

The Power of Sustainable Development in Vietnam

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The Power of Sustainable Development in Vietnam

*Environmental narratives, NGOs and
the state's environmental rule*

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First published in Singapore in 2025 by
ISEAS Publishing
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Website: <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

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ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name(s): Behrens, Julia L., author.

Title: The power of sustainable development in Vietnam : environmental narratives, NGOs and the state's environmental rule.

Description: Singapore : ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2025. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: ISBN 978-981-5203-47-9 (soft cover) | ISBN 978-981-5203-48-6 (ebook PDF) | ISBN 978-981-5203-49-3 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Environmental policy—Vietnam. | Sustainable development—Law and legislation—Vietnam. | Non-governmental organizations—Vietnam. | Environmentalism—Social aspects—Vietnam.

Classification: LCC GE190 V5B42

Cover illustration by Duong Nguyen

Cover design by Lee Meng Hui

Index compiled by Sheryl Sin Bing Peng

Typesetting by International Typesetters Pte Ltd

Printed in Singapore by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

For the Vietnamese women who cannot be named in this book

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Preface

Writing a book—going from research to initial manuscript to final publication—takes time. While I was going through that process with this book, the political context changed significantly.

I set out to understand what nature and environment mean for people in Vietnam and their political system. I have worked in the broader field of ecological development and political cooperation, and I have often wondered how the cooperation partners in Asia whom I corresponded with understand the issues surrounding nature and the environment. As it turned out, these partners were less interested in international development cooperation and more in the local entanglements with different entities of the Vietnamese government. As a result, I ended up writing about sustainable development and power structures in Vietnam.

The Vietnamese environmental governance that my informants were concerned about has caused many new worries since 2021 (when I concluded my research) for Vietnamese non-state actors, international organizations and even departments within the Vietnamese government. The last three years have seen further restrictions in the opportunities to engage in political and environmental spaces. The economic decentralization that has been central to the state's governmental setup has continued to lead to decisions being made at the top state level while putting responsibility on the individual citizens. As individual clean-up campaigns and propaganda posters that encourage citizens to keep their environment clean are still going strong, prominent advocates in the environmental field have been incarcerated, among them are persons who have inspired and helped me with this research. The arrests sent shockwaves through the environmental community, with the grapevine full of speculation about why they happened. In the wider context, an understanding of the Vietnamese state's approach to governance is crucial to the bigger picture. I have not rewritten the

manuscript to fit new changes since they have happened after my fieldwork. They are, nevertheless, important to bear in mind, and I have added paragraphs to point that out wherever appropriate.

The arrests and newly issued decrees were followed by anti-corruption campaigns and an increase in surveillance—for example, the staff of the restaurants where I reserved tables for dinners would always seat me at a convenient table and started to have pictures of me. But even before all that, doing research in Vietnam was challenging, especially with the lists of permits and documents required. Additionally, I stayed in Vietnam during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was a difficult period to conduct research due to the difficulty of travelling to the provinces outside of Hanoi.

I hope this book still achieves what it set out to do: generating and translating knowledge about environmental rules and sustainable development in Vietnam. This means deepening the understanding of what sustainable development means in Vietnam, why it means what it means and what conclusions we can draw from the results to better understand the functions of the state, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international development cooperation. The book gives an insight into not only why narratives matter, but also why and how they deviate from the practice in some places. For development practitioners, the book aims to help them better understand the context they are in and what (un)intended consequences their actions might (not) have. Across all interviews and observations, I found Tania Li's famous book *Will to Improve* continues to be relevant today. Having worked for think tanks myself, I am only cautiously optimistic that things will change for the better. Nevertheless, I am thankful to the people you are going to meet in the following pages.

Acknowledgements

This book is the product of my long PhD journey. The journey has been especially long because it took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and while I was moving between countries and having many self-doubts. To be able to complete my research and publish this book, I owe it to several wonderful, inspiring and supportive colleagues, friends and family members.

In 2015, I started on my PhD journey with a different research topic from what it is now and under a different supervisor. I am very grateful to Professor Dr Michael Mann for encouraging me to take my first step towards a PhD. I am not sure if I would have embarked on this endeavour without his support and advice. Along the way, I changed my research topic, and I am most grateful to Professor Dr Vincent Houben for accepting me as one of his PhD students and giving his precious time and expertise. He has supported me not only on my academic journey, but also on my professional journey with his countless approvals, comments and letters of recommendation. Professor Dr Christoph Antweiler has provided meaningful comments to my initial thesis, and these helped me to strengthen my argument for publication. During my time in Vietnam, I would not have been able to settle down and navigate academics without Professor Dr Pham Quang Minh's help. Despite his busy schedule, he always makes time for his students. There are also several other academics and scholars who supported me with their advice, contacts and encouragement when I was not sure if I should continue my PhD journey. I would like to thank Professor Dr May Tan-Mullins, Professor Dr Ben Tran, Professor Dr Christina Schwenkel and Professor Dr Erik Harms. Professor Dr Harms (and Sarah Affenzeller) enabled me to spend precious time at Yale University, despite all the other global matters (a pandemic!) going on. This period was crucial for me to organize my thoughts and put them together in my analysis. I would also like to thank everyone at the now defunct Nordic Institute of Asian Studies for

having me during an intense period of writing and the Asia Research Institute in Singapore for a helpful graduate workshop. Professor Dr Minh Nguyen has enabled me to dedicate my time to writing through a fellowship. She, together with Professor Dr Antje Missbach and their teams at Bielefeld University, has challenged my arguments and expanded the contribution that I hope to make.

I am very privileged and lucky to have received the support from some of the most incredible women whom I met during my fieldwork. I dedicate this book to them. Their wisdom, trust and honesty carried me through my research.

I would like to express a huge thank you to everyone who dedicated their time to reading parts or all of this research and providing me with their comments and feedback. Marie Carnein, Julia Holz, Isabelle Windhorst, Mandy Ma—I hope you know how much your contribution mattered for my dissertation. Vito Dabisch spent hours with me online, writing our dissertations together and keeping each other motivated during the lockdowns. The two anonymous reviewers played a crucial role in guiding me to structure my thoughts. Ng Kok Kiong and everyone at ISEAS Publishing have been a real delight to work with, and their professionalism have made this book readable.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Philip Degenhardt; my parents, Katrin and Peter Behrens; my partner in crime, Dieu Linh Dao; and my number one cheerleaders, Lis, Mai and Phung, for their mental and material support throughout the process. All remaining errors are my own.