



Civil Society Organizations and Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam: The Role of International Cooperation in Community Governance

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ABSTRACT: Since the expansion of international cooperation after 1995, Vietnam has experienced significant growth in NGO activities, community-based development programs, and participatory governance initiatives, particularly in ethnic minority regions characterized by persistent poverty, inequality, and limited access to public services. International development agencies, civil society organizations (CSOs), and donor-supported projects have increasingly collaborated with local authorities and communities in areas such as education, healthcare, livelihood development, and local governance. This article analyzes the role of civil society organizations in ethnic minority development and community governance in Vietnam between 1995 and 2025. The study employs qualitative policy analysis, literature review, and a governance-oriented approach to examine how CSOs and international cooperation contribute to participatory development and local empowerment in ethnic minority regions. The findings indicate that CSOs have contributed positively to community participation, local empowerment, educational access, healthcare outreach, livelihood support, and participatory governance mechanisms. Through community-based development projects, women's groups, educational initiatives, healthcare programs, and local consultation activities, NGOs and CSOs have strengthened local engagement and facilitated interaction among communities, donors, and state institutions. However, important limitations remain, including weak institutional autonomy, donor dependency, fragmented coordination, and uneven grassroots participation. In several cases, participatory development remains constrained by short-term funding cycles, symbolic participation, and limited community influence over governance processes. The article contributes to broader discussions on civil society studies, development governance, participatory development, and ethnic minority policy research. It argues that sustainable ethnic minority development requires stronger local governance capacity, meaningful community participation, and long-term collaborative partnerships capable of moving beyond project-based intervention toward more locally grounded governance models.

KEYWORDS: Civil society organizations, Community governance, Ethnic minority development, International cooperation, NGOs, Participatory development, Vietnam.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the implementation of the Đổi Mới (Renovation) reforms in 1986, Vietnam has undergone profound economic, political, and social transformation characterized by market-oriented reforms, international integration, and expanding development cooperation. During the post-reform period, Vietnam increasingly engaged with international organizations, bilateral donors, foreign NGOs, and transnational development networks. This process accelerated significantly after the normalization of diplomatic relations with the United States in 1995 and Vietnam's broader integration into regional and global institutions such as ASEAN and the World Trade Organization. International cooperation gradually expanded beyond economic assistance and humanitarian support toward broader areas including poverty reduction, education, healthcare, environmental sustainability, governance, and community development (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2018).

One important consequence of this transformation was the expansion of civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in Vietnam. Although Vietnam maintains a state-centered political system, the post-Đổi Mới period witnessed the gradual emergence of various social organizations, development associations, community groups, and NGO partnerships involved in local development initiatives (Abuza, 1996). International organizations and donor agencies increasingly collaborated with Vietnamese institutions and local communities through projects emphasizing participation, poverty reduction,

Civil Society Organizations and Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam: The Role of International Cooperation in Community Governance

gender equality, and sustainable development. In many cases, NGOs and CSOs became important intermediaries connecting international development agendas with local implementation processes.

Ethnic minority regions became a particularly significant focus of development cooperation because they continued to experience disproportionately high levels of poverty, inequality, and social vulnerability despite Vietnam's rapid economic growth. Vietnam is home to 53 officially recognized ethnic minority groups, most of whom reside in mountainous, borderland, and geographically remote areas characterized by limited infrastructure, weak public services, and restricted access to educational and economic opportunities. According to the World Bank (2019), poverty rates among ethnic minority populations remain substantially higher than national averages, while disparities in healthcare access, educational attainment, and livelihood security continue to persist.

In addition to socioeconomic inequality, ethnic minority regions also face important governance challenges. Geographic isolation, limited institutional capacity, linguistic barriers, and uneven participation in local decision-making processes frequently constrain effective policy implementation. Existing studies suggest that state-led development programs in ethnic minority areas have often emphasized infrastructure expansion and economic modernization while paying insufficient attention to local participation, cultural diversity, and community agency (Oxfam Vietnam, 2017). Consequently, development interventions sometimes encounter limitations related to sustainability, local ownership, and responsiveness to community priorities.

Within this context, NGOs and CSOs have increasingly played important roles in community development and local governance. Through programs focusing on education, healthcare, women's empowerment, livelihood support, environmental adaptation, and participatory planning, civil society actors have contributed to strengthening community participation and local capacity in many ethnic minority regions. International cooperation projects implemented by organizations such as UNDP, USAID, Oxfam, CARE, Save the Children, and other NGOs frequently emphasize participatory development approaches designed to involve local communities more directly in project implementation and decision-making processes.

At the same time, the role of civil society organizations in Vietnam remains complex and contested. While development cooperation has expanded opportunities for community participation and local empowerment, institutional constraints, regulatory limitations, and donor dependency continue to shape the operational environment of NGOs and CSOs. Furthermore, the effectiveness of participatory development initiatives varies considerably across regions and sectors. Some projects successfully strengthen local governance and community engagement, while others remain largely symbolic or externally driven. These dynamics raise important questions regarding the relationship between international cooperation, civil society participation, and community governance in ethnic minority development.

Despite growing scholarly interest in development cooperation and ethnic minority policy in Vietnam, relatively limited research has systematically examined the role of civil society organizations within ethnic minority governance. Existing studies on Vietnam's ethnic minority regions often focus primarily on poverty reduction, education, healthcare, or state development policy (Baulch et al., 2012; McElwee, 2004). Meanwhile, research on NGOs and civil society in Vietnam frequently concentrates on legal frameworks, donor relations, or broader governance issues without paying sufficient attention to ethnic minority communities and local participatory governance processes. As a result, the interaction among international cooperation, civil society organizations, and ethnic minority development remains insufficiently explored within current scholarship.

This article addresses that gap by examining the role of civil society organizations in ethnic minority development and community governance in Vietnam between 1995 and 2025. Specifically, the study aims to analyze how CSOs have contributed to education, healthcare, livelihood development, and local participation in ethnic minority regions; examine the role of international cooperation in shaping participatory governance practices; and evaluate the achievements and limitations of civil society involvement in community development.

