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Youth Civic Engagement in Vietnam: Envisioning Social Change Through Everyday Actions

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Abstract This sociological investigation into youth training programmes illuminates how young people's civic engagement can be nurtured in a one-party political setting where actions that overtly challenge the state's authority are highly repressed. The study uses qualitative data collected in 2020 from participant observation at training programmes organised by Vietnamese civil society and in-depth interviews with young participants in these programmes. The findings show how such venues provide youths with frames of reference for their everyday civic engagement. As a contribution to scholarship on youth civic participation in the Global South, this study addresses how social transformation unfolds through everyday action and consumption.

Keywords Social change. Youth. Vietnam. Authoritarianism. Civil Society.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 State and Civil Society Relations in a One-party Nation. – 3 Studying Youth Programmes in Vietnam: Methodological and Ethical Reflections. – 4 Everyday Civic Engagement and Respectful Resistance. – 4.1 Civic Action Through Responsible Consumption. – 4.2 Respectful Resistance Against Hierarchy and Authority. – 5 Conclusions.

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1 Introduction

Social movement scholarship often blurs the distinction between social movements and mass mobilisation, such as public demonstrations and protests. In a review spanning two decades of research on social movements and emotions, Jasper (2011, 286) asserted that "social movement" and "protest" are two concepts that "overlap sufficiently". Similarly, Eyerman's (2005, 41) exploration of "how social movement moves" focused predominantly on the outward, performative aspect of social movements.

While public mobilisations have a pivotal role in social movements, it is also crucial to recognise the more silent forms of everyday resistance. Our understanding of politics must extend beyond formal political participation, such as voting or organised protests, to encompass "a kind of politics that unfolds at the level of subjective experience and is submerged in the flow of everyday life" (Bakardjieva 2009, 92). Scholarship adopting this perspective (e.g. Juris, Pleyers 2009; Oinas, Onodera, Suurpää 2018) has enabled us to observe that civic engagement among the younger generation is not declining; rather, it has evolved into various forms: everyday consumption (Navne, Skovdal 2021), affective bonds (Horton, Kraftl 2009; Abdou, Skalli 2018), and creative expressions (Laine, Suurpää, Ltifi 2018; Mai, Laine 2016). Beyond the realm of formal institutional politics, this study acknowledges the intimate relationship between the stories of everyday life and the broader narratives that shape and inspire large-scale social movements (Ewick, Silbey 2003). This recognition allows for a more comprehensive grasp of the nuanced dynamics that drive social transformation.

Focusing on Vietnam, this research specifically examines everyday politics among the younger generation that lay the foundation for social movements. It argues that, within an authoritarian context, understanding social change and social movements requires a nuanced perspective that goes beyond traditional public mobilisations. This is particularly relevant given that overt confrontations with the authoritarian state often fail to yield meaningful outcomes. Instead, a more subtle and subversive form of political engagement, one that challenges prevailing cultural narratives and revokes stigma, is more effective. For instance, pragmatic negotiation is a key feature in Vietnamese lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activism, whereby civil society groups pursue social change without challenging the state's legitimacy (Faludi 2016; Mai 2022; 2024). This case illustrates how civil society actors, including but not limited to local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), promote change through subversive resistance.

With an emphasis on subversive resistance in an authoritarian context, this study explores Vietnamese training programmes for

e-ISSN 2385-3042

young people. Targeting youth across the nation, these programmes address various dimensions of societal development such as gender and sexual equality, sustainable development, and human rights. These programmes are organised by a wide range of civil society actors, including local NGOs, social enterprises, and grassroots networks. Typically, they are held in secluded locations for a specified period (often between two and five days), where the selected youths study and live together. The purpose of this setup is to enable the participants to solely focus on the training, without being distracted by daily demands.

Although the subjects of these programmes are diverse, they share a common goal: enriching the knowledge and civic responsibility of their participants, which empowers them as change agents. These programmes adopt the capacity-building approach, or the so-called 'teach a man to fish' philosophy (Swidler, Watkins 2009), often manifested in international development projects. By equipping young individuals with new perspectives and competencies, these initiatives aim to foster effective daily advocacy and bridge the socioeconomic divide among youths from diverse backgrounds.

