

# Analysing key debates in education and sustainable development in relation to ESD practice in Viet Nam

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**Note:** This article uses Vietnamese spellings of place names rather than anglicized versions, for example Ha Noi rather than Hanoi. This is because these were the terms used by research participants, local organizations, and featured in much of the literature reviewed. This approach is also taken by international organizations such as UNESCO.

## **Abstract**

This article is based on qualitative field research carried out in Ha Noi, Viet Nam, in 2013 for an MA dissertation in Education and International Development at the UCL Institute of Education. It analyses interpretations of education for sustainable development (ESD) in Viet Nam, relating these to key debates around instrumental and democratic approaches.

In order to understand and analyse ESD in the Vietnamese context, interviews were conducted in Ha Noi with university student volunteers who create and implement ESD activities. Students were part of NGO-led networks or university-based clubs. Their activities targeted peers, children, and local communities. NGO staff working on youth-related ESD were also interviewed.

The institutional structure in which these youth-led projects operate strongly determined their approach, revealing a focus on behaviour change. This links closely with core debates within the ESD canon on instrumental and participatory approaches. Youth activities generally align with the instrumental approach, however, participant experiences also contained elements associated with the participatory approach. These included critical thinking, personal development, and engagement with complex cross-cutting issues such as climate change. The research presents an example of ESD practice that combines the democratic and instrumental approaches within the unique cultural, social, and political context of Viet Nam.

**Keywords:** education for sustainable development, environmental education, Vietnam, Viet Nam, youth volunteering, youth

## **Introduction**

This article is based on qualitative field research carried out in Ha Noi, Viet Nam, in 2013 for an MA dissertation in Education and International Development at the UCL Institute of Education. It analyses interpretations of education for sustainable development (ESD) in Viet Nam, relating these to key debates around instrumental and democratic approaches.

Qualitative research was conducted with university student volunteers who create and implement ESD activities targeted at peers, children, and local communities. NGO staff working on youth-related ESD were also interviewed. This paper presents and analyses an example of ESD practice that combines the democratic and instrumental approaches within the unique cultural, social, and political context of Viet Nam.

This paper is split into three main sections, a conceptual framework, a contextual analysis, and finally a detailed analysis of research findings in relation to key literature and theory.

## **Conceptual Framework**

This section analyses debates on approaches to education for sustainable development (ESD), noting that limited attention has been paid to the feasibility of participatory approaches outside Western contexts.

Discussions on environmental education (EE) and education for sustainable development (ESD) suggest that either one can be seen as falling under the other's umbrella (McKeown and Hopkins, 2003). Diverse perspectives and differing disciplinary backgrounds have shaped the discussion on how these concepts are understood and defined. Some academics have argued that the ongoing and open nature of this debate means it is less important to clearly define each term and more important to critically reflect on their interpretations in different contexts (Sauvé, 1996). This paper applies existing literature and theory to examine how ESD or EE is interpreted and applied in one Vietnamese context.

UNESCO (2013: 114) recently highlighted that the term 'ESD' is not explicitly 'part of the educational panorama' in Viet Nam although ESD principles are present in policy and practice. Terminologies including climate change education (CCE), environmental education (EE), and sustainability education (SE) are used in Viet Nam, and are often perceived to be separate and disconnected areas. The scope of

youth-led projects in Viet Nam ranges broadly across the aforementioned topics, therefore the broad term ESD will be used in this paper.

ESD practices in Viet Nam can be framed in relation to current theories and debates on ESD. This paper draws specifically on two key theories: the instrumental approach and the democratic/participatory approach. Debates on the purpose, principles, and practice of ESD often relate to the differences between the instrumental approach and the democratic approach; sometimes positioning them as at either end of a spectrum.

The instrumental approach often focuses on behaviour change, conceptualizing 'education as an instrument to achieve particular targets' (IALEI, 2009: 13). This mode usually teaches specific content relating to the environment, suggesting that views about these issues have been 'established amongst experts, textbook authors, and teachers *before* the educational event' (Ohman and Ohman, 2013: 325). This approach can make ESD relevant to the daily lives of participants particularly through providing concrete ways for young people to contribute (e.g. pro-environmental actions). The pedagogy behind the instrumental approach links to the globally dominant model of schooling that places the teacher at the centre of learning, often using 'chalk and talk' approaches (Sterling, 2001).

