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# **Youth participation in environmental action in Vietnam: Learning citizenship in liminal spaces**

**Authors:** Laura Beckwith, Matt Baillie Smith, Oliver Hensengerth, Hue Nguyen, Chamithri Greru, Siobhan Warrington, Tanh Nguyen, Graham Smith, Thuy Mai Thi Minh, Lan Nguyen, Pam Woolner

## **Abstract**

Youth participation has become an important element of environmental governance and is also a way that young people learn about the expectations of citizenship. In the Global South, young people are confronted with multiple understandings of citizenship as international development organisations may introduce citizenship in a liberal, democratic framing which may differ from national citizenship norms. In Vietnam, state agencies have a history of supporting youth participation linked to nation building and community service. These activities create an imaginary which highlights citizenship as a status and the national scale as being central. More recently, liberalisation policies have opened the door for activities of international organisations which extend imaginaries of citizenship to the global scale and beyond status to a process centred on creating a sense of belonging. Other forms of participation are also flourishing, thanks to the increasing reach of social media. This paper explores how the diversity of this landscape creates liminal spaces of citizenship which young people navigate, working within and between different scales and imaginaries.

**Keywords:** Vietnam, youth, citizenship, liminality, participation, environmental governance.

## **1 Introduction**

In this paper we develop a geography of citizenship which explores the liminal spaces created by the articulation of global discourses of youth engagement and national histories and ideas of youth participation in Vietnam. We show how different institutional actors across scales have created a complex landscape of youth participation in environmental action. Today's youth have a unique claim as environmental actors as the generation that will be responsible for responding to the

impacts of global environmental degradation, including climate change. In response, youth participation in environmental governance has been increasingly prioritised at all scales (Thew et al., 2020; United Nations, 2020). Engaging young people also offers authorities the opportunity to teach youth about their role in political activities and public life, an important part of how young people learn citizenship (Jeffrey and Staeheli, 2016). The ways authorities engage young people in environmental governance influences how young people learn citizenship, particularly through the organisation of opportunities for participating within existing structures provided by state and non-state institutions (Mills, 2013).

While youth participation is mainstreamed in policy rhetoric and increasingly discussed as a 'universal' component of the response to the climate emergency, the shape it takes varies greatly across and between national and global institutions. As is increasingly recognised in calls to de-colonise development, the approaches to mobilisation of young people reflect histories of unequal North-South power and are far from universal despite being presented as such. In many countries, the national political context is built on different norms than the liberal democratic ideals prevalent within the institutions of the development sector (donors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations). This may take the form both of more restricted civic space in some settings, as well as more thriving civil society and social engagement in others, and in ways that reflect different degrees of liberal democratic behaviour (Åström et al., 2012; Ayana et al., 2018). As both national and international actors attempt to confront environmental challenges, they are mobilising young people in support of their agendas. Given this, while there are increasingly global exhortations and celebrations of youth citizenship in relation to the climate emergency, participation led by development actors animates diverse and complex understandings of what it means for young people to play a meaningful role in society. This is creating complex geographies of youth citizenships across scales.

To date, much of the academic and policy literatures on youth participation have focused on young people from the Global North, or on actions that resonate with forms of citizenship that echo those predominant in the Global North (for example Checkoway and Aldana, 2013; Mills and Waite, 2017; United Nations, 2020). While there is a growing literature on youth in the Global South (for example Akrofi et al., 2019; Chhokar et al., 2011; Narksompong and Limjirakan, 2015), the focus tends to

be on the knowledge and attitudes of young people which influences their motivation as environmental actors, rather than on the landscape of opportunities presented by institutional actors. This reflects a highly individualised account of social action, rooted in processes of neoliberalisation which foreground individual responsibility and autonomy. It also presents an incomplete picture of how young people in the Global South are engaged with environmental challenges. This is a problematic knowledge gap, because it overlooks how institutions of development operating within national contexts add additional complexity to the options for young people to be engaged in environmental governance by promoting a discourse of participation and citizenship that may be at odds with those presented by state agencies. It also fails to recognise histories of participation and organising within particular places, including who is included and excluded. The presence of alternative understandings of what it means to be a citizen and at what scale can present young people with a challenge for finding their place amongst diverse messages. We argue that this places young people in a position of liminality as they navigate within and between these spaces seeking to establish themselves as citizens and environmental actors.