This study employs in-depth interviews and participant observation to explore the cultivation of everyday civic engagement through participation in civil society initiatives. It illuminates how civic responsibility can be nurtured through participation in youth-targeted training programmes that shape young people's everyday civic actions. Thus, the research highlights the foundational role of these programmes in shaping broader social movements. These programmes not only equip young individuals with ideological frameworks and concrete practices but also contribute to the collective emergence of groups advocating for social transformation within the Vietnamese society.

2 State and Civil Society Relations in a One-party Nation

The development of civil society in authoritarian regimes has been a topic of significant interest in recent years. Many studies[1] have addressed how the operation of civil society in the region of Southeast Asia challenges several assumptions underlying the mainstream characterisation of civil society. This section provides a brief overview of these common assumptions and problematises them.

The most popular conceptualisation of civil society, commonly referred to as Civil Society I or the 'social capital' interpretation of civil society, takes root in Tocqueville (1969) and Putnam's (2000) work.

1 Lee 2004; Wischermann 2010; Hsu 2010; Wells-Dang 2014.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

This perspective emphasises the value of civic associations, contending that civic associations generate social trust and foster democracy. Putnam (2000), in particular, argued that civic associations provide horizontal networks of civic engagement for citizens to collaborate. He maintained that a decrease in civic engagement would lead to decreased social trust as well as a range of social problems.

Another interpretation of civil society, Civil Society II, emerges out of the rise of anti-communist movements in Eastern Europe. This perspective constructs the totalitarian state as 'evil' and antithetical to democratisation processes. It depicts civil society as an autonomous sphere of action, capable of energising resistance against tyrannical regimes (Seligman 2002). Moreover, it views civil society as an important platform for marginalised voices and a source of opposition against the state (Cohen, Arato 1992), thus highlighting the political role of civil society.

Both conceptualisations presented above presume that civil society is an ontological entity distinct from the state. Scholars who study civil society in authoritarian settings have challenged this assumption and advocated for a more nuanced view of state-civil society relations. Lewis (2013, 326), for instance, aptly noted that state and civil society in authoritarian settings "are enmeshed together in a complex and multilayered network of material transactions, personal connections, and organisational linkages". This prompts the inquiry whether civil society can effectively act as a counterweight to the state, and if it does, what kind of strategies these non-state actors utilise in their negotiation with state officials.

To better understand how civic actions unfold within a political context that renders dissident voices and contention inherently problematic, this paper zooms into activities conducted by civil society actors in Vietnam. Given its political structure, Vietnam is an interesting case for observing the formation and functions of civil society: the country has been under the Communist Party's sole leadership since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. Consequently, it is known as a one-party nation (London 2023). Thayer (2009, 3) uses the term "mono-organisational socialism" to describe this political system, in which state institutions, the armed forces, and other societal organisations all belong under the hegemonic control of the Communist Party. In this setting, all licensed social organisations are legally and practically connected to the state, all "linked by a chain of official ties to the central committee of the Communist Party" (Hayton 2010, 79). Given that everything is "part of either a Party or a state structure", there can be no officially truly "non-governmental" organisations in Vietnam (Hayton 2010, 79; Bedner, Berenschot 2023). Consequently, civil society in this context does not readily fit into either Civil Society I or Civil Society II's conception of a discrete sector. Furthermore, civil society's watchdog function is also restricted within this political structure.

Does this mean Vietnam's civil society is fully restrained? This study sheds light on this inquiry by acknowledging that under conditions of high repression, civil society must adopt a "not blaming, but assisting" approach in its interaction with the state (Dai, Spires 2018, 75). Furthermore, the study proposes that even non-oppositional activities can lay the seed for everyday resistance. Acting as service providers, for instance, enables civil society actors to instil change on a small scale.