Criticisms of the instrumental approach include students potentially enacting pro-environmental behaviours without engaging with the wider context and the possibility that ESD can 'slip from education to indoctrination' (Bangay and Blum, 2010: 363). The instrumental approach can be conceptualized as a linear process in which educators 'give' knowledge and information to students. This is challenging because scientists and educators do not necessarily have clear solutions for environmental problems that can be easily taught to the next generation. Advocating specific behaviours may over-simplify complex issues like climate change for which there are no simple solutions (Scott and Gough, 2007).

The participatory or democratic approach alternatively focuses on developing young people as 'independent thinker[s] who consider[s] and engage[s] with society's important challenges, both alone and especially in dialogue with others' (IALEI, 2009: 11). In this approach, environmental views are established *during* ESD activities as part of a dynamic exchange between participants (Ohman and Ohman, 2013). Researchers have suggested that this enables participants to develop skills such as reflection, critical thinking, and problem solving (Bangay and Blum, 2010). It has been argued that a democratic approach is less about teaching concepts and more about reflecting on the contested meanings of complex topics like sustainable development (Huckle and Sterling, 1996).

Contemporary debates on ESD are often informed by assumptions (sometimes implicit rather than explicitly stated) that the participatory approach is superior to an instrumental approach that is inherently more simplistic. The current body of ESD research is largely focused on European and North American contexts, with a growing focus on African contexts (e.g. Johnson-Pynn and Johnson, 2010). While this literature informs the research, this paper uniquely aims to situate ESD in the very different context of Viet Nam through drawing on the two key theories mentioned earlier. This paper aims to develop academic understandings of the feasibility of the participatory approach and to better understand how ESD theory links to practice in non-Western contexts. Previous research from Asia-Pacific has tended to focus on the environmental knowledge young people have and how this affects their attitudes or actions (e.g. Said *et al.*, 2007; Rickinson, 2001). There is a small body of relevant ESD research conducted in Viet Nam that has significantly informed the content of this paper (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2013; Khuc, 2012; Live & Learn and Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, 2011).

### **Scoping the Vietnamese context**

This contextual analysis outlines the research approach and methodology used, as well as briefly touching upon some of the research limitations. It also uses relevant literature to introduce and analyse the nature of ESD within the Vietnamese context, bringing in supplementary interviews with NGO staff that inform the research.

### **Research approach and methodology**

This small-scale research study was undertaken to contribute towards a dissertation for an MA in Education and International Development in 2013 at the UCL Institute of Education. The research study aimed to learn more about young people's perspectives on ESD activities in Viet Nam. The terms 'youth' and 'young people' will be used throughout this paper to describe the research participants. These were the terms used by the participants themselves. 'Youth' is being used as it is understood in the Vietnamese context: as a life stage of independence prior to marriage rather than as a specific period of years in someone's life (Valentin, 2007). The study also aims to further define and understand the pedagogical approach to ESD in the Vietnamese context. The research specifically focused on higher education students who volunteer their time to create and implement ESD activities. It was undertaken while working with Live & Learn, an environmental education NGO which coordinates the Green Generation movement that brings together university students for ESD volunteering. Live & Learn Viet Nam is part of the Live & Learn international network. Live & Learn is an environmental education NGO founded in Australia in 1991. It has since expanded to operate across 11 different countries, mostly in the Asia-Pacific region. Live & Learn works as an international network rather than a

centrally controlled organization and is a locally registered NGO in each country of operation.

This research took place over five weeks in Viet Nam, based mainly in Ha Noi but also with travel to Da Nang and Hoi An in the centre of the country. The majority of this time was spent at the Live & Learn office, contributing to their programmes, and conducting this piece of research.

The focus on youth perspectives meant that qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups using open-ended research questions were appropriate to gather data on the topic (Schostak, 2005). Participant-observation was also an important method that helped to enhance understanding of the context (Musante and DeWalt, 2010). Individual and group interviews lasted between 15 and 90 minutes depending on time available, participant English language skills, and the personality of individual participants. In group settings, some participants would inevitably have more to say than others and shy participants may not have been able to express themselves as much as in an individual interview. Interview structure was flexible to each circumstance and situation but included the same questions for each participant. Interviews were recorded with the permission of participants and later transcribed.