The article is guided by three research questions. First, how have CSOs contributed to ethnic minority development in Vietnam? Second, what role has international cooperation played in community governance? Third, what challenges continue to limit participatory development in ethnic minority regions?

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to several interconnected academic fields, including civil society studies, governance studies, development anthropology, and Southeast Asian development research. By linking international cooperation with community governance and ethnic minority development, the article provides a broader understanding of how participatory development operates within complex political and institutional contexts. The study also contributes to contemporary debates regarding the role of civil society actors in promoting inclusive development and local empowerment in developing societies undergoing rapid social transformation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Civil Society and Development Governance

The relationship between civil society and development governance has become a central topic within contemporary development studies, particularly in discussions concerning participatory governance, decentralization, and community empowerment. Existing scholarship generally argues that civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can play

Civil Society Organizations and Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam: The Role of International Cooperation in Community Governance

important roles in improving governance effectiveness, strengthening local participation, and facilitating communication between state institutions and communities. Rather than functioning solely as service providers, CSOs are increasingly viewed as governance actors capable of contributing to social capital formation, institutional accountability, and participatory development processes.

One of the most influential theoretical perspectives within this literature is the concept of social capital developed by Putnam (1993). Putnam argues that civic participation, trust, and associational networks strengthen democratic governance and collective problem-solving capacity. From this perspective, civil society organizations contribute to development not only through material assistance but also by fostering cooperation, participation, and community engagement. Although Putnam's work primarily emerged from democratic governance contexts, subsequent studies have applied aspects of social capital theory to development governance and community participation in developing societies.

Edwards (2014) further emphasizes that civil society should be understood as a dynamic sphere connecting citizens, communities, and institutions rather than merely a collection of NGOs. According to Edwards, civil society organizations may strengthen governance by encouraging participation, representation, and public engagement in development processes. However, he also warns that civil society is not inherently democratic or empowering; its effectiveness depends on institutional context, political environment, and the quality of community participation.

Participatory governance constitutes another important dimension of the literature. Development scholars increasingly criticize top-down development models for failing to address local needs, social inequality, and community agency. Lewis and Kanji (2009) argue that participatory development approaches emerged partly in response to the limitations of centralized and technocratic development planning. These approaches emphasize local involvement, stakeholder participation, and community ownership in project design and implementation. NGOs and CSOs are frequently viewed as intermediary institutions capable of facilitating local participation and strengthening grassroots governance.

International organizations have also promoted participatory governance and decentralization as components of sustainable development. UNDP (2018) emphasizes that inclusive governance requires broader community participation, local institutional capacity, and collaborative decision-making processes. Similarly, World Bank governance literature highlights the importance of accountability, participation, and institutional responsiveness in reducing poverty and improving development outcomes (World Bank, 2019, 2019a). Within this framework, NGOs are often perceived as flexible actors capable of addressing gaps in state service delivery and strengthening local governance mechanisms.

At the same time, existing scholarship recognizes important limitations associated with civil society participation in development governance. Critics argue that donor dependency, institutional constraints, and unequal participation may weaken the transformative potential of NGOs and participatory development models. Consequently, contemporary debates increasingly focus not simply on whether participation exists, but on the quality, inclusiveness, and sustainability of participatory governance processes.

2.2. Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam

The literature on ethnic minority development in Vietnam primarily focuses on poverty, inequality, social exclusion, and uneven development outcomes in mountainous and remote regions. Existing studies consistently demonstrate that ethnic minority populations remain disproportionately affected by multidimensional poverty despite Vietnam's significant national economic growth during the post-Đổi Mới period. According to the World Bank (2019, 2023, 2025), ethnic minority communities continue to experience lower income levels, weaker educational attainment, limited healthcare access, and greater livelihood vulnerability compared to the Kinh majority population.

Poverty and inequality are closely connected to geographic isolation and limited access to infrastructure and public services. Oxfam Vietnam (2017) argues that ethnic minority regions often face structural disadvantages related to transportation, market integration, and institutional capacity. Such disparities contribute to long-term socioeconomic vulnerability and constrain opportunities for sustainable development. Baulch et al. (2012) further note that poverty reduction among ethnic minority groups has occurred at a slower pace than among the majority population, indicating persistent structural inequalities despite broader national development progress.

Participation barriers represent another major theme within the literature. Existing studies suggest that ethnic minority communities frequently encounter linguistic, cultural, and institutional obstacles limiting meaningful participation in local governance and development programs. UN Women and the Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs (UN Women & CEMA) (2018, 2021) emphasize that women and vulnerable groups within ethnic minority communities often face intersecting forms of exclusion related to gender, language, and geography. Limited participation may reduce the effectiveness and sustainability of development interventions when local priorities and cultural contexts are insufficiently incorporated into project implementation.

Governance challenges in ethnic minority regions have also attracted growing scholarly attention. McElwee (2004) argues that development policies in mountainous regions often emphasize economic modernization and administrative integration while overlooking local cultural practices and indigenous livelihood systems. Existing studies further suggest that centralized policy implementation may encounter difficulties in remote communities where institutional capacity remains limited and local

Civil Society Organizations and Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam: The Role of International Cooperation in Community Governance

participation mechanisms are weak. As a result, development outcomes frequently vary across regions depending on local governance quality, institutional coordination, and community engagement.

Recent literature increasingly highlights the importance of participatory and culturally grounded development approaches in ethnic minority regions. Scholars argue that sustainable development requires stronger local participation, recognition of indigenous knowledge, and more inclusive governance frameworks capable of addressing the diverse needs of ethnic minority communities. However, despite these discussions, relatively limited research has examined the specific role of civil society organizations and international cooperation in facilitating participatory governance at the community level.

