



**CENTRE FOR MARINELIFE CONSERVATION AND COMMUNITY  
DEVELOPMENT'S STRATEGY AS AN NGO IN STRENGTHENING THE  
SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM'S COASTAL COMMUNITY  
RESILIENCE**

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**ABSTRACT**

Climate change is the biggest challenge for humanity in this century as it causes problematic environmental changes and destructive weather conditions. Vietnamese coastal community were considered as the most vulnerable people suffering from the impacts of climate change as their livelihoods are depending on the marine-based resources. However, this research found that the coastal people today are more able to adapt, adjust and overcome the negative impacts of climate change after receiving intervention from Centre for Marinelife Conservation and Community Development (MCD). This research aims to describe the coastal community condition and explain the strategies used by MCD to strengthen the coastal community resilience in Vietnam. This qualitative research is developed using literary technique. In which, author collected data from secondary sources, comprise of publications from of MCD, other related ministries and institutions. Using the conceptual frameworks of NGO Concept and Transnational Advocacy Network, this research answers the question that MCD uses its strategies by maintaining cooperative manner to deliver its influence within the socialist government utilizing the Transnational Advocacy Network and conducting small-scale change and large-scale change. These strategies allow MCD to strengthen Vietnamese coastal communes' resilience and to sustain under the socialist regime.

**Keywords:** *coastal community, coastal resources management, advocacy, NGO, Transnational Advocacy Network*

**Introduction**

According to the Third Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), developing countries are expected to suffer the most from the negative impacts of climate change. Analysis by an international team of researchers, led by Hobart-based scientists from the University of Tasmania and The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), show that 87 coastal countries could face decreases in both agriculture and fisheries production as the climate changes (University of Tasmania, n.d.). In the efforts of eradicating the negative impacts of climate change, many NGOs strive to restore the resilience of coastal people from the horror of this phenomena. One of the many, Centre for Marinelife Conservation and Community Development (MCD), is an NGO that focuses on the field of coastal marine ecosystem conservation and community livelihoods development. It exists to protect coastal communities from negative impacts of climate change in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Established in 2003 under the Vietnam Association of Marine Science and Technology with the license granted by the Ministry of Science and Technology of Vietnam, MCD was performed as a Vietnamese non-governmental non-profit organization (VNGO). Along with the emergence of climate change as a local and international challenge, MCD has started to include climate change considerations and responses within its agenda of strategies since 2008. Works such as environment and natural resources management, community sustainable livelihood development, communications and policy advocacy are MCD's focus until today (MCD, n.d). The cross-cutting issues that are also included within the agenda of work are climate change response, disaster risk reduction, gender equality, and poverty. This organization is devoted in ensuring a good quality of life for coastal communities, especially the most vulnerable ones—local people.

In 2008, data above shows that Vietnam has been identified as one of the top-five countries most influenced by climate change specifically from the cause of the frequent and severe storm as well as the sea-level rise (IPCC, 2007). The Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment predicted that approximately 10 to 12% of the Vietnamese population will experience direct effects of climate change and GDP will decrease by about 10% (2007). If sea level rises about 1 meter in Vietnam, 40% of agricultural output will be lost (Van & Duc, 2013). Gradual changes on more extremes of weather such as drought, and more intense typhoons caused devastating impact on the people's safety and economy, especially for the coastal poor. As the majority live in areas vulnerable to flooding and other natural disasters which also endangered their lives. Every year, weather extremes increased their vulnerability which is the degree to which geophysical, biological and socio-economic systems are susceptible to, and unable to cope with, adverse impacts of climate change. Fewer resources towards disaster recovery also caused poverty rate disproportionately worsened as they lost their capital due to disasters strikes (OXFAM, 2008). As poverty escalated, it also exposed another threat for coastal people. Vietnam is considered as an area of human trafficking, particularly sexual trafficking hub (Shelley, 2010, p. 158). The poor economic and social circumstances of the people can be a higher factor to drive them into trafficking especially for women (Lehti and Aromaa, 2006, p.153). From 1995 to 2005, Tran (2006) investigates that around 88 percent of traffickers are of Kinh ethnic origin whose mainly inhabit the Red River delta and the central coastal delta. Low education, unemployment experience and poverty are of conditions faced by most trafficking victims (Zimmerman & Borland, 2009).