**Table 1: Details of participant demographics**

Participant details	
<b>Median age of participants</b>	20
<b>Gender of participants</b>	Female: 19
	Male: 6
<b>Membership of networks</b>	Green Generation network: 19
	350 networks: 5
	Members of both 350 and Green Generation: 3
<b>Location of participants</b>	Ha Noi: 22
	Da Nang: 3

Twenty-five young people were interviewed in total, aged between 18 and 23. Participants were generally university students from urban areas although a few had moved to the city from rural areas to attend university. Initial participants were selected through the Green Generation network via contacts at Live & Learn; a snowball sampling approach was then used to select other research participants on the recommendation of existing participants. These limitations mean that the research cannot represent Vietnamese young people’s perspectives on ESD generally, but participant views are likely similar to the views of other Green Generation or 350 volunteers. It draws upon previous research on ESD in Viet Nam that has similarly

focused on educated youth; they are the most engaged group in this field and have the greatest access to opportunities for participation (Khuc, 2012). Pseudonyms were used for all research participants in order to protect confidentiality and allow participants to speak openly.

Members of staff from five different organizations were also interviewed: Live & Learn, Plan International, the British Council, Challenge to Change, and Community and Environment (C&E). These represent a small but particularly active sample of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and NGOs who work on ESD; they were selected using a snowball approach and following initial recommendations from Live & Learn staff. Interviewing NGO staff provided greater context to ESD in Viet Nam and insight into the pedagogical approaches that were being used.

### **Analysis of ESD in the Vietnamese context**

This section uses relevant literature to inform the context, as well as analysis of supporting interviews (carried out as part of the research with local NGO staff). NGO staff have a strong understanding of the national and local contexts that they work within and were therefore well placed to explain effective approaches to ESD in Viet Nam. They highlighted a general approach to ESD in which young people act as change agents, applying an over-arching model of behaviour change to discrete projects within unique institutional structures. The top-down policy context influenced the extent of youth participation and the range of ESD activities implemented. ESD projects worked within these often rigid structures, generally focusing on behaviour change and awareness raising rather than advocacy.

ESD projects exist in a policy context that is heavily influenced by both the Government of Viet Nam (GoV) and the Communist Party of Viet Nam. A recent UNESCO report (2013: 110) states that 'these structures, reaching from the highest levels of state down to grassroots participation, are top-down oriented bureaucracies with highly centralized decision-making powers'. GoV/Party support can increase the potential and scope of approved projects, but may also present challenges for bottom-up approaches and for encouraging community-level participation (UNESCO, 2013). INGOs and NGOs have historically had positive and even uncritical attitudes towards the GoV (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2004). The channels provided by the GoV are very effective, but it can be extremely difficult to work outside of them (UNICEF, 2004).

In May 2013, there were 70 climate change education (CCE) and disaster risk reduction (DRR) projects in Viet Nam (Live & Learn, 2013). Climate change is a development priority in Viet Nam so the majority of ESD initiatives focus on DRR and CCE. These projects are delivered by 50 different organizations, half of which

are national and international NGOs. Other implementing organizations include schools, the GoV, media, and political/social groups. Proportionately, the majority of projects are delivered by the NGO sector and take place in informal educational settings, however, collaboration and partnerships are common across and between different stakeholders.

The research conducted for this paper found a wide and diverse variety of projects carried out by research participants and conceptualized as ESD. The majority of these were informal educational activities involving children and local communities as well as specific groups such as farmers, motorcycle users, and shop vendors. Specific campaigns or projects included *I Hate Plastic* (a campaign on reducing, reusing, and recycling plastic bags), *I Will if You Will* (a celebrity-backed campaign that asked people to pledge actions that would reduce environmental impact), *Green Pause* and *No Horn* (campaigns to reduce emissions and fuel for road users) as well as presentations and activities on climate change in primary schools. Research participants also organized events for international occasions (i.e. Earth Hour, World Biodiversity Day, and World Environment Day) and small-scale local events (clean ups, energy saving exchanges).