2.3. NGOs and International Cooperation in Vietnam

The expansion of NGOs and international development cooperation in Vietnam accelerated significantly after the normalization of diplomatic relations with the United States in 1995 and Vietnam's broader integration into global development networks. During the post-reform period, international donors, bilateral agencies, and NGOs increasingly engaged in projects related to poverty reduction, healthcare, education, gender equality, environmental sustainability, and rural development. This expansion contributed to the gradual emergence of a more diverse development landscape involving cooperation among state institutions, NGOs, international organizations, and local communities.

USAID reports indicate that international cooperation in Vietnam evolved from humanitarian assistance toward broader development partnership frameworks emphasizing governance, community resilience, and participatory development (USAID, 2021). Ethnic minority regions became important targets of development intervention because of persistent poverty, weak infrastructure, and social vulnerability. International NGOs frequently implemented donor-funded projects in partnership with local authorities and community organizations, particularly in sectors such as education, maternal healthcare, livelihood support, and environmental adaptation.

UNDP (2018) similarly emphasizes the increasing role of community-based development models within Vietnam's development cooperation framework. Participatory approaches became especially prominent in projects related to local governance, women's empowerment, and rural livelihoods. NGO reports often highlight the importance of local partnerships and grassroots engagement in improving development effectiveness and strengthening community ownership.

Vietnam NGO resource literature also demonstrates the growing institutional diversity of civil society actors operating in Vietnam during the post-1995 period. Although the operational environment for NGOs remains shaped by state regulation and administrative oversight, international cooperation has nonetheless created opportunities for community-based organizations, social associations, and local development groups to participate more actively in development initiatives. In many cases, NGOs function as intermediaries connecting donor priorities with local implementation realities and community needs.

However, the literature also identifies significant limitations affecting NGO effectiveness in Vietnam. Donor dependency, fragmented coordination, project-based funding cycles, and institutional constraints may reduce long-term sustainability and local autonomy. Some scholars further argue that participatory development projects occasionally remain symbolic or externally driven rather than genuinely community-led. These debates highlight the need for more detailed analysis of how NGOs and international cooperation shape governance and participation within ethnic minority regions specifically.

2.4. Research Gap

Although the literature on civil society, development governance, and ethnic minority development in Vietnam has expanded considerably, several important gaps remain. First, relatively few studies explicitly examine the relationship among civil society organizations, international cooperation, and ethnic minority governance within a single analytical framework. Existing research often treats these topics separately rather than analyzing how they interact in shaping participatory development processes at the community level.

Second, much of the existing literature remains fragmented and policy descriptive. Studies frequently focus on legal frameworks, donor assistance, poverty indicators, or individual development sectors without examining broader governance dynamics and local participation mechanisms. Consequently, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how NGOs and CSOs influence everyday governance practices and community decision-making in ethnic minority regions.

Finally, existing scholarship often lacks community-level governance analysis capable of capturing the complexity of local participation, institutional interaction, and power relations in development implementation. Many studies evaluate development outcomes primarily through policy frameworks or donor assessments while paying insufficient attention to how communities themselves experience participatory governance. This limitation is particularly significant in ethnically diverse regions where local cultural practices, language differences, and social structures strongly shape development processes.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs a theoretical framework combining participatory development theory, civil society theory, and community governance. The integration of these perspectives provides an analytical foundation for examining how civil society organizations

Civil Society Organizations and Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam: The Role of International Cooperation in Community Governance

(CSOs), NGOs, and international cooperation contribute to ethnic minority development and local governance in Vietnam. Rather than viewing development solely as a state-led process of economic modernization, this framework emphasizes participation, local agency, institutional interaction, and collaborative governance at the community level.

3.1. Participatory Development Theory

Participatory development theory emerged as a critical response to centralized and top-down development models that frequently marginalized local communities in decision-making processes. Scholars within this tradition argue that development interventions are more sustainable and equitable when communities actively participate in identifying priorities, implementing projects, and evaluating outcomes. Participation is therefore understood not simply as consultation, but as a mechanism for strengthening local agency and community empowerment (Chambers, 1997).

A central principle of participatory development is the idea of bottom-up development. Rather than imposing externally designed solutions, participatory approaches emphasize local knowledge, community needs, and grassroots engagement. This perspective is particularly important in ethnic minority regions where cultural diversity, linguistic differences, and geographically specific livelihood systems often make standardized development policies less effective. Existing studies indicate that development initiatives lacking meaningful local participation frequently encounter problems related to sustainability, weak community ownership, and limited long-term impact (Lewis & Kanji, 2009).

Stakeholder participation constitutes another key concept within participatory development theory. Development processes involve multiple actors, including local communities, state institutions, NGOs, donors, and international organizations. Effective participation therefore requires mechanisms that allow diverse stakeholders to engage in dialogue, negotiation, and collaborative decision-making. In ethnic minority development, stakeholder participation becomes especially significant because local populations are often excluded from formal governance processes due to linguistic, economic, and institutional barriers.

Community ownership further strengthens the participatory framework. Community ownership refers to the extent to which local populations possess genuine influence over development priorities and implementation processes. Participatory development scholars argue that projects are more sustainable when communities view development initiatives as their own rather than externally imposed interventions. This concept is particularly relevant in evaluating NGO and donor-supported projects in Vietnam's ethnic minority regions, where local participation frequently determines the long-term viability of community programs.

3.2. Civil Society Theory

Civil society theory provides a second analytical lens for understanding the role of NGOs and CSOs in ethnic minority governance. Civil society generally refers to the sphere of voluntary organizations, community associations, social networks, and collective activities operating between the state and the market (Edwards, 2014). Within development studies, civil society organizations are often viewed as intermediary institutions capable of strengthening participation, representation, and local accountability.

One influential concept within civil society theory is social capital, developed most prominently by Putnam (1993). Social capital refers to networks of trust, cooperation, and civic engagement that facilitate collective action and community problem-solving. NGOs and community organizations may contribute to social capital formation by strengthening cooperation among local actors and encouraging broader participation in development activities. In ethnic minority communities, where communal relationships and collective practices often remain socially important, civil society organizations may help reinforce local cooperation and institutional engagement.