The existence of MCD as an NGO in Vietnam however, has proven to be a significant changemaker of the vulnerability within this community. From the programs it has implemented, many coastal people are becoming more resilience towards climate change. The communities in MCD project locations are able to identify suitable alternatives of livelihoods, develop strong resilience to climate change conditions and has understood advantages in protecting and improving the quality of the environment (Hien, et al., 2015). Communities have also been supported by local authorities to implement the livelihood models along with the collaboration with organization alike. Many of MCD programs were also mainstreamed in the local development plan. MCD's livelihood activities are often focusing on the participation of women in improving climate change adaptation capacity and as a result, the role of women in families has increased around 90% in the family decision making. MCD also has been directly supporting more than 1000 households with livelihood models that are adaptive to climate change impact. The people's income in the project locations were able to significantly improve. In the last 5 years, the amount of community property in the commune has been increased.

Through the course of less than one and a half decade, MCD grew progressively since its initial establishment (Centre for Marinelife Conservation and Community

Development, n.d.). Starting from only having organizational and human resources divided into two programs which worked on two ecosystems of coral reef and mangrove during its first period of operation (2003-2007), MCD today has worked in 13 areas of focus along the coastal communes. The prolonged existence of MCD in Vietnam is a unique phenomenon that has drawn the author's attention. As part of civil society in which is a strong fundamental pillar derived from liberal values, the existence of an NGO in a country that doesn't value democracy will be unlikely. The restriction from the authoritarian regime shall result in some challenges for an NGO to grow. Not to mention for MCD as the term "civil society" remained a sensitivity within the authoritarian rule. The limited space of civil participation shall be one of many hardships faced by a civil society in a socialist country. However, MCD has proven its perseverance and sustainability to become a leading local NGO with significant results as its programs' implementation were successful to strengthen the resiliency of coastal people. Thus, this research will explain the strategies in which is used by MCD to achieve these accomplishments.

The role of Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) became very significant within the global politics realm after the end of the Cold War. The concept of NGO came into use in 1945 following the establishment of the United Nations Organizations which recognized the need to give a consultative role to organizations which were not classified as government nor member states (Willett, 2002). They have recently been regarded as part of the "third sector" or not-for-profit organizations. Although there is contestation of the definition of an NGO, it is widely accepted that these are organizations which pursue activities to relieve the suffering, promote interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services, and undertake community development (Cleary, 1997). NGOs' participation in the global environmental politics can be seen from their efforts to increase the awareness of environmental issues; they lobby the decision-making process of the state in hopes that they can influence the domestic and foreign policy that's related to environmental issues; they coordinated a boycott in effort to stop environmental destruction; they participated in the environmental negotiation on the international level; and they helped monitor as well as enforced the international law and treaties (Betsill & Corell, 2001). From these participations, it is important to be acknowledged that the activities done by NGOs in different political arenas also involves different strategies, goals and unique political dynamics (Streeten, 1997, p. 195).

Willett (2002) categorized the activity of NGOs into operational, campaigning and both operational and campaigning. Operational NGOs seek to "achieve small-scale change directly through projects". They deal with a wide range of issues, but are most often associated with the delivery of services or environmental issues, emergency relief, and public welfare. Although operational NGOs can be community-based, many are national or international. The defining activity of operational NGOs is the implementation of projects. While campaigning NGOs seek to "achieve large-scale change promoted indirectly through influence of the political system". They plan and host demonstrations and events that will keep their cause in the media. They must maintain a large informed network of supporters who can be mobilized for events to garner media attention and influence policy changes. The defining activity of campaigning NGOs is holding demonstrations. It is not uncommon for NGOs to make use of both activities. Many times, operational NGOs will use campaigning techniques if they continually face the same issues in the field that could be remedied through policy changes.

In achieving their missions in influencing national authorities, NGOs involve in what's called Transnational Advocacy Network (TAN). It is a structure of communication where members are motivated by shared principled ideas/values. A platform where

exchange of information and service is provided voluntarily, reciprocally, and horizontally. Actors include NGOs, advocate organizations, foundations, researchers, intergovernmental organization, international organizations, even executive and parliamentary members (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Certainly, NGOs play as centre role in most of advocacy network case. Usually, NGOs introduce new ideas, provide informations, and perform lobbying to change the policy. TAN occurs when (1) the media between domestic and government is being halt and conflict resolution seems impossible to meet; (2) activist believes that TAN will stimulate and promote their campaigns; (3) international conference and other forum creates the arena to help and strengthen the network. Sikkink and Keck develops this typology into several tactics of TAN usually being performed which are information politics, symbolic politics, leverage politics, and accountability politics.