ESD in Viet Nam is characterized by child- and youth-centred approaches and these were advocated by all the NGO staff interviewed for this research project (Live & Learn, 2013a). A Challenge to Change (2013) presentation stated that youth are effective change agents because 'they are motivated by strong ideals, they are willing to take risks, they have a lot of energy, they are trend-setters for others and they are highly communicative'. NGO staff also felt that young people were essential stakeholders for meeting future challenges such as climate change:

*Young people are not really taken seriously, so when we do projects with young people donors often ask what young people have to do with climate change. Our key argument is that they need to be prepared because in the future we need local leaders. If we don't do it now, when will we do it?*

Phuong, NGO member of staff

Interviews with NGO staff as well as NGO documents suggested that behaviour change is the dominant model used to implement ESD activities for young people in Viet Nam. Live & Learn's (2013) review of activities across Viet Nam summarizes this general approach:

*Activities prioritized awareness raising, skills building and behaviour change, with many designed to be innovative and participatory, reflecting a focus on engagement and community ownership and a prioritization of community and school-based project targets.*

Live & Learn, 2013: 13

The common aim of youth projects in Viet Nam is for young participants to change their own behaviour and to influence the actions of others. While this research focused largely on behaviour change models, there are other less common approaches to climate change and environment-related projects in Viet Nam. For example, some NGOs focus on advocacy and on influencing different levels of government; this is often aimed at audiences other than youth.

Environmental activism in other contexts often takes the form of direct action that includes protests, marches, symbolic actions, and even violence against property (Rootes, 1999). Activist behaviours in these contexts are sometimes seen as radical and extreme. However, environmental activists in Viet Nam are not perceived as part of a radical movement. This is partially because the political context of Viet Nam limits campaigning strategies. Vietnamese civil society groups or movements must be approved by the GoV and the Party and maintain good relations with these institutions (UNICEF, 2004). Activists in Viet Nam therefore use non-confrontational advocacy methods such as 'subtle negotiation' to achieve their goals (UNICEF, 2004: 33).

Youth participation in decision-making is limited in Viet Nam. UNFCCC (2013) recently identified examples of inspirational youth projects across five categories: mitigation activities, adaptation activities, developing youth leadership, raising awareness, and influencing decision-making. Within this framework, youth projects taking place in Viet Nam mainly focus on raising awareness and developing youth leadership, with less focus on influencing decision-making. Vietnamese youth also participate in climate change adaptation and mitigation activities, however this research referred more generally to ESD. Indeed, only 38 per cent of Live & Learn and Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (2011) survey respondents felt that they participated in decision-making processes and many were uncertain as to how they could participate. This view was also supported by NGO staff. Danh, an NGO staff member, said that:

*In Viet Nam children [and young people] do not have any place in local planning. They only join with the NGO activities or projects. They never come to any workshop or any planning from government at any level. So that's why, when we invite them to our projects, they're very happy.*

Although young people may have opportunities to participate at a community level, it seems harder to do this at higher levels. Theis's (2007) research on youth participation in South East Asia defined three different types of participation: participation as performance and responsibility, participation as rights, and participation as democratic citizenship. Participation as performance and responsibility has historic associations with Party-led youth organizations and community service in Viet Nam (Theis, 2007). The nature of the Vietnamese state fosters limited opportunities for the



recognition of young people's rights to influence decisions or for youth participation at economic and political levels (Theis, 2007; UNICEF, 2004). This is partially explained by the age hierarchy in Vietnamese society which also impacts the extent to which young people are taken seriously by older people (Enkthor, 2007).

UNICEF (2004) argues that Government of Vietnam (GoV) policies conceptualize youth as human resources rather than rights holders. Research elsewhere suggests that Viet Nam's environment and climate-specific policies may show 'negligible appreciation of rights-based language and commitments' (Walker, 2012: 5). The role of youth in the Vietnamese political context is therefore an important factor for understanding the extent and limitations of their participation in ESD.

