especially during profitable times, demonstrates their commitment to the organization. This commitment is a core factor that enables the Union to overcome resource difficulties and continue its operations, serving as a survival strategy in a specific political context (Norlund, 2007).

In conclusion, the case of the Quang Ngai Fisheries Union offers a nuanced perspective on civil society in a non-Western setting. It shows that organizations can be effective and resilient by embracing a hybrid identity, strategically leveraging both their state-sanctioned role and their grassroots community embeddedness. This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating how such organizations can not only survive but also flourish by navigating a complex political landscape through a blend of formal cooperation and informal negotiation, ultimately fostering community resilience and contributing to social development.

Conclusion

This study analyzes the Fisheries Union in Quang Ngai province as a "hybrid civil society entity," a complex organizational model that challenges traditional definitions of civil society, which emphasize complete independence from the State. Qualitative research methods reveal that the Union exists and develops by skillfully combining two opposing roles: serving as a tool for implementing state policies and acting as a representative and protector of the fishing community's interests.

The results show that the Union acts as an effective bridge, helping the State disseminate policies to the grassroots quickly, particularly regulations related to maritime security and sustainable exploitation. In another aspect, the Union exemplifies the nature of a community-based civil society entity, particularly when it stands up to protect its members' rights and support their livelihoods. This organization has established a social security network based on trust and voluntarism, resolving issues ranging from internal disputes to emergency assistance, and even negotiating with authorities to protect the interests of fishermen.

In addition, the mechanism of the Union's interaction with the State shows the complexity of the "hybrid governance" model. The Union not only cooperates formally through attendance at meetings and administrative support, but also uses informal negotiation channels to advocate for policies and to reflect the aspirations of grassroots members. This combination enables the Union to maintain its autonomy, not being entirely dependent on state resources, but instead relying mainly on social capital and voluntary contributions from the community.

This study contributes to the academic debate on the role of civil society in non-Western contexts by providing practical insights into its role in Vietnam. It shows that, in a specific political context, organizations that are not entirely independent of

the State can still contribute to development and governance, challenging the rigid dualistic view of civil society. These findings suggest that the assessment of civil society organizations should be more flexible, focusing on their actual functions and their ability to interact, thereby opening new approaches to studying the role of citizens in modern society. In particular, when the government is interested in civil society, recognizing and cooperating with "hybrid" organizations such as the Fisheries Union can improve governance effectiveness. The State should leverage and strengthen this organization's role to promote two-way negotiation mechanisms, foster trust among the people, and maximize the use of social capital. From there, scholars construct a model of sustainable and harmonious development as a foundation for national harmony in contemporary society. Analysts may also apply this framework to other Southeast Asian contexts, such as Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar, where civil society actors operate within similarly constrained political environments.

This study has several limitations. First, as a qualitative ethnographic case study, the findings are specific to the Fisheries Union in Quang Ngai and may not be generalizable to all social organizations in Vietnam. Second, while the study explored the hybrid nature of the Union, it did not delve deeply into the internal power dynamics and potential conflicts between different interest groups within the organization, such as ship owners and fishermen. Future research could address these limitations by: (1), Conducting comparative case studies across different provinces or sectors to identify broader patterns of hybridity; (2), Employing quantitative methods to measure the impact of the Union's activities on fishermen's livelihoods; (3), Investigating the influence of generational changes on the Union's operating model and its social capital. These future research directions will help build a more comprehensive understanding of the role of social organizations in Vietnam's evolving governance landscape.

Acknowledgement

This article is a part of the results of the ministerial-level project "Impact of labor migration in coastal communities in Quang Ngai province on fisheries and maritime security," in which Le Ngoc Huynh is the director of the project from 2025 to 2026, funded by the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Institute of Anthropology and Religious Studies.