## **Discussion**

### *MCD's Strategies under the Socialist Regime*

Working in a country that preserves socialist ideology is not a challenge-less duty for an NGO. As part of civil society in which is a strong fundamental pillar derived from liberal value, the existence of an NGO in a country that doesn't value democracy will be unlikely. The limited space of civil participation towards governmental issue shall be one of many hardships faced by a civil society in a socialist country. Therefore, the existence of MCD as an environmental NGO working in a socialist country is seen as an intriguing topic and is the cause of why this research is being held in the very first place. There shall be reason that contributes to the sustainability of MCD in Vietnam. This research finds that MCD uses its strategy to achieve its mission and prolong its existence by maintaining a cooperative manner with the government so that they can operate smoothly under the authoritarian regime and achieve their mission which is to strengthen the resiliency of Vietnam's coastal community.

As the movement of NGOs remain sensitive, being critical towards the authoritarian regime clearly will not be beneficial for MCD. This research finds that unlike NGOs that work in democratic countries which often times being the critical body or opposition side of the government, MCD conversely maintained a cooperative behavior with the regime. This strategy is applied in order to avoid potential contradictions with the authoritarian regime as well as to achieve their goals for the coastal community. In the past studies of NGOs working in authoritarian regime, NGOs have admitted that some of their present difficulties were caused by their attempts to adapt to the Western models (European Commission, 1998). As Yung Wang emphasized in his work that activists found critical behavior used in strong authoritarian states are often damaging to their cause. Unwanted pressure can do tremendous harm towards its existence. In a few cases, frontal opposition may cause NGOs to be limited or even can lead on shutdowns as the consequences (Wang, 2013).

This results in the cooperative relations between MCD and the authoritarian government, as well as sustainability of the programs implemented within the community allowing them to have influence in the policy making processes. A cooperative manner is proven to provide NGOs with more freedom and less limitation from the ruling regime by exposing them to the possibility of lobbying, advocacy, and win the trust of the local authority (Wang, 2013). The influence is crucial as it can increase the legitimacy of its existence and intervention as well as for its programs implementation that needed support from the government in a form of policy that are more pro-environmental and coastal people friendly. In spreading their influences, MCD is believed to benefit from the utilization of their network through what's called Transnational Advocacy Network (TAN). As Keck & Sikkink (1998) stated TAN occurs when (1) the media between domestic and

government is being halt and conflict resolution seems impossible to meet; (2) activist believes that TAN will stimulate and promote their campaigns; (3) international conference and other forum creates the arena to help and strengthen the network.

As the term of “civil society” remained sensitive and the work of NGOs is maintained closely (although not limited) by the Vietnamese government, TAN works to strengthen the ties between the two parties and to influence in the political system by involving another ‘more powerful actor’ such as bigger organization in their network. In fact, MCD has built alliances with many International organizations, donors, and experts who were most of the times included within many discussion panels with the local government. However, unlike what TAN was mostly used in the democratic nations with many critical campaigns and harsh confrontation towards the government, platform such as workshops, seminars, policy reviews and dialogue remained as the key strategy for MCD in order to utilize TAN.

Previous literatures about TAN has shown that this strategy of cooperative manner through conducting workshop and dialogue has worked and was more applicable to be implemented in the socialist systems rather than those of the “naming and shaming” strategy that dominates the literature on advocacy networks. For example in the dissertation published by Yun Wang about the transnational religious activism in China where activists cooperate harmoniously with the system instead of ‘attacking’ and protesting the authority (Wang, 2013). In Russia, the NGO Gay Russia who began to push for legal, annual gay pride parades was facing distrust and hostility from the conservative Russian society and the Russian government in 2006. Meanwhile, their other kinds, “ЛГБТ- Служение” or “Nuntiare et Recreare” (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender-Ministry “Proclaim and Strengthen”) and LaSky were more successful as they work cooperatively with the Russian government by dealing on the issue of HIV which also help to solve a problem that the country has been struggling with for a long time (Dufalla, 2014).

In the assessment of transnational activism in the context of strong authoritarian states, Wang argued:

*“that by building a local network including government-sponsored social groups, transnational activists can push a strong authoritarian regime to incorporate basic freedoms and build a space for their activism, even if the society is closed to outside criticism and the state ridicule the advocacy with anti-imperialist accusations.”*

The cooperative manner of NGOs within the authoritarian regime also proven significant for them to gain not only public but also governmental support by prioritizing to achieve common goals together rather than protesting. NGOs that provide welfare services to assist citizens and develop local civil society can receive governmental support and funding. In this way, they can also be perceived as legitimate which contrasts with how transnational actors typically gain public support (Dufalla, 2013). In Russia for instance, The Russian government has supported NGO networks that serve the purpose which aligned with the government agenda. It supported the movement “Civil Dignity” (Гражданское достоинство), that focused in increasing the level and quality of people’s lives. A collaborative action was marked with both parties working together to play the role as the ultimate guarantor of housing, education, and even access to culture for all Russians (Dostoinstvo, 2013).