Some NGO members of staff commented that ESD was at an early stage of development in Viet Nam, which meant that raising awareness had to take priority. Phuong was concerned that some projects overly focused on awareness raising or behaviour change, at the expense of more participatory approaches:

*I find the foundation of the educational system in our country in general, and climate change education specifically, is lacking in critical thinking. An example is unsustainable youth based projects; they throw so many resources like time and staffing on raising awareness in general but cannot evaluate it or sustain it on a higher level.*

While critical thinking may not be an explicit outcome of all ESD projects in Viet Nam, there are a number of youth-centred projects that encourage critical responses from participants. UNESCO's (2013: 114) recent research highlights that voluntary activities led by Vietnamese youth groups often show 'great understanding of ESD principles'. NGO staff also felt that critical thinking and developing initiative were important gains for participants in some projects:

*We are not giving them everything; we are trying to encourage them to come up with ideas themselves.*

Sang, NGO member of staff

*We ask young people: What does climate change mean to you? What does resilience mean to you and your community? So let's identify problems that you see happening and is there any change or negative impact for community development, in your city or office ... and then you propose something to do to solve that.*

Phuong, NGO member of staff

Phuong and Sang highlighted that participants often used high-level cognitive skills such as evaluation, analysis, synthesis, innovation, and creativity. Both Green Generation and 350 operate models that encourage young people to develop and implement projects addressing environmental issues of their choice. Other youth

projects operating in Viet Nam led by NGOs such as Challenge to Change and C&E use similar methods. Although youth participants received support from NGOs, young people themselves were largely in charge of project implementation and decision-making.

### **Challenges and limitations**

This section briefly outlines some of the limitations and challenges that shaped this piece of research. Other researchers working in Viet Nam have described fieldwork as ‘negotiated, adaptive and require[ing] a degree of flexibility’ (Scott *et al.*, 2005: 38). Key fieldwork challenges in this instance related to language and translation, time constraints, busy schedules, and establishing connections.

The interviews were conducted in English, and this limited potential participants to those who spoke English. In group interviews, students would help to translate for other participants who spoke less English. Although this was very useful, the translator often supplied a summary rather than a direct translation meaning that the subtler nuances of opinions may have been missed. Technical terminology around climate change and ESD may also have been difficult for participants to translate into English. Vietnamese language skills on my part would have helped to gain greater insight into youth projects and opinions.

### **Capturing the youth experience**

This section analyses the research findings in greater detail, paying particular attention to young people’s experience participating in ESD in Viet Nam. It considers the intersections between instrumental and participatory approaches in Viet Nam; young people’s projects often focused on behaviour change but also included elements more typically associated with a participatory approach. Research participants’ own change in attitudes often inspired them to try and change the minds of others. They acknowledged the challenging global context as well as challenges within the national institutional context; these obstacles shaped the type of activities conducted by young people as well as their expectations for change. Young people understood their level of influence to be limited and therefore targeted their ESD activities at a small-scale local level, rarely attempting to achieve a national or global reach.

### **Changing behaviours and attitudes**

Although the approach to ESD was clearly centred around behaviour change, there were also elements of the participatory approach evident through young people’s own changing attitudes and critical reflections. This presents an interesting example

of ESD practice in which aspects of two approaches – which are often discussed in opposition to one another – are simultaneously present.

Young people often focused their self-initiated ESD projects on behaviour change, for example the *I Hate Plastic* campaign encourages communities to change their behaviour by reducing, reusing, and recycling plastic bags. As noted earlier, interviews with NGO staff suggest the behaviour change model is dominant in Viet Nam and it is likely that young people's exposure to this model influences their projects. The model of behaviour change used in these projects can be seen as reflecting an instrumental view of ESD in which the purpose of educational activities is to achieve predetermined pro-environmental goals, or to take actions that contribute to large-scale aims (IALEI, 2009).

In spite of this, the process of participating in these projects was more closely aligned with a democratic approach that develops critical thinking and reflective skills (Bangay and Blum, 2010). Comments from NGO staff suggested that the experience of youth engaging in these projects shares features associated with democratic approaches. The process of participation was frequently mentioned by NGO staff as a key element of youth volunteering, with personal development seen as more important than tangible outputs, outcomes, or targets.