Civil society theory also emphasizes governance participation. NGOs and CSOs frequently function as channels through which marginalized populations can communicate with state institutions and international donors. In this sense, NGOs may act as bridges connecting the state, local communities, and external development agencies. This intermediary role becomes particularly important in ethnic minority regions where institutional distance, language barriers, and limited state capacity may restrict direct participation in governance processes.

At the same time, civil society theory recognizes that NGOs are shaped by broader political and institutional environments. Their effectiveness depends not only on organizational capacity but also on regulatory frameworks, donor relationships, and local legitimacy. Consequently, civil society participation should not automatically be assumed to produce empowerment or democratic governance; rather, it must be examined within specific social and institutional contexts.

3.3. Community Governance

The concept of community governance further complements this theoretical framework by emphasizing local decision-making and collaborative governance processes. Community governance refers to systems of local participation and collective decision-making involving state actors, civil society organizations, and community members. Unlike hierarchical governance models relying exclusively on centralized authority, community governance emphasizes cooperation, negotiation, and shared responsibility among multiple actors.

Collaborative governance is particularly relevant in ethnic minority development because many local challenges involve overlapping social, economic, cultural, and environmental dimensions that cannot be addressed effectively through state intervention alone.

Civil Society Organizations and Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam: The Role of International Cooperation in Community Governance

NGOs, local associations, women's groups, village leaders, and development agencies frequently participate together in development planning and implementation. Such collaboration may improve responsiveness to local needs and strengthen community engagement in governance processes.

Grassroots participation represents another central component of community governance. Participatory governance requires that local communities possess meaningful opportunities to influence development priorities and policy implementation. Existing studies suggest that grassroots participation is especially important in ethnic minority regions where local knowledge, cultural practices, and communal structures strongly shape development outcomes. Consequently, community governance provides an important framework for analyzing how international cooperation and civil society organizations contribute to local participation and ethnic minority development in contemporary Vietnam.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) and international cooperation in ethnic minority development and community governance in Vietnam between 1995 and 2025. A qualitative framework is particularly appropriate because the research focuses on governance processes, institutional interaction, participation, and community development dynamics that cannot be fully understood through quantitative indicators alone. Rather than measuring development outcomes exclusively through statistical data, the study seeks to analyze how NGOs, local communities, donors, and state institutions interact within participatory development processes in ethnic minority regions.

The research primarily utilizes policy analysis, literature review, governance analysis, and a comparative-historical approach. Policy analysis is used to examine the evolution of development cooperation frameworks, NGO participation, and state policies related to ethnic minority development and local governance in Vietnam. This includes analyzing development strategies, participatory governance initiatives, decentralization policies, and donor-supported community development programs implemented after the expansion of international cooperation during the post-1995 period.

The literature review method provides the basis for synthesizing existing scholarship on civil society, participatory development, ethnic minority governance, and international cooperation in Vietnam. Through this process, the study identifies dominant theoretical perspectives, recurring governance challenges, and major debates regarding community participation and NGO involvement in development processes. Existing studies from governance research, development anthropology, NGO literature, and Southeast Asian studies are critically examined to establish the broader academic context of the research.

Governance analysis constitutes another important methodological component of the study. This approach allows for the examination of institutional relationships among state agencies, NGOs, donors, and local communities. Particular attention is given to participation mechanisms, community engagement, collaborative governance practices, and the intermediary role of civil society organizations in ethnic minority regions. Governance analysis is especially useful for understanding how participatory development functions in practice under Vietnam's state-centered political and administrative framework.

The study also adopts a comparative-historical approach to trace changes in civil society participation and development cooperation between 1995 and 2025. This period is significant because it reflects Vietnam's deepening international integration, the expansion of NGOs and donor-funded projects, and the growing emphasis on participatory development and community governance. By examining developments across multiple decades, the study is able to analyze long-term trends and institutional transformation rather than isolated development interventions.

The research draws upon approximately 25–30 sources, including NGO reports, government documents, UNDP publications, World Bank assessments, USAID reports, and academic studies related to development governance and ethnic minority policy in Vietnam. These materials provide both policy-oriented and community-level perspectives necessary for analyzing the interaction between civil society organizations and local governance processes.

The temporal scope of the study extends from 1995 to 2025, beginning with the expansion of international development cooperation following Vietnam's normalization of diplomatic relations with the United States and broader global integration. The analysis focuses specifically on education, healthcare, livelihoods, community participation, and governance in ethnic minority regions because these sectors represent some of the most important areas of NGO and CSO involvement in Vietnam's development landscape.

5. EXPANSION OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN VIETNAM

5.1. NGO Expansion after Đổi Mới

The expansion of civil society organizations (CSOs) and international NGOs in Vietnam was closely connected to the country's economic reforms and broader international integration after the implementation of *Đổi Mới* in 1986. During the pre-reform period, development activities in Vietnam were largely organized through centralized state institutions, while opportunities for non-state actors and international NGOs remained highly limited. However, the gradual transition toward a market-oriented economy and the normalization of diplomatic and development relations with international partners created new conditions for the emergence of development cooperation involving NGOs, donor agencies, and community-based organizations.

Civil Society Organizations and Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam: The Role of International Cooperation in Community Governance

This process accelerated significantly during the 1990s and early 2000s following Vietnam's normalization of relations with the United States in 1995 and its expanding engagement with multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and ASEAN. International organizations increasingly viewed Vietnam as an important development partner in Southeast Asia because of its rapid economic growth, poverty reduction achievements, and ongoing institutional transformation. As a result, the number of international NGOs operating in Vietnam expanded substantially during this period, particularly in sectors related to education, healthcare, poverty reduction, gender equality, environmental sustainability, and rural development.