To illustrate this argument, this research investigates capacity-building programmes targeting young people organised by different civil society groups, such as local NGOs, social enterprises, and grassroots networks. By exploring the activities of these programmes and the reflections of the participating youths, this article demonstrates that the potential for social change lies within the narratives of young individuals who, through programme participation, acquire the skills to engage in everyday civic actions. This, accordingly, sheds light on the foundation for social movements in an authoritarian society.

3 Studying Youth Programmes in Vietnam: Methodological and Ethical Reflections

As previously mentioned, this study focuses on training programmes aimed at young people organised by various civil society groups and networks, including both local NGOs and grassroots citizen groups. To achieve this objective, I created a research design utilising in-depth interviews with young participants who have attended at least one of these youth training programmes. Data was also collected from my participant observation at two training programmes.

Out of 31 interviews conducted, 19 took place online due to COVID-19. While online interviews may have some limitations in terms of building rapport, they allowed me to collect data from the participants who lived in different regions of Vietnam. All in-person interviews took place at a coffee shop, per the interviewee's preference.

To ensure that the interviews collected the same area of information from each individual while still allowing for a certain degree of flexibility, I developed a guide for semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Besides asking follow-up questions and giving these young people ample time to express their views, I offered them the opportunity to ask me any questions. I also openly shared my personal reflections, if asked. This approach was meant to build trust and rapport, making open dialogue possible. Overall, these techniques enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of these young individuals' perspectives and capture nuances that would not have

e-ISSN 2385-3042

been possible with more structured interviews. The average interview length was 90 minutes, with the shortest lasting 50 minutes and the longest over 200 minutes.

I also conducted participant observations at two youth training programmes to supplement my interview data, which helped me clarify many things I had found puzzling or unclear from the interview accounts. The experience also gave me a glimpse into the concrete space and time that civil society organisations have allocated to youth. As the data collection period coincided with the first wave of COVID-19, participant observation opportunities were severely restricted. Vietnam's strategy to combat the pandemic involved mandatory masks, quarantine, contact tracing, and eventually nationwide isolation. All youth programmes scheduled during this period were cancelled. Consequently, I was only able to conduct two participant observations during my six-month stay in Hồ Chí Minh City from January and July 2020.

My first participant observation took place in February 2020, prior to the outbreak. It was a one-day workshop organised by a grassroots youth group focused on community development and educational initiatives. The workshop featured a presentation by a youth leader on development objectives and methods, and included a discussion for attendees to share their experiences and reflections. Despite the requirement to wear face masks, over 60 participants attended the workshop, most of whom were active in various civil society groups and development networks in southern Vietnam.

My second participant observation took place in June 2020, a few weeks after Vietnam lifted its first nationwide quarantine measures. The programme under discussion was organised by an interregional youth network with the objective of broadcasting the United Nation's (UN) 16 sustainable development goals following the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. 34 young individuals, most of whom were college students at the time of the event, participated in this two-day programme.

Throughout my participant observation, my role as a researcher was clearly communicated to the organisers and participants, both in the application form and during the ice-breaker introduction. My positionality as a late-20s Vietnamese with native language skills, familiarity with cultural slang, and knowledge of community development allowed me to maintain a 'low-key' presence in the field. Additionally, I benefited from an atmosphere where most programme participants were new to each other and expected to be open and welcoming.

Ethical considerations were central to my approach to research and my interactions with the interlocutors of this study. A strong ethical framework was essential given the broader context of an authoritarian state and these young people's involvement with civil society initiatives. These considerations remained relevant even

e-ISSN 2385-3042

when these programmes already received state permission to operate, and some even had state officials present. Informed consent was obtained by providing detailed information about the study's goals, the scope of participation, and confidentiality measures, both verbally and in writing. The interlocutors could opt out of the study at any time with no repercussions. The data collection process was followed by meticulous data storage procedures to protect these individuals' identity.