In this paper we explore how opportunities for youth participation in environmental action offered by state and non-state institutions at different scales reflect and reproduce at times conflicting perspectives on the role of young people in society. Our case study is Vietnam, which as a one-party state, provides the opportunity to examine a political context with different understandings of citizen participation to those in the Global North whose histories have shaped contemporary debates around citizenship. Additionally, Vietnam is one of the countries most affected by climate change and environmental degradation (Manh et al., 2015; Whitehead et al., 2019) and the government has taken steps to build a policy framework which recognises the need for environmental protection, while acknowledging the need to involve larger segments of the population in policy processes, including young people (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2012). Domestic and international NGOs and international organisations also work with young people outside of the party-state apparatus, often underpinned by discourses of empowerment and democracy. Finally, young people mobilise themselves by engaging in creative protest or by founding their own organisations (Vu, 2017). By exploring the ways institutions engage young people, we contribute to debates on citizenship by highlighting the

liminal spaces created as discourses around youth participation are worked and re-worked at different scales.

## **2 Learning Citizenship through Participation**

Young people have an important role as environmental actors as the generation that will respond to and live with the outcomes of today's decisions. It is therefore unsurprising that young people have made claims to be included in decision-making as a question of justice (Thew et al., 2020). O'Brien et al. (2018) suggest that youth express their dissent with the prevailing policies and practices of climate governance through actions which can be construed as "dutiful, disruptive or dangerous" depending on the way young people are perceived by those with political power. However, young people can also be engaged in ways that support or legitimize decision-making within existing power structures and their participation may be used to shape expectations of their role as future citizens (Wood, 2013).

Structured forms of participation led by state and non-state institutions contribute to a process whereby young people learn their expected role in society, or how to become 'good citizens'. Learning citizenship is a process through which "new information and experiences interact with sedimented habits and understandings to change perceptions and ways of being in the world" (Jeffrey and Staeheli, 2016). Through structured opportunities for participation, authorities shape young people in ways that reflect their understandings of what good citizens should be (Mills, 2013). The term 'participation' can be applied to a broad range of activities, but it is generally understood to refer to ways that young people are included in decision-making processes and institutions that concern them (Checkoway, 2011). Participation is fundamental to democracy where citizens are expected to be engaged in decision-making (Smith and Dalakiouridou, 2009). However, participation is also present in multiple forms in non-democratic settings, which has been linked to strategies of legitimation such as allowing citizen complaints or inputs as a gesture towards responsive governance (Åström et al., 2012; Bui, 2013). In both democratic and non-democratic contexts, state and non-state institutions may offer structured opportunities for participation which support or legitimise decision-making within existing power structures. This can co-opt citizen-led movements and produce curated forms of citizenship while avoiding political challenges.

## *2.1 Conceptualisations and scales of citizenship*

Citizenship as a concept and practice is contested. As a legal status, citizenship is granted by state powers to those who are deemed to have met certain requirements that entitle them to a set of rights. This view of citizenship typically underpins the discourse of state institutions, creating a legal distinction between those who belong and those who are 'others' (Staeheli, 2011). This perspective centres the nation-state as the dominant scale of citizenship, creating a citizen subjectivity linked to national boundaries. As a result, state-led citizen engagement may rely on appeals to nationalism and the prioritisation of local or national issues. State institutions may seek to further state policy goals and produce the values and identities they desire for their citizens through engaging youth in active participation and education for citizenship (Staeheli and Hammett, 2013; Mills and Waite, 2017).

During the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, attention increasingly turned to ideas of 'global citizenship', facilitated by growing recognition of the ways environmental and other challenges transcended national borders and jurisdictions. In the UK, for example, this took the form both of government policy making for education and engagement of young people in international development (Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011) as well as becoming part of public discourse – both positively and pejoratively – to reflect actions oriented to global public goods such as the environment. Global citizenship remains conceptually contested, variously associated with ideas of cosmopolitan thinking, global governance, corporate citizenship and global civil society; as Stromquist notes, it is more often “strategically utilized than explicitly defined” (2009, p.8). She also recognises that debates around global citizenship have paid insufficient attention to “power geometries” (Stromquist, 2009, p.7). This has meant that global citizenship has been characterised by a particular geography associated with places of relative affluence and particular forms of mobility.