The growth of international NGOs was also facilitated by gradual policy opening and administrative reform within Vietnam's development governance framework. Although the Vietnamese state maintained strong regulatory oversight over civil society activities, authorities increasingly recognized the practical importance of international development assistance and NGO participation in addressing socioeconomic challenges, particularly in remote and disadvantaged regions. According to UNDP (2018), development cooperation in Vietnam gradually shifted from humanitarian aid toward broader partnership-based models emphasizing sustainable development and community participation.

Development partnerships became especially important in ethnic minority regions, where state capacity often faced limitations related to geography, infrastructure, and institutional reach. International NGOs frequently collaborated with provincial authorities, local mass organizations, and community groups in implementing development projects. Organizations such as Oxfam, CARE, Save the Children, Plan International, and FHI 360 established long-term development programs focusing on poverty reduction, maternal healthcare, education, women's empowerment, and environmental adaptation in mountainous and rural areas.

At the same time, the expansion of civil society in Vietnam differed significantly from Western liberal models of independent civil society development. Many Vietnamese NGOs and community organizations operated within a framework of negotiated cooperation with state institutions rather than direct political opposition or autonomous advocacy. Consequently, civil society participation in Vietnam often evolved through development-oriented collaboration and service provision rather than adversarial political mobilization. This institutional context strongly shaped how NGOs and CSOs participated in ethnic minority development and community governance.

5.2. International Cooperation and Ethnic Minority Regions

Ethnic minority regions became major recipients of international development cooperation because of persistent poverty, inequality, and uneven access to public services. International organizations and donor agencies increasingly identified mountainous and remote areas as priorities for development intervention due to high poverty rates, limited educational opportunities, weak healthcare systems, and environmental vulnerability. According to the World Bank (2019), ethnic minority communities continued to experience significantly lower living standards compared to national averages despite broader economic growth in Vietnam.

Donor-funded projects in ethnic minority regions frequently focused on community-based development approaches emphasizing participation, local ownership, and grassroots engagement. Unlike earlier development models centered primarily on infrastructure construction and centralized planning, many internationally supported programs sought to strengthen local capacity and community participation in development implementation. NGOs and international agencies increasingly promoted participatory rural development, women's livelihood programs, educational support initiatives, and local governance training in cooperation with local authorities.

Community-based development became a particularly influential model in ethnic minority regions during the 2000s and 2010s. Such programs emphasized direct involvement of local communities in identifying development priorities, planning projects, and monitoring implementation. Existing studies suggest that participatory development approaches were intended to address some limitations of earlier top-down development strategies that often failed to reflect local needs and cultural contexts (Oxfam Vietnam, 2017). In practice, community-based projects included agricultural training, microfinance programs, bilingual education initiatives, maternal healthcare outreach, environmental conservation activities, and women's cooperative development.

International cooperation also contributed to strengthening local governance support in ethnic minority areas. Development agencies increasingly recognized that sustainable poverty reduction required not only economic investment but also improved local institutional capacity and participatory governance mechanisms. Consequently, several projects focused on enhancing community consultation, village-level participation, local planning processes, and institutional coordination between communities and local authorities.

UNDP and USAID reports further indicate that development cooperation in ethnic minority regions increasingly incorporated concepts such as social inclusion, empowerment, and rights-based development. Women, youth, and vulnerable households became important target groups within many development initiatives. Some projects additionally emphasized culturally sensitive implementation approaches recognizing the importance of local languages, indigenous knowledge, and traditional social structures in development processes.

However, development outcomes remained uneven across regions and communities. Some projects successfully strengthened community participation and local capacity, while others encountered difficulties related to bureaucratic procedures, limited

Civil Society Organizations and Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam: The Role of International Cooperation in Community Governance

sustainability, and weak institutional coordination. These variations reflected broader governance challenges associated with participatory development implementation in complex social and political environments.

5.3. CSOs as Intermediaries

One of the most important roles played by civil society organizations in ethnic minority development has been their function as intermediary actors connecting local communities, state institutions, and international donors. In many ethnic minority regions, NGOs and CSOs operate as bridges translating external development priorities into locally understandable and culturally appropriate forms. This intermediary role is particularly important in areas where linguistic barriers, geographic isolation, and institutional distance may limit direct communication between communities and development agencies.

NGOs frequently facilitate communication between donors and local populations by interpreting development policies, organizing community meetings, and supporting participatory planning processes. Through local field staff, community facilitators, and grassroots networks, CSOs help external organizations understand local social conditions, cultural practices, and community priorities. In many cases, NGOs also assist local communities in navigating administrative systems and accessing development resources.

This intermediary function extends beyond communication alone. Civil society organizations often adapt national or donor-driven development frameworks to local realities by incorporating community knowledge, local customs, and culturally specific practices into project implementation. For example, educational projects in ethnic minority regions may include local-language instruction or culturally relevant teaching materials, while healthcare initiatives may rely on community health workers familiar with local languages and customs.

At the same time, NGOs also help local communities articulate concerns and participate more actively in development decision-making. Community meetings, participatory assessments, women's groups, and local consultation mechanisms frequently serve as spaces where community members can communicate priorities and negotiate development needs. Such activities may strengthen local participation and increase community engagement in governance processes.

Nevertheless, the intermediary role of CSOs also contains important tensions. NGOs often depend heavily on donor funding and institutional approval from state authorities, which may limit their autonomy and advocacy capacity. In some cases, NGOs prioritize donor-defined objectives or measurable project outputs over deeper forms of community empowerment. Furthermore, participation itself may become uneven when local elites dominate community consultation processes or when marginalized groups remain excluded from decision-making activities.

Despite these limitations, CSOs remain significant actors within ethnic minority development because they facilitate interaction among multiple governance levels and development stakeholders. Their role demonstrates how community governance in Vietnam increasingly involves not only state institutions but also complex networks of international donors, NGOs, local organizations, and community actors.