In this article, I present selected findings from a thematic analysis of the interview data, focusing on narratives from six interlocutors. Selecting only a subset for in-depth analysis ensures a nuanced engagement with the narratives, giving each individual's voice sufficient space. To contextualise the analysis, I also used notes from participant observation. In presenting the findings, I used pseudonyms for all the young people featured and anonymised the programmes mentioned, referring to them as Programme [Letter]. Additional information about each programme and the organising civil society groups is included in the footnotes.

4 Everyday Civic Engagement and Respectful Resistance

As previously mentioned, this study builds on existing scholarship exploring youth everyday politics as a foundation for social movements (e.g., Oinas, Onodera, Suurpää 2018; Juris, Pleyers 2009). It acknowledges that civic engagement can be observed through youths' lifestyle choices, consumption habits, and daily activities, broadening the definition of 'civic engagement' beyond formal processes such as voting (Trott 2021). Through everyday organising, networking, and horizontal collaboration (Juris, Pleyers 2009; Riley, More, Griffin 2010), youth can participate in peaceful social transformation, effecting change through "small steps and small wins" (Navne, Skovdal 2021, 314). This approach to studying young people's civic engagement is particularly useful in authoritarian regimes where overt political confrontation is discouraged, or in societies where age-based hierarchies consistently marginalise youth voices and contributions.

In the discussion of age-based hierarchy and power dynamics, the concept of 'respectful resistance' (Quiñones 2016; Laine, Suurpää, Ltifi 2018) is particularly relevant. While the notion of resistance, in its traditional meaning, refers to an individual or a group reacting against oppression by a ruling class, 'respectful resistance' manifests in daily concerns and interpersonal encounters. This form of resistance can be observed in acts of negotiating with or challenging various forms of authority, whether it be an authority figure, age-based hierarchy, or societal cultural and religious norms. Previously, the concept has been applied to study how young musicians (Laine,

Suurpää, Ltifi 2018) and young women in patriarchal society (Mai, Laine 2016) express their discontent in creative ways. This is a useful framework to study how youths manage tensions and hierarchical dynamics, as well as strive for change, without challenging the prevailing social structure (Quiñones 2016).

Applying this lens enables us to observe youth civic engagement in various areas of expressions (Riley, More, Griffin 2010). The following subsections explore civic action in two areas: responsible consumption and resistance against authority and cultural hegemony.

4.1 Civic Action Through Responsible Consumption

One emerging area of everyday political engagement involves young people addressing climate concerns (Navne, Skovdal 2021). This engagement often centres on consumption practices, with young individuals increasingly mindful of their choices and environmental impact. Evidence of such practices is found in both interview and participant observation data.

In June 2020, I attended a youth training programme organised by a Vietnamese interregional youth network, referred to as Programme A, which focused on sustainable development goals. The programme attracted 34 participants, most of whom were youth leaders active in different youth clubs and development projects. Held over two days, Programme A took place in a rented office space in Hồ Chí Minh City.

A few days before the programme began, an announcement about lunch arrangements provided insights into the norms of the space I was about to enter. It specified that lunch would be available at the venue for pre-order, or participants could bring their own food from home. Two aspects of this announcement stood out. First, participants were encouraged to bring their own eating utensils to reduce single-use plastic. Second, the organisers emphasised that they "**do not take responsibility for and disagree** [bold in the original] with those who buy food outside or order food delivery for lunch" (official announcement, posted by programme organisers on 3 June 2020, author's translation). This was explained as a measure to minimise plastic waste and align with sustainable development values.

To understand the rationale behind this announcement, it is important to consider the infrastructure of modern Vietnamese food culture, where plastic consumption is prevalent and often ingrained as a habit (Makarchev et al. 2022). For instance, sugarcane juice, a popular product sold by street vendors, is typically served in disposable plastic cups and packaged in plastic bags with straws. Plastic is also widely used for takeaway food, with foam containers and plastic cutlery common for items like sticky rice, baozi, and summer rolls.

The rise of food delivery applications has further exacerbated plastic consumption, with disposable items such as straws, cups, and bags providing convenience for consumers (Châu et al. 2020).