## *2.2 The complex landscape of citizenship in the Global South*

The growing mainstreaming of youth participation, particularly in the context of the climate emergency, means global citizenship discourses are reaching outside these geographies. The presence of international organisations in low- and middle-income countries affords young people an opportunity for alternative forms of participation outside of state institutions, complicating the scales of citizenship. This is particularly

acute in the Global South, where histories of international presence through colonialism to development, recognition of urgent climate impacts and identification of 'youth' as a critical environmental and development actor, are creating a particular geography of citizenship across scales. This is not to suggest that 'global' subjectivities have been 'invented' by international organisations, given long histories of solidarities from and between Global South settings; but it is to flag how international agencies are promoting opportunities for youth participation by introducing notions of global citizenship that are linked to cosmopolitan norms and values and focus on global level challenges. For example, the UN Youth Strategy states:

...it is only by engaging and working with them [youth], supporting them in standing up for their rights and creating the conditions allowing them to progress and play an active role, that the international community will be able to achieve peace, security, justice, climate resilience and sustainable development for all (United Nations, 2018, p.4).

This perspective sees young people as a generational unit that has an important role to play in "leading global efforts" towards sustainability (United Nations, 2018, p. 6). This introduces a new subjectivity for young people who are asked to see themselves as part of a global community beyond the bounds of the nation-state. Yet, within development agencies these discourses may be modified and contested as individuals responsible for delivering on these agendas interpret them through their own values and experiences (Nagel and Staeheli, 2015).

### *2.3 Inequalities in youth participation*

It must also be recognised that opportunities for participation are unevenly distributed with factors of age, class, race and gender strongly influencing how young people engage in or are invited to participate in political affairs (Checkoway, 2011; Ramasamy, 2018). Harris et al. (2010) show that young people are often reluctant to participate in political processes because they feel their voices and needs are not taken seriously; a feeling even more prominent among young women. This inequality in access to opportunities which influences how young people learn citizenship is important as the exclusion of certain groups may lead to feelings of alienation from societal institutions. Learning citizenship is not a straightforward

process of receiving information from authorities; rather, young people interact with institutions, creating the opportunity for citizenship to be practiced as well as contested (Jeffrey and Staeheli, 2016). Young people themselves are socially embedded, operating within institutions, structures and relationships that influence their access to resources and opportunities (Edwards, 2009). They are engaged in both high profile and 'everyday' forms of participation as 'generationally-positioned' individuals but also as part of intergenerational and multi-scalar regimes of power (Walker, 2020). Therefore, it is important to understand the diversity of experiences shaping how young people access and respond to opportunities to learn citizenship.

#### *2.4 Enacting citizenship as a process*

Managed forms of participation do not typically allow for youth to independently develop their own meanings of citizenship (Coleman, 2010) and can contribute to 'regimes of obstruction' against youth-initiated climate activism (Dunlop et al., 2021). Many young people may therefore prefer to engage in informal, individualised and 'everyday' activities related to issues they deem important (Skelton, 2010). This can be seen as enacting their own understanding of citizenship and can occur at any scale. For example, young people are increasingly turning to online spaces for social connection (Boulianne and Theocharis, 2020). The growing use of digital platforms allows a "deinstitutionalization" of communication, which has been used effectively in the environmental movement to leverage individual actions to generate support across geographic boundaries facilitating widespread participation in defining the environmental agenda (Diaz-Pont et al., 2020, p. 4).

In this light, citizenship has been alternatively conceived as a process or way of participating in societies, a framing which is more compatible with discourses of citizenship that operate at scales other than the national level and which recognises how young people learn citizenship outside of formal structures. Though acknowledging the significant influence of nation-states on the political, social and economic context in which people live, citizenship as a process challenges the primacy of political borders as the defining feature of citizenship (Maestri and Hughes, 2017; Kallio et al., 2020). Instead, scholars have suggested that citizenship is related to a feeling of belonging and participating in society (Wood, 2013). This allows for an understanding of citizenship that extends down to the local level and



outwards to the global scale. Citizenship can therefore be understood as “both a status and a set of relationships” and is embedded in both places and practices (Staeheli, 2011, p. 394). To this end, scholars have proposed the concept of “lived citizenship” to describe “the embodied performance of citizenship, and how people negotiate rights, responsibilities, identities and belonging through interactions with others in the course of daily life” (Kallio et al., 2020, p. 713).