Correspondently, with the cooperative strategy, MCD used the same tactics as well as has fulfilled the characteristics where the work of TAN is proven has been successful.

This research also found that the arena such as dialogue and conferences as well as other types of panel discussion are proven to be a successful platform to deliver their influence and aspirations within the policy making agenda. Whereas in that platform, MCD hold a series of information exchange as well as deliver their critics in the form of advice and suggestions rather than harsh comments towards the socialist authorities. The use of information politics, leverage politics, symbolic politics and accountability politics were proven to be applicable within MCD's 'cooperative' strategy. It allowed programs being continued and supported overtime as well as changes within the policy making accessible for stakeholders including MCD and the local governments. Often times, it resulted in resilience programs and approaches introduced by MCD to be implemented within the national agenda.

On the information politics, MCD utilized this tactic by conducting an exchange of information through workshops or dialogues. For instance in "Integrating Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation into the Planning Process of Local Socio-economic Development" workshop which was co-organized by MCD with Oxfam, the Department of Sea and Islands, the Department of Natural Resources and Environment of Hai Phong and Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) in Hai Phong on October 2013. MCD obtained all capacity to mobilize information within this network. Through its alliance and partnerships with International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network (ADRRN), South East for Fish for Justice Network (SEAFish), Oxfam, AusAID, and USAID, MCD utilized the leverage politics as there is involvement of more powerful bodies/parties, be it international organizations, donors and even national authorities in their programs/actions.

The Ecolife Café is an indicator of its ability to use a symbolic story or actions to influence people, organizations or even governments from distance which showed the symbolic politics existence. It represents the symbolism created as a goal which is a more sustainable living, adaptive to the changing climate. This program received acceptance and support from the socialist government as the establishments of the second Ecolife Café in Van Hung and third in Phu Long were conducted in the following years of 2012 and 2013. A policy advocacy from MCD to the national government has shown that MCD has utilized its accountability politics of where it can influenced, imposed and monitored the government to implement certain programs/policy to reach its mission on marinelife conservation and the strengthening of coastal community programs. Whether in the form of law, adaptation model or policy advisory. Another example was from the 2012 national consultation named "Sustainable Development of Small Scale Fisheries in Vietnam and the FAO guidelines" in Hanoi. It was able to bring stakeholders together to provide input on the newly drafted FAO Sustainable Small Scale Fisheries (SSF) Guidelines in conjunction with the status of fisheries in Vietnam. MCD emphasized on the discussion focus of small scale fisheries role in the context of food security, poverty alleviation and sustainable use of fisheries resources link in value chains, disaster and climate change. Major recommendations and information from the workshop was able to be delivered to general department of fisheries, the highest agency in charge of fisheries of Vietnam for their considerations.

### *MCD's Strategies in Strengthening the Coastal Community Resilience*

In strengthening the coastal community resilience, MCD uses the strategy of being both *an operational and campaigning NGO*. *Operational* NGOs seek to "achieve small-scale change directly through projects". They mobilize financial resources, materials, and volunteers to create localized programs. They often operate in a hierarchical structure; a main headquarters being staffed by professionals who plan projects, create budgets, keep

accounts, and report and communicate with operational fieldworkers who work directly on projects. While *Campaigning* NGOs seek to "achieve large-scale change promoted indirectly through influence of the political system". They maintain a large informed network of supporters who can be mobilized for events to garner media attention and influence policy changes (Willetts, 2002).

As MCD's activity varies from running campaigns to hands-on intervention directly to the fields of their projects locations. The works done by MCD is dedicated not only to achieve "large-scale change", but also "small-scale change". This also can be a strategy for this organization to reach its goals and mission. MCD works within the fields of marinelife conservation and coastal community development which can be said that it is indeed "local-centered" organization that can be successful with only involvement from the members and participants from coastal community alone. Achieving "small-scale change", being an operational NGO will be enough if only this was the case. However, because it also works to build capacity for the local people from the danger of climate change, which is a global environmental issue and works along the coastal of Vietnam involving many project locations as well as stakeholders, it is necessary for MCD to achieve the "large-scale change" through campaigns and communication advocacy.