Amidst the prevalent use of plastic, the lunch announcement of Programme A served as a reminder that even small contributions to a healthier environment are valuable. To reduce plastic waste, the organisers pre-ordered lunch from a nearby restaurant and had it delivered in reusable trays. These trays were collected and returned to the restaurant after meals. Although participation in the pre-ordered lunch was optional, the organisers discouraged the participants from purchasing their own lunch outside the venue or using food delivery apps, thereby imposing concrete limitations on lunch behaviours.

This emphasis on climate considerations in daily consumption reflects a broader movement. As highlighted by Trott (2021), many young people are changing their own and influencing others' consumption habits as part of their everyday climate activism. In this study, the interlocutors frequently noted that their involvement in civil society programmes requires them to consider their environmental impact, even if the programme they had attended did not specifically focus on sustainable development. These programmes often enforced concrete rules on participants' behaviours, as expressed by 23-year-old Lan:

> When I attended [Programme C],[2] the organisers said we could not bring single-use plastic products […] Later, at [Programme D],[3] the rule was that the items we brought had to be natural and environmental-friendly, so for example, no synthetic soap or detergents. In general, we had to be mindful of how we used resources.

Similar to Programme A, the two programmes Lan referred to set specific rules requiring participants to act in an environmentally conscious manner. In response to the climate crisis, these programmes advocate for solutions rooted in responsible consumption (Sachdeva, Jordan, Mazar 2015). Youth are encouraged to make eco-friendly choices, reduce waste, conserve energy, and adopt sustainable lifestyles. These programmes provide a framework for understanding

2 Programme C was organised by a local NGO dedicated to youth and community development. It targeted individuals aged 18 to 35, aiming to equip them with the skills necessary to advocate for sustainable development and to provide a networking platform for youth groups from various regions. Between 2015 and 2021, the programme was held multiple times and trained over 600 participants.

3 Programme D was organised by a local NGO focusing on environmental education and raising awareness about climate change. The two-day programme aimed to equip participants with knowledge about the causes and impacts of climate change, as well as recommend actions for adapting to and mitigating climate change's effects.

e-ISSN 2385-3042

the climate crisis in more manageable terms, promoting the idea that individual behaviours are closely linked to the environment's well-being and that individuals can drive large-scale change through daily choices. These guidelines extend beyond physical participation. For example, 23-year-old Thanh discussed how her lifestyle was impacted after participating in civil society programmes:

> In 2017, I was living alone and using a lot of plastic. Then I attended [Programme D] and saw how mindful everyone was. That experience changed me. After the programme, I read extensively about how to minimise my environmental impact. That programme showed me how changes could be done in a sustainable way. Now using plastic bags makes me feel uneasy, and I rarely use disposable items. Overall, it has completely transformed my lifestyle. I am now more mindful and always consider the environment.

From Thanh's perspective, civil society programmes not only connected her with a green-oriented community but also provided practical tools for adopting a responsible lifestyle. She viewed her participation in Programme D as a pivotal moment, where she gained the knowledge and skills needed to live sustainably and make environmentally friendly choices.

What is particularly intriguing in this narrative is how Thanh links her individual actions, such as her choice to "rarely use disposable items," to broader societal changes. This perspective reflects her understanding of social change through responsible and mindful consumption. This aligns with previous studies on youth climate activism in various contexts, where young people "tactically break up the climate crisis into manageable actions", exerting their influence through "small steps and small wins" (Navne, Skovdal 2021, 314; Trott 2011). Like Thanh, other interviewees emphasised the significance of individual actions and civic responsibility, noting how their participation in civil society programmes altered their everyday behaviours. Many talked about replacing plastic products with alternatives such as bamboo straws, glass jars, thermal mugs, and cloth bags. Thảo (aged 21) brought her own mug to the coffee shop for the interview, while Xuân (aged 25) requested that the interview be conducted at a coffee shop that did not serve drinks in plastic containers. These actions reflect their commitment to environmental protection, demonstrating how they applied the strategies learned from civil society programmes. For 21-year-old Việt, responsible living means a broader sense of civic duty that goes beyond environmental concerns:

> Through my participation in [Programme C] and the environmental club, I learned the importance of reducing plastic use and opting for recycled items. I have switched to using glass items. My

> sense of responsibility has also increased. For example, whereas I used to, like everyone else, throw all types of waste, including glass, into one bin, I now sort my trash. I place glass waste in a separate bag and label it 'glass' so the garbage collectors know it contains glass. This ensures they avoid injury when handling the trash.