### *2.5 The liminal spaces of citizenship imaginaries*

These debates create a complex landscape of subjectivities and imaginaries of citizenship across scales that young people must navigate as environmental actors. The breadth of these imaginaries introduces liminal spaces where young people may participate as actors at different scales and identify with diverse conceptions of their generation and their responsibility for the environment. The liminal position of young people as citizens in the making has been well established (Wood, 2013; Worth, 2016; Skelton, 2010), as has the space for liminality between notions of citizenship as a status and the everyday practice of lived citizenship (Staeheli, 2011). However, the liminality that confronts young people as a result of their interactions with institutions representing imaginaries of citizenship at different scales has not been discussed as widely. Debate has focused on how to motivate people in the Global North to embrace ideals of global citizenship in order to accept responsibility for the harms inflicted on other parts of the world as a result of their disproportionate consumption of the world’s resources (Cameron, 2018; Lough and McBride, 2014) or to take action for ‘development’ in the context of colonial and other histories which emphasise the agency of the Global North (Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011). The ways that young people in the Global South navigate between the imaginary of national and global citizenship is not well examined. This paper seeks to understand the range of subjectivities and imaginaries that confront young people as they are engaged in active participation in environmental issues by both state and non-state actors and the resulting liminal spaces created by this complexity.

This paper critically explores these debates in the context of youth participation in Vietnam. It does this to challenge established conceptualisations of youth participation as a phenomenon principally rooted in settings with liberal democratic institutions and associated with understandings of citizenship as a right (for example,

UNDESA, 2012). As young people in the Global South are mobilised as the next generation of citizens, it is important to address the specific spaces in which this is taking place and how these are configured to shape youth participation and citizenship.

### **3 Methods**

This paper draws on the results of seven key stakeholder interviews, three months of participatory field work with communities, including 27 young people, in An Giang province in Vietnam (April-July 2021) and participatory research conducted online with eight young people involved in structured forms of participation in environmental action (October 2021 to March 2022). As the primary focus of this work is to examine the institutional landscape, we draw primarily from the key stakeholder interviews and secondary data and touch lightly on the voices of young people, which will instead provide the focus of additional pieces of work.

Of the key stakeholders interviewed, three are international organisations or NGOs engaged in funding and promoting environmental education and awareness programmes for young people. Two are domestic NGOs which engage young people in environmental leadership and other training opportunities. One is a representative from a provincial branch of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) Youth Union and one is part of an institute of higher education that also engages young people in environmental leadership activities. Interviewees were given the choice of conducting the interview in English or in Vietnamese with two choosing Vietnamese and the remainder English.

The participatory fieldwork conducted in two research sites in An Giang province examined how young people live with and respond to environmental change in their communities. One research site was home to a predominantly Cham community, an ethnic minority group whose members have their own language and are practicing Muslims. Participants from the second research site were all from the majority Kinh ethnic group. Through this field work, 12 young men and 15 young women between the ages of 18 and 24 (divided almost evenly between the two sites) participated in activities which included participatory mapping, photography and individual interviews.

Insights from an online project delivered with eight young people involved in organised environmental activities have also been integrated into the data used for this article. This project was conducted from October 2021 to March 2022 and explored young people's attitudes and motivations to organised environmental activities as well as understanding their role as future environmental leaders. It used a combination of creative and visual research methods alongside individual interviews and collaborative group sessions.

#### **4 Youth and Environmental Change in Vietnam**

Environmental change in Vietnam is recognised at the institutional and individual levels. Long term data collected by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment shows a rise in temperatures, changes in rainfall patterns and an increase in the frequency of strong typhoons (Tran et al., 2016, p.31). The policy framework which governs environmental protection in Vietnam including climate change is expansive and includes the Law on Environmental Protection (2022) and the National Climate Change Strategy (2016–2050) (World Bank and ADB, 2020; RFA, 2020). Environmental governance in Vietnam has been characterised as having a high degree of state autonomy and reliance on centralised authority (Bruun, 2020). However, some opportunities for participation in policy formulation have emerged through civil society networks, funded and linked to international donors (Ortmann, 2017).