Table 1. Major International NGOs and Their Activities in Ethnic Minority Regions of Vietnam

Organization	Main activities	Development sectors
Oxfam Vietnam	Poverty reduction, women's empowerment, livelihood support	Rural development and governance
Save the Children	Education, child welfare, bilingual learning support	Education and healthcare
CARE International	Gender equality, community resilience, local participation	Livelihoods and governance
Plan International	Youth participation, education, community development	Social welfare and education
FHI 360	Public health, HIV prevention, healthcare outreach	Healthcare and community services

Source: Author's compilation from NGO reports, UNDP publications, and development cooperation literature.

6. CSOS AND COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE IN ETHNIC MINORITY DEVELOPMENT

6.1. Education and Community Participation

Education has become one of the most important sectors in which civil society organizations (CSOs) and international development partners contribute to ethnic minority development and community governance in Vietnam. In many mountainous and remote regions, limited educational infrastructure, language barriers, and household poverty continue to restrict access to quality education for ethnic minority children. Within this context, NGOs and community-based organizations have increasingly supported educational initiatives emphasizing local participation, inclusive learning, and community engagement.

Community schooling models represent one important form of CSO involvement in ethnic minority education. International NGOs and local development organizations have frequently collaborated with village communities and local authorities to improve school access, classroom infrastructure, and educational participation in disadvantaged regions. These projects often include support for school facilities, transportation assistance, community learning centers, and educational materials adapted to local contexts.

Civil Society Organizations and Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam: The Role of International Cooperation in Community Governance

According to UNICEF (2018), community-based educational initiatives may improve school retention and participation rates by strengthening local involvement in educational planning and implementation.

Local educational support has also expanded through NGO programs targeting ethnic minority students, teachers, and families. Several organizations have promoted bilingual education, mother-tongue learning support, and culturally responsive teaching practices in areas where language differences create barriers to formal schooling. Such initiatives recognize that educational inequality is closely connected to linguistic exclusion and limited community participation within mainstream educational systems. In some communities, NGOs have additionally supported extracurricular cultural education programs designed to preserve local languages, oral traditions, and indigenous knowledge among younger generations.

Women and youth participation constitute another important dimension of educational governance in ethnic minority regions. CSOs frequently organize women's educational groups, youth leadership programs, and parent-community associations aimed at strengthening local involvement in school management and educational decision-making. Oxfam Vietnam (2017) argues that community participation in education can improve local accountability and encourage stronger collaboration between schools and households. In many regions, women's groups have played significant roles in promoting girls' education, reducing school dropout rates, and supporting early childhood learning initiatives.

At the same time, challenges remain regarding educational participation and sustainability. Limited funding, uneven institutional coordination, and shortages of local-language teachers continue to constrain educational equality in many ethnic minority areas. Furthermore, some community participation mechanisms remain largely consultative rather than genuinely empowering. Nevertheless, CSO involvement has contributed to expanding educational participation and strengthening community engagement in local educational governance.

6.2. Healthcare and Social Welfare

Healthcare and social welfare programs constitute another major area of CSO involvement in ethnic minority development. Ethnic minority regions frequently face limited healthcare infrastructure, shortages of medical personnel, and barriers associated with language, transportation, and poverty. As a result, international NGOs and development agencies have implemented numerous community-based healthcare initiatives aimed at improving public health access and local healthcare capacity.

Public health campaigns supported by NGOs have focused particularly on preventive healthcare, nutrition, sanitation, reproductive health, and disease awareness. In remote communities where access to formal medical facilities remains limited, CSOs often collaborate with local authorities and village health workers to organize outreach activities and community education programs. USAID-supported health initiatives and NGO programs have contributed to expanding awareness regarding maternal health, vaccination, hygiene, and child nutrition in ethnic minority regions (USAID, 2021).

Maternal healthcare has received particular attention because ethnic minority women often experience disproportionately high healthcare vulnerability. Existing studies indicate that women in remote communities frequently face barriers related to transportation, language, healthcare information, and institutional accessibility (UN Women & CEMA, 2021). In response, NGOs have developed community outreach programs involving local health facilitators, women's support groups, and culturally sensitive healthcare communication strategies. Such initiatives aim to strengthen trust between healthcare providers and local populations while improving access to reproductive healthcare and maternal services.

Local outreach mechanisms represent another important contribution of CSOs in healthcare governance. NGOs frequently rely on local facilitators, village volunteers, and community health workers capable of communicating effectively with ethnic minority populations in local languages and cultural contexts. These intermediaries help bridge institutional gaps between formal healthcare systems and local communities. Community-based outreach therefore plays a crucial role in strengthening healthcare accessibility and social welfare participation in remote regions.

Despite these contributions, healthcare inequalities remain substantial in many ethnic minority areas. Geographic isolation, inadequate infrastructure, and dependence on donor-supported projects continue to limit long-term sustainability. Nonetheless, CSO involvement has strengthened community participation in healthcare delivery and expanded access to essential social welfare services.

6.3. Livelihood Development and Empowerment

Livelihood development has become one of the most visible areas of participatory development in ethnic minority regions. Many NGOs and CSOs have implemented programs aimed at reducing poverty, strengthening household resilience, and increasing community empowerment through livelihood diversification and local economic participation. Such initiatives are particularly significant because ethnic minority populations remain disproportionately affected by multidimensional poverty and economic vulnerability.

Microfinance programs have been widely promoted as mechanisms for supporting household-level economic development. NGOs frequently provide small loans, savings groups, and financial training to women and vulnerable households in rural communities. These programs seek to strengthen local entrepreneurship, reduce dependence on informal debt systems, and expand economic

Civil Society Organizations and Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam: The Role of International Cooperation in Community Governance

opportunities for marginalized populations. In many communities, women's savings groups and rotating credit associations have become important forms of collective economic participation and social support.

Agricultural training programs constitute another major component of livelihood development initiatives. International organizations and NGOs often support projects related to sustainable agriculture, livestock production, irrigation techniques, crop diversification, and climate adaptation. Such programs are especially important in mountainous areas where households depend heavily on agriculture and natural resources for their livelihoods. Existing studies suggest that participatory agricultural training may improve local capacity while incorporating indigenous knowledge and local environmental practices into development planning.