Considering how others could be affected by thoughtless waste management, Việt's narrative highlights the dimension of care in his everyday actions (Horton, Kraftl 2009). His rationale for lifestyle changes goes beyond reducing his environmental footprint, showing a commitment to taking responsibility for others' welfare. The narrative emphasises the connection between caring for the environment and caring for the broader social collective. By considering the potential harm to the garbage collectors, Việt viewed his individual actions as impacting society as a whole, framing a simple choice like waste sorting as an act of civic responsibility. Thus, this narrative highlights the interdependence between personal daily habits and the well-being of the community, solidifying the link between the individual and the broader society.

This section provides insights into how civil society programmes foster a youth culture centred on environmental awareness, mirroring previous research on school-like settings (Trott 2021; Navne, Skovdal 2021). Youths' commitment to living an environmentally conscious lifestyle is a form of civic engagement embedded in everyday life (Collins 2021). By applying the strategies they have acquired through civil society programmes, these Vietnamese youths demonstrate the ability to adapt their lifestyle within a context of pervasive plastic use. Their consumption habits reflect a departure from a food infrastructure that prioritises convenience over environmental sustainability.

4.2 Respectful Resistance Against Hierarchy and Authority

Previously, I discussed how young people can adopt an environmentally conscious lifestyle as a form of civic engagement. Collectively, their modest individual efforts contribute to a broader shift towards sustainability, emphasising that everyday responsible consumption can lead to lasting change.

This section examines additional practices and choices by young people that embody the spirit of 'respectful resistance' (Quiñones 2016; Laine, Suurpää, Ltifi 2018). An example can be found in Kim's (aged 26) narrative, a young woman whose decision to leave a workplace reflects the desire to strive for change without confronting prevailing social orders. Upon graduating from college, Kim found a job

that initially suited her well and allowed her to work on issues she was passionate about. However, this job exposed her to a system of petty corruption. Kim shared that it caused her months of internal struggle – she wanted to resign, but her struggle was invalidated after consulting her family:

> When I thought of quitting, I shared my concern with my family, but they kept saying that I had just graduated and already found a stable job with a good salary, so why would I even consider quitting? They said I was overreacting, because it's not like I actually gained any extra money from those acts of corruption, so why let it bother me so much?

Following months of internal turmoil as a bystander witnessing the corruption, Kim resigned from the position despite not having a safety net. For Kim, resigning meant giving up economic stability and family support to maintain an ethical sense of self. In the following quote, she explained her decision:

> [Programme B][4] taught me about the value of integrity and transparency. In my work and daily life, I find that these principles personally affect me and help me improve. I strive to fulfil these principles. I work on projects that involve fund management, so first, I need to be honest with myself to overcome petty corruption. Second, I refuse opportunities to go too far in material matters [...] That's what [Programme B] has taught me. It's like a mirror reflecting my integrity.

By maintaining transparency in her work, Kim established herself as leading an ethical life. The impact of Programme B on her life choices was evident in her use of analogy: it became a "mirror", a means of self-reflection in which she held herself accountable for her own action (or inaction). Kim identified Programme B as an ethical frame of reference that guided her everyday actions, serving as a repertoire for a kind of politics "submerged in the flow of everyday life" (Bakardjieva 2009, 92).