The important role of young people as future citizens is recognised by the 2005 Youth Law, which outlines the rights and responsibilities of young people as well as the need for state agencies to perform youth related public administration. Vietnam recognises youth as an age category from 16 to 30 years (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2012). However, our research revealed that for many 'youth' relates to a way of seeing and interacting with the world. One participant shared: "...the young is both the age and the soul. They have a lot of energies, they want to help the other people and they want to give the energy for the other people. For me this is the young."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Journey mapping activity with youth environmental leaders, 17 March, 2022, female participant, age 21.

Despite constraints imposed on their political voices, many young people participate in forms of civic engagement and action, both within and outside state structures (OECD, 2017). The level of political engagement and interest in politics varies with levels of deprivation and exclusion, with young people living in poverty and particularly those who are not in school less likely to be politically engaged.

## **5 Geographies of Citizenship in Vietnam**

Spaces for citizen participation are shaped by the historical evolution of Vietnamese society and its institutions. The interplay between the language of global citizenship associated with institutions of the Global North, and the evolution of citizen engagement at the national level has resulted in a complex array of opportunities and subjectivities for young people to negotiate. To understand the liminal positions produced by these discourses over time, we conceptualise youth participation in Vietnam through three interrelated lenses: State structures and citizenship as status; civil society and global citizenship; and everyday forms of action and lived citizenship across scales. Each lens shows distinct roles and expectations of citizenship for youth in environmental activities.

### *5.1 State Structures and Citizenship as Status*

Government backed organisations are an important avenue through which people in Vietnam participate in society, and one of the ways that civil society is distinct from the way it is understood in Western democracies (Vu, 2019). Characterised by Kirkvliet (2018) as ‘mobilizational corporatism’, state-run organisations are used to mobilise support for policies and programmes and manage societal involvement and response. Youth involvement has a historical importance in Vietnam where young people were given “pioneering” roles within the CPV. During the revolutionary period in the late 1940s, young people joined the anti-colonial resistance front and contributed to setting up schools, teaching literacy and performing other acts of social service (Biggs, 2005). During the Vietnam War (1955-1975), youth also participated in volunteer movements and played a critical role in the revolutionary struggle and the creation of the modern Vietnamese state (*Việt Nam*, 1970, in Chonchirdsin, 2016). Instrumentalising the labour of young people for military, political and social/developmental purposes has been built into the fabric of the communist movement in Vietnam.

This tradition of youth volunteers has been retained by the modern state. According to Article 4 of the 2005 Youth Law: “The youth represents the future of the country, is a powerful social force, possesses great potentials and plays a pioneering role in the cause of building and defending the country” (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2012). In terms of environmental protection, youth are expected to: “participate in environmental protection and the rational use of natural resources; and to combat acts of destroying natural resources and the environment” (Article 12, Point 3). The language of the Youth Law reflects ideas of youth having the responsibility to improve themselves to prepare for a career and participate in the socio-economic development of the country by providing community service in deprived areas.

The participation of youth is formalised within state structures such as the Youth Federation and the Youth Unions, part of the CPV apparatus specifically focused on engaging young people at every level of state administration. Channels of participation in the Youth Unions are necessarily shaped to suit the strategic objectives of the government. For example, provincial youth unions receive their priorities as directives from the central youth union, though there is scope for developing their own activities provided they are not ‘political’<sup>2</sup>; activities include “...doing charitable work, volunteering and community service projects”.<sup>3</sup> Opportunities for youth to influence decision-making processes are limited (Balls, 2016).

The particular form of participation found within the unions is rooted in acts of community service (Bruun, 2020; Valentin, 2007). Union members, alongside other young people such as university students, are engaged as volunteers in community development, performing beautification projects such as cleaning and planting flowers, as well as transmitting information to the public about “social evils” (Kirkvliet, 2018, p.11).<sup>4</sup> These are often mass events where many young people come together to work collectively. This is a continuation of the way young people have been engaged historically, as volunteers instilled with CPV messages related to nation building, in service to deprived communities and trained to become the next

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<sup>2</sup> Political activities in this context would be considered activities directly relating to the political process such as organising young people to vote.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with representative from provincial Youth Union, 17 June 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with male resident of An Giang province, age 20, 18-19 June 2021.

generation of party members. One research participant shared that she chose to participate in Youth Union activities like tree planting and collecting rubbish because 'the authorities and the locals usually support the meaningful projects'.<sup>5</sup> Thus, young people participating in Youth Union activities learn citizenship as a priority of the nation-state as well as the political leadership.