Some youth participants spoke about a general change in their mode of thinking and their approach to projects outside ESD. Anh described her experience of increased awareness and engagement:

*The most important thing that I've learnt is the way I see everything around me. Now when doing an assignment, I always think about which are the fastest steps to complete it? Where can I get useful information? Who can help me to do it better? Does this create a good or bad influence to my work after? When do I have to complete it to spend time studying? Working with these questions, which I have never asked before, helps me a lot in finding the best way to work.*

*An interesting thing is that these questions do not only appear in my work but also when I observe other people's work. For example, when I come to an event, I try to find out how they can hire such a good hall, how to check everything before the starting time, why they have to check in before the event, how to write a good press release, what to do when the audience are distracted ... and then I take notes, to apply in my events.*

*I mean that I don't just 'see,' I 'observe' everything. At the beginning, I observe because I need to; now I observe because I'd like to.*

Anh, research participant (female, age 19)

Some youth participants shared stories of transformation and change when asked about their motivation. Although they may not have had a strong motivation for joining an environmental club, some participants felt they had become increasingly aware of environmental issues and pro-environmental behaviours. Participants thought they had a responsibility to solve environmental problems, usually through individual behaviour change and by encouraging others to change their behaviour too:

*So before I was working in the environmental field I had no idea about the environment. Just live what you want, let it go, let it be ... everything. But after I attended the environmental club I found that we must be more responsible ... I tell other people to do them – so I have to do it and I have to understand it. People are not sure what you say if even you don't do it. It was very accidental for me but after I attended the environment club I found that we have to be more responsible.*

Anh, research participant (female, age 19)

*I heard a quote 'we do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children' which is very inspiring and I realize that I myself must take the responsibilities to save the earth. This is my biggest motivation.*

Kim-Ly, research participant (female, age 20)

Several participants felt that their increased knowledge about environmental behaviours meant they were now better equipped to take action. Participants in ESD programmes in China also reported an 'enhanced sense of personal and social responsibility' (Johnson *et al.*, 2007: 373). Taking on the role of educating others helped motivate participants to change their own attitudes and behaviours. This links closely to the behaviour change paradigm, which is clearly an important part of ESD in Viet Nam, but there is also a clear linkage with the democratic approach: youth participants are setting their own goals and creating their own projects.

### **Understanding the national and international context**

Youth participants reflected on the structures they worked within and their role as young people in Viet Nam as well as recognizing some of the institutional constraints discussed earlier in this paper.

Several participants said that youth ESD work needed more support at national and international levels. These comments imply that ESD is understood as one element of a broader effort to impact global environmental issues. Youth participants in Viet Nam understood ESD as a way to change local and global environments through changing the behaviour of their peers and community members. This aligns closely with instrumental approaches to ESD.

Hung, an experienced student activist and founder of several environmental organizations expressed a nuanced opinion about the impact of youth ESD projects. Hung said that the bigger picture involved both the international community and greater commitment from the GoV:

*We don't produce a lot of carbon compared to other countries so trying to reduce our carbon footprint is not a solution for Viet Nam. We already like to live in the big city so it's so hard to say that we need to change our energy, or to green energy, it needs a lot of money.*

*I work on plastic reduction now, but even if all people change to paper bags it doesn't make a difference. Even if the whole country turns off the lights for Earth Hour it doesn't mean anything. You cannot save a country by turning off the lights!*

Hung, research participant (male, age 23)

Youth participants highlighted the limitations of their own actions and noted the need for greater engagement and commitment from other actors. They often framed the challenges they faced in relation to the instrumental model of ESD. It was therefore not surprising that many participants identified encouraging behaviour change among others as a significant challenge:

*Some farmers like this project but it's difficult to do organic agriculture in Viet Nam - it's maybe easy to say but it's difficult to do it ... And when we come with our project for environment, they will say 'I don't know about the environment, I don't know how to protect the environment.' But if you tell them about organic agriculture and new food sources for Viet Nam then I think it's better, it's closer to the farmers' lives. They care more about this.*

Lanh, research participant (female, age 20)

Institutional constraints are another challenge that youth ESD projects can face. Lousley (1999) identified these in the school setting, noting that Canadian youth clubs were restricted to activities that followed school policies and were often unable to apply a critical approach. In Viet Nam the role of youth is influenced by Confucian values of filial duty (to the family and the nation state) as well as rigid societal structures that make it difficult for people to be critical of the GoV or the Communist Party of Viet Nam (Valentin, 2007; UNICEF, 2004). ESD activities in Viet Nam tended to focus on small-scale behaviour change instead of attempting to influence government policy, suggesting that the dominance of the instrumental approach is shaped by this socio-political context.