Women's cooperatives and community livelihood groups further contribute to empowerment and participatory governance. NGOs frequently support collective production models involving handicrafts, small-scale processing, eco-tourism, and agricultural cooperatives. These initiatives not only generate income but also strengthen community organization and local participation. CARE International (2020) notes that women's livelihood groups often become important spaces for community dialogue, local leadership development, and social participation in ethnic minority regions.

However, livelihood projects also face limitations associated with market instability, donor dependency, and uneven local participation. Some programs remain highly dependent on external technical assistance and struggle to maintain long-term sustainability once donor funding declines. Nevertheless, livelihood initiatives supported by CSOs have contributed significantly to community empowerment and local economic participation in many ethnic minority communities.

6.4. Participatory Governance and Local Voice

One of the most important contributions of civil society organizations in ethnic minority development has been the strengthening of participatory governance and local voice. Participatory governance refers to processes through which local communities engage directly in development planning, consultation, implementation, and monitoring. In many ethnic minority regions, NGOs and CSOs have created spaces for dialogue and grassroots participation that were previously limited within conventional top-down development models.

Local consultation mechanisms represent a central feature of participatory governance initiatives. NGOs frequently organize community consultations, village discussions, and participatory assessments designed to identify local priorities and strengthen communication between communities and development actors. These processes may improve responsiveness to local needs and increase community involvement in decision-making. Participatory planning also allows local knowledge and cultural practices to influence development implementation more directly.

Community meetings and grassroots engagement activities further contribute to strengthening local participation. In several ethnic minority regions, CSOs support village forums, women's groups, youth associations, and local committees that facilitate discussion of development concerns and collective problem-solving. Such activities may increase local awareness regarding rights, social services, and governance processes while encouraging broader civic participation at the community level.

Importantly, participatory governance initiatives can also strengthen relationships between local authorities and communities. NGOs often act as facilitators helping local institutions engage more effectively with ethnic minority populations. Through collaborative governance practices, development projects may improve institutional trust and strengthen local accountability mechanisms.

At the same time, participatory governance remains uneven and contested. Community participation is not always inclusive, and local elites may dominate consultation processes in some regions. Furthermore, participation may occasionally remain symbolic if communities possess limited influence over final policy decisions or resource allocation. Nevertheless, the expansion of participatory development approaches represents an important shift in ethnic minority governance compared to earlier centralized development models.

Table 2. Community Governance Contributions of CSOs in Ethnic Minority Regions

Governance area	CSO contributions	Community impacts
Education	Community schooling, bilingual support, parent participation	Increased educational access and local engagement
Healthcare	Public health outreach, maternal care, local facilitators	Improved healthcare awareness and service access
Livelihoods	Microfinance, agricultural training, cooperatives	Enhanced income generation and empowerment
Governance participation	Community meetings, local consultation, grassroots forums	Strengthened local voice and participatory governance

Source: Author's compilation from NGO reports, UNDP publications, and development governance literature.

7. CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Despite the growing role of civil society organizations (CSOs) and international cooperation in ethnic minority development, significant challenges and limitations continue to affect the effectiveness and sustainability of participatory governance in Vietnam.

Civil Society Organizations and Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam: The Role of International Cooperation in Community Governance

While NGOs and community-based organizations have contributed positively to education, healthcare, livelihood development, and local participation, their activities remain shaped by institutional constraints, donor dependency, uneven participation, and coordination difficulties. These challenges illustrate the complexity of implementing participatory development within a highly centralized governance environment and economically vulnerable regions.

One major limitation concerns institutional constraints affecting CSO autonomy and operational flexibility. Although Vietnam has gradually expanded opportunities for development cooperation and NGO participation since the post-Đổi Mới period, civil society organizations continue to operate within a regulatory framework characterized by administrative oversight and institutional supervision. Existing studies suggest that NGOs often face procedural restrictions related to project approval, registration, reporting requirements, and partnership coordination with state agencies (UNDP, 2018). Such regulatory barriers may limit the ability of CSOs to respond flexibly to local needs or engage in independent advocacy regarding governance issues affecting ethnic minority communities.

Limited institutional autonomy also affects the long-term capacity of local organizations. Many community-based organizations remain heavily dependent on external technical support, administrative approval, or international partnerships. Consequently, some CSOs prioritize maintaining institutional stability and donor relationships rather than pursuing broader forms of grassroots empowerment or policy advocacy. This situation may reduce the transformative potential of participatory governance initiatives in ethnic minority regions.

Donor dependency constitutes another significant challenge. A large proportion of NGO and CSO activities in ethnic minority development rely heavily on international donor funding and project-based development assistance. While external funding has enabled the implementation of important programs in education, healthcare, and livelihood development, it also creates vulnerability regarding long-term sustainability. Development projects are often limited by short funding cycles, shifting donor priorities, and uncertain financial continuity. When donor support decreases or projects conclude, local communities and organizations may struggle to maintain activities because of limited financial resources and institutional capacity.

Project instability further complicates community development efforts. Short-term interventions sometimes prioritize measurable outputs and rapid implementation over sustainable institutional development and long-term community participation. Oxfam Vietnam (2017) argues that donor-driven development may unintentionally encourage fragmented interventions rather than integrated and locally grounded governance strategies. As a result, communities occasionally experience discontinuity in services, training programs, or livelihood support initiatives once funding periods end.

Uneven participation also remains an important limitation within participatory development processes. Although NGOs frequently emphasize community engagement and grassroots participation, participation itself is not always inclusive or equitable. In some communities, local elites, village leaders, or socially advantaged groups dominate consultation processes and decision-making mechanisms. Consequently, marginalized households, women, youth, and vulnerable individuals may possess limited influence over development priorities and project implementation.

In other cases, participation may become largely symbolic rather than substantive. Community meetings and consultation activities may provide opportunities for discussion without granting communities meaningful authority over resource allocation or governance decisions. Such forms of symbolic participation risk reinforcing existing power hierarchies while creating the appearance of participatory governance without deeper structural empowerment.