This creates an imaginary in line with understandings of citizenship as a right where the national scale is central, though many actions take place at the local level. The emphasis on acts of community service and cooperation fosters a sense of solidarity and nation-building as well as continuity with the historical contributions of youth.

## *5.2 Civil Society and Global Citizenship*

Under early communist rule and continuing after unification in 1975, public organising was only permitted if it was part of the CPV structure, thereby performing the role of extending the reach of the Party to the grassroots level (Nguyen and Datzberger, 2018; Ortmann, 2017). As a result of economic liberalisation reforms beginning in the mid-1980s known as *Doi Moi* or 'restoration', civil society is having a more influential role in shaping opportunities of participation both outside of and in collaboration with state structures. Along with support from Western donors, reforms have helped to grow a civil society space separate from the CPV but activities are still heavily controlled with 'propaganda against the state' prohibited by law (Nguyen and Datzberger, 2018). New forms of political participation have been introduced by the state, including attempts at decentralisation, but rather than expanding space for enacting citizenship, these new structures curtail grassroots organising by channelling participation and dissent through Party structures (Rodan and Jayasuriya, 2007).

To be effective, civil society actors often embed themselves with state institutions and work to exercise their autonomy within official policy agendas (Vu, 2019). For example, UNICEF works in collaboration with the Youth Union to deliver the Children's Council Initiative which operates in nearly 20 provinces and cities to gather young people for regular meetings to discuss issues of importance to children (Lau and Vis, 2022). International NGOs and UN agencies welcomed to the country

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<sup>5</sup> Journey mapping activity with youth environmental leaders, March 17 2022, female participant, age 21.

since *Doi Moi*, have brought with them understandings of citizenship rooted in the values and practices of their constituents in the Global North. This includes the subjectivities and imaginaries of global citizenship which underpin youth participation in global environmental challenges. Opportunities for participation offered by national and international NGOs include knowledge sharing and training on climate change, advocacy activities and consultation on policy development. Young people learn about climate change and environmental degradation from a global perspective albeit closely tied to local actions and practices. Said one representative from a Vietnamese NGO:

...when our program came to the village, we trained them and educated them on climate change and helped them understand why that happens and their contribution to global warming for example or how their traditional practices are contributing to environmental changes.<sup>6</sup>

The local and the global are tightly linked in this perspective as NGO training offers a global frame in which to place the environmental change that participants are witnessing at the local level.<sup>7</sup>

Through these activities youth are introduced to the possibilities of global citizenship which extend their responsibility beyond the state to take action as part of a transnational community of environmental actors. One young person explained: '...my actions will impact to the world...the social network it can strengthen our ideas into the world and moreover, I want to become an entrepreneur, the business man and I will use the money and invest into the environmental projects or the organisations to help this work and although it is just a small action, I think it's going to work and support to the world though it is not much.'<sup>8</sup>

NGO training speaks of 'empowerment' as a way to prepare young people to become leaders in their communities, acting at the local level to address global problems.<sup>9</sup> This is distinct from messages of community service that are present in the activities of the Youth Unions. Youth are intentionally invited to participate in

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with representative from Vietnamese NGO, 23 June 2021

<sup>7</sup> Interview with representative from Vietnamese NGO, 22 April 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Visioning and collage exercise with youth environmental leaders, 4 April 2022, male participant, age 21.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with representative from Vietnamese NGO, 22 April 2021; interview with representative from international NGO, 13 April 2021.

environmental activities organised by civil society actors in order to play the role of 'agents of change'. As one NGO manager said:

People think that young people should follow the older ones... and they are not in the position to take a role and responsibility. But of course, they have very big potentiality, because they are strong, they are young, they are active, they can use technology, right? And they can absorb new knowledge and information quickly.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than adhering to and reproducing societal norms, youth are mobilised by civil society actors to lead society away from a what is characterised as a problematic past to an idealised future. One NGO said that an innovative way of problem solving was the defining characteristic of youth:

Age is not biological age for us. The youth for us are young local people, that means local citizens... And they are very young in the way they approach the issues... They bring about creativity, innovations when working on environment... That's how we define, first, young people in the local area, second young in the way they approach the problem, their views are innovative and third, why young people, because they are committed, energetic, that's the most important.<sup>11</sup>