While Kim's decision to resign from her workplace does not involve confronting systemic corruption directly, it highlights a commitment to ethical practices in everyday life. Kim's decision also demonstrates

4 Programme B was organised by a local NGO with the mission of educating youths about transparency and combating corruption, a particularly sensitive subject in Vietnam's political landscape. The programme ran six times over five years, with each session recruiting 30-40 participants and lasting an average of five days. As of the writing of this article, the NGO that managed this programme has ceased operations, leading to the programme's discontinuation.

her rejection of societal expectations that view petty corruption as normative or acceptable behaviours. Her choice to resign against her family's wishes reflects a respectful challenge to authority (Quiñones 2016). Kim explained that participating in Programme B provided her with the guidance and inspiration to act ethically, even in situations where others seemed silent or complacent. Her narrative illustrates how a commitment to being a good citizen can manifest in everyday life choices outside of formal politics. Such actions lay the foundation for a social movement that challenges hegemonic social norms.

The same 'respectful resistance' can be found in another narrative shared by Khánh, a 23-year-old medical student, who viewed civil society programmes as opportunities to grow as a doctor. This motivated her to apply to several training programmes:

> I want to expand my knowledge and not become narrow-minded. When I participate in these programmes, I gain a more comprehensive view. With this multidimensional perspective, I can treat my patients better. […] Working in the health sector, I see that those who don't attend these [programmes] tend to have a partial, one-dimensional view. For them, being a doctor guarantees a good income and power over patients. They only care about improving their expertise so that after med school they can start making money and live a well-off life.

At the time of the interview, Khánh was in her final year of medical school and was doing clinical rotations at a hospital where she frequently observed power imbalances between doctors and patients. She described how participating in various civil society programmes allowed her to listen to experts in other fields, helping her understand the different challenges and disadvantages that patients face. This experience informed her practices, enabling her to address patients' problems more comprehensively. Khánh emphasised that being a "good doctor" means not only having expertise but also treating patients with respect and empathy:

> [The patients] may not know their rights when entering a medical facility. As doctors, we cannot touch the patient's body without their permission, but the patients may not be aware of that. When they come to the hospital, they listen to us, doctors in our white coats, and do everything we tell them to do. They are not aware of their rights; they don't know many things that can be useful when going to a hospital. I realised this after attending a programme on human rights.

In highlighting the symbolic value of doctors' positions, especially in contexts where they are seen as authority figures, Khánh suggested

that doctors' abuse of patients might stem from this authority. Similar to Kim's narrative, Khánh's perception of being a good doctor also incorporates an ethical dimension: she argued that the desire to "make money and have a well-off life" should not be the priority for a "good doctor". Khánh attributed these insights to her participation in civil society programmes, which she saw as a pathway to becoming an ethical individual. For Khánh, living ethically meant resisting the temptation to abuse the power that doctors usually hold over their patients.

Similarly, 31-year-old Quang established a clear link between his participation in civil society programmes and a transformative realisation that contributed to his self-improvement. For Quang, participating in development programmes meant stepping out of his comfort zone, where his perspective was "limited and confined", to gain new knowledge and insights into his role in society:

> Before [participation], I was a simple guy. I just stayed at home, took care of the farm, and did normal everyday stuff. I used to believe whatever people in authority or those with high degrees said, thinking their words were absolute and that I had to follow them. But after the programmes, I felt I had a voice and could discuss topics like corruption or human rights. Previously, when I heard about corruption, I thought it had nothing to do with me […] For example, there are many development projects on roads where people can take a little from the budget for themselves. I used to think that because the roads belonged to the state, the authority could do whatever they wanted. Now I realise that the funding for these projects comes from taxes, which are paid by people like us. Now I understand that taxes are part of what I pay every day – through electricity bills, VAT, and even when I buy a box of milk. So I find it necessary to speak up and reject wrongdoing.

This quote offers much to unpack. To illustrate the transformative impact of participation, Quang detailed his self-perception before engaging in civil society programmes. He described his "previous self" as naïve and simplistic, preoccupied only with day-to-day economic routines. This "previous self" was portrayed as detached and indifferent when faced with social problems or authority misconduct, seeing no personal connection to these issues. Quang characterised this "previous self" as having a "limited and confined" perspective, which, he implied, contributed to his detachment and inaction regarding social injustice. By contrast, he depicted his "current self" – post-participation – as an active contributor to society. He repeatedly emphasised the need to "speak up" and "reject the wrong", highlighting his shift towards a more engaged and responsible stance.