References

- Anheier, H. K., Lang, M., & Toepler, S. (2020). Civil society in times of change: shrinking, changing and expanding spaces and the need for new regulatory approaches. *Civil Szemle*, 17(2), 5–35.
- Anheier, H. K., & Toepler, S. (2019). International Encyclopedia of Civil Society. In *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society*. Springer Science & Business Media. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-99675-2>
- Bloom, J. D. (2014). Civil society in hybrid governance: Non-governmental organization (NGO) legitimacy in mediating wal-mart's local produce supply chains in honduras. *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, 6(10), 7388–7411. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su6107388>
- Esposito, P., Brescia, V., Fantauzzi, C., & Frondizi, R. (2021). Understanding social impact and value creation in hybrid organizations: The case of Italian civil service. *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, 13(7), 4058. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13074058>
- Hasenfeld, Y., & Gidron, B. (2005). Understanding multi-purpose hybrid voluntary organizations: The contributions of theories on civil society, social movements and

- non-profit organizations. *Journal of Civil Society*, 1(2), 97–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448680500337350>
- Hoffmann, S., & Putnam, R. D. (2003). Democracy in Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society. In *Foreign Affairs* (Vol. 82, Issue 1). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20033465>
- Keane, J. (2003). Global civil society? In *Global Civil Society?* Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511615023>
- Kelly, C. R., & Kelly, C. R. (2011). Financial Crises and Civil Society Financial Crises and Civil Society. *Chicago Journal of International Law*, 11(2), 6.
- Kerkvliet, B. J. T., & Marr, D. G. (2004). Beyond Hanoi: Local government in Vietnam. In *Beyond Hanoi: Local Government in Vietnam*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Ladner, A., Keuffer, N., & Bastianen, A. (2012). *Local autonomy index in the EU, Council of Europe and OECD countries (1990-2020)*. Publications Office of the European Union Luxembourg.
- Lam, W. M., & Lam, K. C. Y. (2013). China's united front work in civil society: The case of Hong Kong. *International Journal of China Studies*, 4(3), 301–325.
- Levitsky, S., & Way, L. A. (2010). Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the cold war. In *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511781353>
- Mati, J. M. (2020). Civil Society in 'Politics' and 'Development' in African Hybrid Regimes: The Kenyan Case. *Voluntas*, 31(4), 674–687. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-020-00211-y>
- Matveieva, O., Mamatova, T., Borodin, Y., Gustafsson, M., Wihlborg, E., & Kvitka, S. (2024). Digital Government in Conditions of War: Governance Challenges and Revitalized Collaboration between Local Authorities and Civil Society in Provision of Public Services in Ukraine. *Proceedings of the Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, 2002–2011. <https://doi.org/10.24251/hicss.2024.249>
- Mendez, C., & Bachtler, J. (2024). The quality of government and administrative performance: explaining Cohesion Policy compliance, absorption and achievements across EU regions. *Regional Studies*, 58(4), 690–703. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2022.2083593>
- Min, B. H. (2022). Hybridization in government–civil society organization relationships: An institutional logic perspective. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 32(3), 409–428. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.21484>
- Norlund, I. (2007). Civil Society in Vietnam. Social organisations and approaches to new concepts. *Asien*, 105(Oktober), 68–90.
- Nugmanovna, M. A. (2022). The place and significance of social and legal control in the legal socialization of the individual in civil society. *Asian Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities*, 12(2), 21–33. <https://doi.org/10.5958/2249-7315.2022.00070.3>
- Pinz, A., Englert, B., & Helmig, B. (2024). Organizing logic multiplicity in hybrid organizations: The role of organizational culture. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 35(2), 353–378. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.21617>
- Ríos, A. M., Guillamón, M. D., Cifuentes-Faura, J., & Benito, B. (2022). Efficiency and sustainability in municipal social policies. *Social Policy and Administration*, 56(7), 1103–1118. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12843>

- Saputra, T., Zuhdi, S., Affrian, R., Amri, K., & Putri, R. A. (2023). Civil Society Participation in Natural Resource Management in Conservation Areas: an Empirical Study of Tesso Nilo National Park, Riau Province, Indonesia. *Public Administration Issues*, 5, 48–68. <https://doi.org/10.17323/1999-5431-2023-0-5-48-68>
- Teets, J. C. (2024). : Civil Society in China: How Society Speaks to the State . In *The China Journal* (Vol. 92). Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.1086/730608>
- Toepler, S., Zimmer, A., Fröhlich, C., & Obuch, K. (2020). The Changing Space for NGOs: Civil Society in Authoritarian and Hybrid Regimes. *Voluntas*, 31(4), 649–662. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-020-00240-7>