The language of the SDGs, which heavily influences the work of UN agencies and NGOs both nationally and internationally attributes a "transformational" impact to youth participation (United Nations, 2020, p.41), where young people are celebrated as "a dynamic force of political change and social transformation" (Hwang and Kim, 2017, p.30). The value of youth participation within this discourse is in the tendency of young people to be "looking towards the future".<sup>12</sup>

These different avenues of participation rest on interlocking scales and imaginaries of citizenship. For civil society bodies, a global framing is more prominent, with the

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with representative from international NGO, 24 June 2021

<sup>11</sup> Interview with representatives from international NGO, 13 April 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with representative from international organisation, 3 July 2021.



identity of young people linked with a global cohort of 'youth'. This imaginary links local issues and actions to ideas of global citizenship where 'empowerment' and action is central to the expectations placed on young people. Youth, at the global level, are expected to bring about social change worldwide, though their actions may take place at the local scale. The responsibility to act resonates with ideas of citizenship as a process where identity as part of this global cohort is established through active participation in environmental actions.

### *5.3 'Everyday' forms of participation and Lived Citizenship across scales*

Outside of these managed forms of participation, young people act on issues they deem important in ways that may align or contrast with the opportunities offered by state and non-state institutions. Young people engage in a range of 'everyday' actions that contribute to the protection of the environment and natural resources. These actions may be either individual and/or collective and include things such as picking up litter, using less plastic and sharing information on social media platforms about environmental causes.<sup>13</sup> Many of these actions are more common amongst young people in urban areas and from those of higher socio-economic status due to their increased access to resources including time and information.<sup>14</sup>

The 'everyday' actions of lived citizenship enacted by young people cut across scales and subjectivities of citizenship to engage with environmental issues at the local, national and international levels. Increasingly, young people are engaging directly with global issues such as climate change as a result of their consumption of international news and environmental media.<sup>15</sup> This has seen young people in Vietnam actively participating in international campaigns such as the Fridays for Future movement which saw a global student strike to call for action on climate change (350.org, 2019). In this way, young people are working across scales to enact citizenship at the local and national level as well as finding space for themselves as part of a global community of youth concerned about international challenges.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Photo journaling with youth environmental leaders, October 2021 – April 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with representative from international organisation, 3 July 2021; Online interview with youth environmental leader, female, age 26.

<sup>15</sup> Photo journaling exercise with youth environmental leader, November 2021, female participant, age 24.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with representative from international organisation, 3 July 2021.

These examples show that the process of learning citizenship in Vietnam is in transition, with elements of continuity from the historic role of young people both competing with and complementing new opportunities presented by economic liberalisation and international cooperation. The scales of environmental action stretch from the local to the global, offering young people different framings through which to understand both environmental challenges as well as their role in addressing them. From this array of opportunities, young people are learning multiple meanings of citizenship which they may explore, uphold or contest. The diversity of scales and subjectivities introduced by institutionally managed opportunities for participation creates liminal spaces for young people as they move between fulfilling different roles such as volunteer, community builder, or agent of change.

#### *5.4 Uneven citizenships: who is allowed to participate?*

Many factors affect the accessibility of opportunities to participate in environmental activities including geographic location and the time needed to participate. For young people who do not fit the model of 'youth' presented by institutional actors, it may be difficult to see a place for themselves in the discourses of citizenship. This leads to an uneven geography of opportunities to participate.

A striking example is the limited opportunities available to young people in rural areas. Though both state and non-state actors in Vietnam recognise that young people in rural areas have first-hand experience with environmental challenges, rural and ethnic minority young people are less likely to be engaged (OECD, 2017).<sup>17</sup>

Evidence collected from our research in rural communities in the Mekong Delta supports this by showing that while young people in the Kinh-majority research site spoke of joining activities organised by the Youth Union, experiences of engagement were lower in the Cham village, which is also further from an urban centre. The provincial Youth Union recognises the difficulty they face to engage ethnic minority youth in their activities. From their perspective the reasons are complex:

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with representative from international organisation, 3 July 2021.

They [young people from ethnic minority backgrounds] work far away from home. Some of them have a little lower level of education than the Kinh people. So, they don't really care about the activities of youth unions. It's quite hard to involve ethnic minority young people.<sup>18</sup>

While socio-economic factors are important, it may also be the case that young members of ethnic minority groups feel a greater sense of belonging with other cultural or religious institutions and therefore express their citizenship through other avenues. For example, when asked if there was a leader or head of the community, one young Cham woman said: 'Yes, a man who is the head of the mosque. He will mobilize everyone if there are some activities.'<sup>19</sup> Thus, the way citizenship and participation is shaped is complex, encompassing multiple institutions and identities.

