



Book Review

The Power of Sustainable Development in Vietnam: Environmental Narratives, NGOs and the State's Environmental Rule. *Julia L. Behrens.* ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, 2025, pp. xii + 188. ISBN 978-9-815-20347-9 (pbk).

Sustainable development is a very prominent narrative seeking to align environmental protection with economic development. Julia L. Behrens' book *The Power of Sustainable Development in Vietnam: Environmental Narratives, NGOs and the State's Environmental Rule* delves into this topic in a country which has prioritized rapid economic development since introducing economic reforms under Doi Moi. Environmental protection has, however, also been an important narrative for the government. According to the World Values Survey, Vietnamese people overwhelmingly prioritise environmental protection over economic development. In 2020, 71.7 per cent favoured the environment while only 26.2 per cent opted for the economy and creating jobs (Haerpfer *et al.*, 2020).

The book approaches this topic by examining how the global discourse of 'sustainable development' has been adapted and reinterpreted in the Vietnamese context. Both the government and development organizations have actively embedded it in their discourses, making it a central tenet of environmental policymaking and project design. As a result, local environmental groups have also had to incorporate it into their own activities. These Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), which are the focus of the study, navigate the complex terrain between official requirements and donor demands. By combining discourse analysis with ethnographic case studies, Behrens shows how actors sometimes adopt the global discourse when it helps them gain funding or promote certain topics, while at the same time turning to other narratives, including indigenous and traditional beliefs, to support their efforts.

The book is divided into six chapters, beginning with an introduction in which the author describes her own positionality as a female foreigner with Vietnamese language skills and her methodological choices in tackling this potentially large topic. Then, it moves to a detailed analysis of the Vietnamese Communist party-state, which looks at the shortcomings in the policy implementation as well as the repressive nature of the state in regard to independent activism. This is followed by an analysis of NGOs and civil society organizations (CSOs), which have to deal with an environment that provides only limited space for bottom-up activism. As international connections are crucial, especially for funding in this field, a chapter is devoted to the linkages between the domestic and global dimensions. After setting the context, the book then turns to the significance of the sustainable development discourse and contrasts it with the existence of other narratives.

One of the highlights of the book are the three case studies in the Mekong Delta and Central Vietnam which illustrate how NGOs position themselves between state expectations, donor requirements and community needs. This allows the reader an in-depth and first-hand view into the work of environmental organizations by following the perspective of the researcher as she encounters them. The participant observation is supported by 29 qualitative interviews with NGO representatives and experts and the extensive reading of policy paper and NGO publications. The ethnographic episodes


are particularly effective in revealing the complexities in the negotiations of the environmental activists with state and donor organizations. They illustrate that sustainable development is a deeply political concept that is often used strategically to gain funding either for survival or for environmental projects.

A particular problem, as the book demonstrates, is that directives from the central level are difficult to implement locally. This is illustrated in regard to sustainable development which does not always meet with local conditions as environmental organizations flexibly employ different approaches when they deal with particular projects. In the process, local organizations find space to use alternative approaches that tend to be based on everyday practices and local interpretations of the environment to respond to community needs. As such, the book suggests that the discourse operates more at the policy than at the practical level.

While the book presents many interesting perspectives, its main weakness is the brevity of the volume and the occasional difficulty to follow the interpretations by the author. The case studies provide a lively way to interact with the environment but the narrative could more clearly articulate the lessons from these instances. It is not always clear what the author's perspectives are beyond the demonstration that sustainable development is a powerful official discourse that drives non-state actors to secure funding. This sometimes leaves the impression that the book is more descriptive than analytical, as the broader implications for theory and practice remain underdeveloped. The author could have engaged more systematically with how competing narratives, such as traditional or community-based understandings of nature, challenge or reshape the dominance of sustainable development. It would have been great to know much more about these alternative discourses and explore how they shape environmental politics differently from the official approach.

At the same time, a deeper engagement with comparative debates on authoritarian environmentalism would have also strengthened the book's contribution to the wider literature, as Vietnam's experience could be fruitfully contrasted with that of China or Laos. This might help shed light on the question whether the overemphasis on the sustainable development narrative constitutes a problem or an opportunity for Vietnam. With more detailed and concrete lessons, the book would be even more useful for development practitioners. At the same time, it would also strengthen the theoretical contribution of the work with the need to turn the rather vague concept of sustainable development into actionable outcomes.

Despite these caveats, the book constitutes an important contribution to our understanding of environmental politics in Vietnam, at least until the recent period when the state has become more repressive. It demonstrates how global discourses are localized, how NGOs survive and adapt under authoritarian rule and how narratives of sustainability can serve both as tools of power and as spaces of contestation. As a whole, the book is a theoretically informed and empirically rich study of environmental politics in a rapidly developing country that deepens our understanding of the difficulties of combining development with environmental concerns.

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