This quote highlights the mediating role of civil society programmes

in bridging the private and public realms. Namely, participation in Programme E,[5] which focused on human rights and universal values, enables Quang to link his individual action, such as buying milk, with his broader right and responsibility to address social issues like petty corruption. In other words, Quang's recognition that his everyday actions are connected to national issues fuels his desire to act. This awareness enhances his sense of agency, transforming him from someone who passively accepts hierarchical norms and authority to an active citizen willing to confront and challenge wrongful actions by those in power. Quang's evolving understanding of his role and rights in society illustrates 'respectful resistance'.

The narratives presented in this section highlight a form of civic engagement embedded in everyday life, where young individuals use their autonomous actions to realign their life choices and interactions with authority figures in line with their ideological beliefs (Benedicto 2013). By challenging passive obedience to authority and by questioning established norms and practices perceived as unethical, these young people exhibit their respectful resistance. Moreover, they link their daily activities with their rights and responsibilities to drive broader social transformation. Thus, these findings highlight the significance of considering 'everyday politics' (Riley, More, Griffin 2010), where the complexity and indeterminacy of everyday actions can lay the foundation for substantial societal change.

5 Conclusions

This paper illustrates how social movements can be understood through everyday actions. Focusing on young people who participate in training programmes organised by civil society actors in Vietnam, the study explores youth civic engagement through everyday action and consumption, which deviate from traditional notions of political participation. Whether it involves embracing green living, rejecting petty corruption, or reflecting on one's power over vulnerable groups, these young individuals demonstrate a commitment to ethical actions and responsible choices aimed at bettering their society. In this way, the study contributes to existing scholarship on youth political engagement (e.g., Oinas, Onodera, Suurpää 2018; Navne, Skovdal 2021), showing that various activities offer new perspectives on 'everyday politics' (Riley, More, Griffin 2010). Such activities provide

5 Programme E was a three-day workshop organised by a local NGO focused on education and empowerment for women and minority groups. Its objective was to promote the understanding and practice of universal values, including freedom, fairness, equality, tolerance, human rights, dignity, justice, and peace. The programme has been held over ten times, with each session recruiting 25-30 young individuals aged 18 to 35 years.

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a foundation for social movements that seek to alter cultural hegemony and hierarchical relations without being overtly confrontational.

The young people in this study attribute changes in mindset and behaviours to participation in programmes organised by civil society actors. These capacity-building programmes equip youth with tools and values that encourage them to act with greater mindfulness and ethical consideration. By fostering an accountable self committed to just actions, these individuals emphasised their connection to and responsibilities within the collective. Accordingly, this study highlights how civil society, even within an authoritarian context, can subtly promote the public sphere and advocate for social change. This is achieved through redefining what constitutes the 'public' and the 'political', thereby translating civic engagement into more flexible forms of everyday expressions (Benedicto 2013).

This study positions youth as key agents of social change, highlighting that activism in an authoritarian society often manifests in subtle forms beyond public demonstrations and mass mobilisations. The findings enhance our understanding of youth civic participation in the Global South, offering insights into social transformation processes within the constraints of authoritarian regimes by focusing on everyday life as a site of contention. It emphasises that youth should not be regarded as passive followers of norms; rather, they are active agents who intimately shape how social transformation unfolds.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the study's limitations. Notably, most civil society training programmes take place in urban centres, making them more accessible to urban youth than their rural counterparts. This urban-rural disparity may affect the demographic profile of the programme participants, who predominantly come from middle-class backgrounds and may have greater freedom to make choices without substantial economic constraints. Future research should explore the extent of this urban-rural divide as well as identify strategies to improve access and inclusivity for youth from less privileged backgrounds to participate in civil society initiatives.

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