Coordination problems among NGOs, donors, and local authorities further affect development effectiveness. In some ethnic minority regions, multiple organizations operate simultaneously with overlapping objectives, fragmented interventions, and inconsistent implementation strategies. Weak coordination may produce duplication of activities, inefficient resource allocation, and confusion among local communities regarding project responsibilities and priorities.

Integration between NGO projects and local governance systems also remains uneven. Some development initiatives operate largely alongside local administrative structures rather than becoming fully integrated into long-term community governance frameworks. Consequently, project outcomes may remain isolated and difficult to sustain after external support concludes. Strengthening institutional coordination and collaborative governance therefore remains essential for improving the long-term effectiveness of participatory development in ethnic minority regions.

Table 3. Main Challenges Facing CSOs in Ethnic Minority Development

Challenge	Main causes	Long-term implications
Institutional constraints	Regulatory oversight and limited organizational autonomy	Restricted participatory governance capacity
Donor dependency	Short-term project funding and financial uncertainty	Weak sustainability and project instability
Uneven participation	Elite capture and unequal community representation	Limited grassroots empowerment
Coordination problems	Overlapping NGO activities and weak institutional integration	Fragmented development outcomes

Source: Author's compilation from UNDP reports, NGO publications, and governance studies.

Civil Society Organizations and Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam: The Role of International Cooperation in Community Governance

8. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that civil society organizations (CSOs) should be understood not merely as service providers but as increasingly important governance actors within ethnic minority development in Vietnam. Through their involvement in education, healthcare, livelihood support, women's empowerment, and participatory planning, NGOs and community-based organizations have contributed to reshaping development governance in many ethnic minority regions. Their activities extend beyond technical assistance or humanitarian support because they frequently facilitate communication, negotiation, and collaboration among local communities, state institutions, and international donors. In this sense, CSOs function as intermediary institutions helping translate development policies into locally meaningful practices while simultaneously communicating community concerns to external actors.

The study also highlights that participatory development is more complex than the simple existence of community participation mechanisms. Participation quality matters significantly. While many NGO-supported projects emphasize grassroots engagement and local consultation, not all forms of participation necessarily produce empowerment or meaningful governance transformation. In some cases, participation remains symbolic or procedural, allowing communities to attend meetings or provide limited feedback without possessing substantial influence over project priorities or resource allocation. Existing power inequalities within communities may also shape participatory processes, allowing local elites or socially advantaged groups to dominate decision-making while marginalized households remain excluded.

These findings contribute to broader debates on participatory governance and development decentralization. Participatory development theory often assumes that local involvement automatically strengthens accountability and community ownership. However, the Vietnamese case demonstrates that participation operates within broader institutional and political contexts that strongly influence its effectiveness. Genuine participation requires not only consultation mechanisms but also institutional conditions enabling communities to exercise meaningful agency and sustained influence over development processes.

International cooperation similarly reveals both opportunities and contradictions. Donor-funded projects and NGO partnerships have expanded resources, technical support, and participatory governance initiatives in ethnic minority regions. International cooperation has contributed positively to educational access, healthcare outreach, women's participation, livelihood diversification, and local capacity building. Nevertheless, the study also shows that development cooperation may unintentionally reproduce forms of dependency when local organizations and communities become heavily reliant on short-term donor funding and externally defined project priorities. In such contexts, participatory governance risks becoming project-driven rather than institutionally embedded within long-term local governance systems.

The analysis further contributes to debates concerning civil society in authoritarian or state-centered political contexts. Unlike liberal democratic models in which civil society is frequently conceptualized as independent from the state, civil society participation in Vietnam often develops through negotiated cooperation and institutional collaboration with state authorities. NGOs and CSOs therefore operate within a hybrid governance environment characterized by both cooperation and regulation. This institutional context shapes the possibilities and limitations of community governance in ethnic minority regions.

Ultimately, the study suggests that effective ethnic minority development requires moving beyond narrow project implementation toward more sustainable forms of participatory governance. Community empowerment depends not only on external funding or NGO activity but also on strengthening local institutional capacity, inclusive participation, and long-term collaborative governance relationships among communities, civil society organizations, and state institutions.

9. CONCLUSION

This article examined the role of civil society organizations and international cooperation in ethnic minority development and community governance in Vietnam between 1995 and 2025. The study demonstrated that NGOs and CSOs have contributed significantly to education, healthcare, livelihood development, and local participation in many ethnic minority regions. Through community-based projects, participatory planning, women's empowerment initiatives, and local governance support, civil society actors have helped expand opportunities for grassroots engagement and community development.

At the same time, the study also identified important institutional and structural limitations affecting participatory governance processes. Regulatory constraints, donor dependency, uneven participation, and weak coordination continue to shape the operational environment of NGOs and CSOs in Vietnam. In many cases, participatory mechanisms remain limited by symbolic participation, short-term project cycles, and unequal community representation. These challenges demonstrate that development cooperation alone cannot automatically produce inclusive governance or sustainable empowerment.

The article argues that effective ethnic minority development requires more than technical development assistance or project-based intervention. Sustainable development outcomes depend on genuine participation, stronger local governance capacity, long-term institutional cooperation, and meaningful community empowerment. Local communities must be recognized not simply as development beneficiaries but as active governance actors capable of shaping development priorities and implementation processes.

Civil Society Organizations and Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam: The Role of International Cooperation in Community Governance

From a broader academic perspective, the Vietnamese case contributes to discussions on participatory governance, development decentralization, community empowerment, and civil society in state-centered political contexts. It illustrates how NGOs and CSOs may simultaneously strengthen local participation while operating within institutional environments characterized by regulation and dependency.

Future international cooperation should therefore move beyond short-term project implementation toward long-term participatory governance and locally grounded development models. Strengthening sustainable partnerships among communities, civil society organizations, donors, and local authorities will be essential for promoting more inclusive and resilient forms of ethnic minority development in Vietnam.

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