## **6 Discussion and Conclusion**

Youth participation in Vietnam is shaped by actors and discourses at multiple scales, which may be upheld or contested at different levels, resulting in a diverse landscape of opportunities and constructions of youth citizenship.

The concept of liminality can help to conceptualise the spaces of environmental citizenship being created for young people. Evolutions in structures of environmental governance and the emergence of civil society have introduced new opportunities for participation. At times, the role of young people put forward by these agencies may be at odds, whether youth are expected to continue the traditions of the CPV or act as agents of change to facilitate societal transformations. This has led to the creation of a liminal space for young people as environmental actors which stretches across multiple dimensions. First, young people engage with issues at different scales from the local to the global as well as with issues that cut across scales. While scale may align with the discourse of the institutional actor managing the participation, this is not always the case. Discourses of global citizenship within UN agencies may equally involve action on local environmental issues, further complicating the range of possibilities. Thus, debate needs to move beyond accounts that contrast the global citizenship of international agencies with 'everyday' activities or the work of

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with representative from provincial Youth Union, 17 June 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with female resident of An Giang province, age 19, 18 June, 2021.

civil society actors, since they are in reality entangled, creating a complex scalar politics of citizenship.

Second, young people are also negotiating a liminal space in terms of perspectives on citizenship, whether it is a legal status or sense of belonging. Youth are simultaneously confronted with ideals of citizenship as a formal status as well as engaging in the process of lived citizenship in terms of establishing themselves as members of communities at all scales. Young people are citizens of the nation-state of Vietnam and are mobilised by political leaders to learn how to carry on the traditions and ideals of the Communist leadership into the next generation.

At the same time, many young people also identify with the discourse of global citizenship and actively participate in environmental actions facilitated by UN agencies and NGOs. The scale of engagement extends from the local to the international level, linking local problems and actions to global imaginaries, particularly climate. Young people have the option to move between these spaces, which fuses citizenships across scales, where being a global citizen is allied in sometimes unexpected ways to national development agendas and local experiences.

This analysis is important for expanding our understanding of how young people learn citizenship outside of the Global North as they move within and between scales and negotiate complex political, social and environmental settings. This is important for global development debates where young people are frequently viewed as a universal category, particularly in the context of responding to climate change. Emphasis should be placed on the voices of young people in the Global South, recognising them as environmental actors in their own right, but also ones that are not contained by locality. Our research carries important implications for climate justice debates, which need to be more attuned to how young people experience climate change in particular places and the actions that result.

Liminality is thus a way for young people in the Global South to be recognised as important climate actors not because they are being mobilised and recognised by international actors, but because of the ways they contribute to the development and delivery of national and local priorities and shape the relationships between these

and international agendas. This de-stabilises perspectives which attribute the majority of agency to actors from the Global North. Instead, the ways young people in the South work across scales is foregrounded. Embracing the complementarity of different understandings of citizenship and the ways young people work between them underlines their important role in strengthening national commitments to SDGs and climate commitments. This does not simply stem from their youthfulness or inheritance of the climate legacy of capitalist development but arises from the liminal spaces which they navigate, creating new connections and dynamics across scales of citizenship and environmental action.

To realise the potential of young people as environmental actors, development agencies must recognise what messages underpin opportunities for participation and what young people are learning about their place in their community, country and the world. Helping young people to move through liminal spaces to find their own understandings of citizenship that reconcile these different perspectives will create new opportunities for change. However, it is clear that opportunities to participate in environmental governance are not accessed by all young people. The uneven geography of this landscape means that choices will not be equally available to all young people with age, gender, geographic location, language and ethnicity playing a role in who has access to opportunities to participate. In thinking about youth citizenship and the environment, it is critically important to understand what messages young people are receiving, or being excluded from, in specific contexts with respect to their rights and responsibilities in society as well as what spaces are available to them to shape their own understanding of themselves as citizens and environmental actors. As this paper has shown, this requires understanding the multiple scales of citizenship available to young people and how they are worked and re-worked in settings with contrasting histories of youth engagement.

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