## Alternative approaches to ESD in Viet Nam

Although the majority of ESD projects focused on behaviour change, there were a few examples of advocacy projects. ‘Soft’ advocacy approaches were used to influence decision makers, always working within institutional structures and finding appropriate roles for youth to play.

One example of youth influencing decision-making is a bear conservation centre that was threatened with closure. NGO staff said that people can be scared to go against the government but highlighted the Action Bear youth group’s role as part of a successful movement to keep the centre open. One member of the youth group commented that:

*We are so young and we didn’t have much experience in doing something like this. Our voices are very weak so we could not give our wishes to the government. But I think the best thing we did was connecting people together. We connected the young people together, connected the journalists together, as well as the voices of other seniors and NGOs. And we also had support from Animals Asia. Thanks to all of this, we could help keep the centre open.*

Kai, research participant (female, age 20)

Kai’s comments confirm that actions like lobbying the government for change are difficult especially for youth who lack influence. Kai also noted that it was hard to send a letter to the Prime Minister as many people were initially unwilling to sign it. However, she suggested that connecting people together is an effective and appropriate way for young people to influence the government.

One participant said that it was not acceptable to protest in Viet Nam and this meant that ESD projects had to be as creative as possible in order to engage people. Although Vietnamese youth volunteers may try to influence government policy through petition writing or other means, they did not generally engage in protests or explicit criticism of policies. The majority of ESD projects therefore tried to encourage behaviour change rather than influence macro-level decision-making. It may be a comfortable niche for Vietnamese youth groups to focus on raising awareness among fellow students and the general public. Although the political and social context presents restrictions on the types of action that can be taken, it can also allow for creativity and innovation.

## Conclusions

In summary, youth-led ESD projects in Viet Nam combine elements from different theoretical approaches to create a unique version of ESD that is tailored to and shaped by the local context. Youth participants developed innovative approaches for raising awareness and changing behaviours without threatening institutional

structures. This approach is likely to be more effective in Viet Nam than importing models of activism from other contexts.

Young people often thought about ESD using the instrumental approach – they aimed to make a difference in their environment and communities through changing the behaviour of others. Despite the instrumental approach being fairly explicit in the projects themselves, this research found that elements of the democratic approach were present within youth experience. Young people in Viet Nam took ownership of their projects and campaigns, gaining communication and organizational skills, as well as developing innovative approaches. Their first-hand accounts suggested they were thinking creatively and critically as a result of their engagement with ESD. Research participants used dynamic approaches to engage with the complexity of international environmental issues, while keeping their projects relevant and appropriate to the national context.

In addition to acquiring greater knowledge about ESD issues, young people also went through a process of personal development through their ESD engagement. These attitude and behaviour changes were an important part of young people's ESD engagement which demonstrates principles of the participatory approach.

The existing body of ESD literature may not have paid sufficient attention to the diversity of contexts in which ESD practice takes place, or to the feasibility of applying ESD in these settings. This is particularly relevant for non-Western contexts such as Viet Nam which have socialist governments. Government bodies in these contexts have an interest and involvement in ESD programmes that shapes NGO and youth options for engagement in this field. While this paper has focused solely on ESD in Viet Nam, other researchers have highlighted the complexity of ESD in similar contexts and this is a growing area of exploration (Hustinx *et al.*, 2012; Xu, 2012; Ryan *et al.*, 2010; Johnson *et al.*, 2007; Theis, 2007).

ESD theory often conceptualizes participatory approaches as more sophisticated and complex than instrumental approaches. However, basing practice entirely on participatory theory may be difficult and inappropriate in a setting such as Viet Nam. ESD practice in this example uses a unique intersection of theories to create an approach that is tailored to fit the constraints and opportunities of the context.

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