In achieving small-scale change, MCD involved directly through projects and create variety of local programs. In implementing their programs, MCD has three principal themes which are the key achievement for their programs: Coastal Resources Management, Capacity Building, Communications and Policy Advocacy. In the field of coastal resource management, MCD conducted a project called: "Improve Resilience of Community Livelihoods and Adaptation Management in Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in Viet Nam". This program focuses on goals of building, developing and implementing essential and social activities about natural resource and coastal environment management; and promoting to apply integrated coastal zone management approach at all levels (MCD, n.d.)

In the field of community development, MCD aims at constructing, developing and implementing activities to promote community development through building capacity for community and local partners, organizing communities in the form of social enterprises and institutionalization, and livelihood development (aquaculture and non-aquaculture). Two amongst the many projects implemented by MCD that are proven to have strengthened the resilience of coastal community were "Safe Vegetable Production" in Xuan Dam and "Integrated Shrimp-Crab Mangrove Aquaculture" in Phu Long Commune. These projects have been proven significant too transform the vulnerable community in finding alternative livelihoods to adapt with the changing climate. This livelihood brings benefit of more than 70 million VND each year which is a sustainable income for communes (MCD-APN-AMDI-DRAGON, 2015). From their project assessment, it also showed that the participating households confirmed their awareness with 74% of them were able to list some signs of climate change and have prepared to reduce the risks to their livelihoods with the knowledge from technical training provided by MCD.

In achieving large-scale change, MCD involves campaigns and demonstrations to reach wider audience. As campaigning NGOs must maintain a large informed network of supporters who can be mobilized for events to garner media attention and influence policy changes (Willetts, 2002), MCD also perceives campaigning as its way to advocate their cause and reach one of their communication mission which is raising awareness of climate change and the importance of marinelife ecosystem protection. For instance, a campaign held in June 2013 named "Environment today, Life tomorrow" was launched cordially in Cat Ba and Giao Lac commune with participation from representatives of Provincial People Committee, Community People Committee, Culture Officers, Women Union, The Red Cross and 200 local young people. The communication campaign proven to have

improved the awareness of more than 1,300 households around 50% of Giao Xuan population and promoted climate change adaptive livelihood models. The Bio Pad model was one of them in which goals are to mitigate disaster risk by enhancing adaptive capability and applying advanced technology and science in adaptive livelihoods, as well as promoting indigenous knowledge in livelihood practices. Some other impacts achieved from this movement are 20 local authorities to contribute in organizing the campaign, 100 households to be trained and supported for Bio Pads practice and including more than 500 arrivals attended obtained knowledge of climate change adaptive livelihoods models

### **3.1. Conclusion**

Analyzing from the data provided with the theoretical frameworks used, this research finds the answer for the research problem. Which is that in strengthening the coastal community's resilience in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, MCD uses its strategies through first, maintaining a cooperative manner to deliver influence within the socialist government utilizing the Transnational Advocacy Network. Second, through conducting small-scale change and large-scale change. As part of civil society in which is derived from liberal value, NGO often faces limited space in a non-democratic regime. MCD used the strategy of maintaining a cooperative manner instead of being a critical body towards the government to be able to work and implement their programs smoothly without unnecessary limitation from the socialist government unlike what usually occurred in most cases of NGOs within authoritarian regime. Cooperative manner is proven to give more freedom and less limitation from the ruling regime due to the possibility of lobbying, advocacy, and win the trust of the local authority (Wang, 2013). It also allowed them to have influence within the political system using their network of TAN by conducting workshops or dialogue involving bigger organization and the government instead of using repressive actions. MCD was able to influence within the policy making and overcome or avoid any contradictions with the ruling government. As Wang emphasized that local network, transnational activists can push a strong authoritarian regime to incorporate basic freedoms and build a space for their activism. This enabled programs from MCD to be accepted and supported by the national government.

Analyzing from the concept of NGO, MCD uses strategies by conducting small-scale change which include coastal resources management, community development, communication and advocacy. This strategy is often used by an operational NGO to achieve their mission through utilizing resources and capacity in the form of programs. From these approaches, the coastal community including local authorities obtained the knowledge on how to use and protect the marine resources wisely to avoid environmental destruction during the changing climate. The coastal community now are able to protect and overcome climatic disruptions for their marine-based livelihoods. In promoting and raising people's awareness towards climate change, MCD used the strategy of achieving large-scale changes. As a campaigning NGO, often times organizations utilize this technique to spread influence or cause towards the people and political system by conducting campaigns, communication events as well as marches. These changes can be indicated by the number of masses involved in the events. This approach results in the coastal community's increased awareness and knowledge of climate change adaptation mechanism that many were lacking before. Through this changes, the coastal community was able reduce the climate change impacts that threatened their safety. Local people, especially the poor now are no longer becomes the victims of the natural disasters caused by the changing climate.



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