

CO-AUTHORING DEVELOPMENT

Lessons from a decade-long journey of working
with ethnic minority communities in Vietnam



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Foreword

The content presented in this edition, which you have in your hands, reminds me of a special event that was organized in an auditorium in Hanoi National Academy of Music in a beautiful evening in 2015. It was “I believe I can – a Harmony of Diversity”, a self-created musical program by The Pioneer Network (Tien Phong) for the voice of ethnic minorities. For more than two hours under the shimmering stage lights, Tien Phong’s members from different ethnic minority communities and regions filled the auditorium with positive energy and emotion. The emotion was brought not only by the cultural signature in songs and dances, but also by the professionalism and the confidence of the two MCs and ethnic minority performers. In those two hours in the auditorium, the performers, who were communities’ insiders, interpreted the spiritual meaning of their stories, the beauty of their cultures, humanity, as well as indigenous knowledge embedded in the dances and practice that were once labelled with negativity. I believe that not only myself, but many spectators among more than 400 people sitting in the auditorium that day, noticed the confidence and pride of the members of Hmong, Khmer, Tai, Pakoh, Muong, Ede, and M’ngong communities as they explained the cultural and spiritual meaning. The audience could also feel the performers’ powerful energy and optimism. How did Tien Phong’s members develop their internal power based on their pride and confidence to successfully organise this unforgettable program in particular, and other major events later at local and national levels in general (such as “Indigenous knowledge – Springs of life”, “Back to the memorial land – Towards sacred realm”, the talk “Do highland inhabitants need to catch up with lowland people?”, “Weaving our stories”, “Let our hearts illuminate the right thing”, “From people’s hearts”, etc.)? What approaches and methods could be helpful for the ethnic minority people’s confidence, self-determination, and choice of their own path for their future, just as the Tien Phong Network has been doing?

The answer to these questions, in my opinion, is playing a methodologically significant role in community development practices. This issue has become more meaningful for development activities in ethnic minority regions, when we know that in Vietnam, the inherent cultural traditions, ways of living and thinking, and assets of these communities,

which have helped them throughout centuries of sustainable living, were, and still are, considered negatively by the perspective of unilineal cultural evolutionism. Negative comments and judgments have been conveyed in the media, in policies, and in mainstream development discourses and philosophies for a long time. These issues lead to ethnic minority communities' internal forces and cultures being somewhat marginalised by others and by themselves. Subsequently, many communities, as observed by Jamieson et al. (1998:16), "...are taught – in schools, mass media, and daily social life – [to] judge themselves by lowland standards and to internalize their inferiority". Development, therefore, as many people define it, is simply an effort to fill in the "inferiority" and make up for the "shortage" – based on evaluation criteria imposed from the outside and outsiders' point of view.

The publication of "Co-authoring Development – Lessons from a decade-long journey of working with ethnic minority communities in Vietnam" is an admirable and respectful endeavour of iSEE. The book helps us answer the above questions. Drawing on lessons from iSEE's experience in working with ethnic minority communities in the development sector over the past decade, the book provides readers with methodological keys to overcome the limits and the deadlocks of perspectives, methods, and goals of previous and current mainstream development activities. As the book's title illustrates, based on an anthropological approach, iSEE considers "accompaniment", instead of "guide", "doing for", or "help" as one of the core elements in its community development activities. The "accompanying" mindset, from development practitioners' viewpoints, allows iSEE's staff to engage with communities to understand their wishes, cultures, lifestyles, and cosmology. From the local people's perspectives, this mindset helps to remove barriers caused by power relations, promoting confidence and self-determination in communities' development activities, where they are equal partners in terms of knowledge, benefits, and status.

Aside from the anthropological approach, iSEE also applies two other theoretical concepts, namely discourse and aspiration, to guide the design of their interventions for change. Discourse helps to reveal the power structure behind prejudiced words and sentences describing ethnic minorities' cultures and lifestyle. Aspiration, as it is used by Appadurai, allows for communities to be determined and self-reliant in finding their own development paths without depending on external models and criteria.

The current context of ethnic minorities' cultures and lifestyles can be one of prejudice and self-prejudice, and unilineal cultural evolutionism is taken as the supreme development model, even if it leaves unexpected consequences. In this light, the lessons presented in this edition are truly meaningful. Having been involved in development activities with iSEE for more than a decade, I think that iSEE's standpoint and methods of practicing development have helped eliminate said self-prejudice, evoking the pride of ethnic cultural values and building confidence within indigenous individuals and communities. These methods also encourage and motivate people to explore, recognise, and re-evaluate their socio-cultural values and local knowledge system.

In the 1995 publication "Encountering development: the making and unmaking of the Third World", by analysing the failure of development models and methods in the direction of unilineal evolution theory, anthropologist Arturo Escobar recommends that, instead of struggling to find development alternatives to pursue old goals, we have to look for alternatives to so-called "development". In "Co-authoring Development", the more than decade-long journey of iSEE and ethnic minority communities has partially implemented and will achieve this. I believe that if these methodological keys are applied more widely in community development activities in Vietnam, we will witness even more activities creating positive impacts by and for ethnic minority communities, following the spirit of "I believe-I can" festival of Tien Phong.

I am pleased to introduce this book to readers!

Hanoi, 16/8/2021

Hoang Cam

Institute of Cultural Studies
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Preface

On the journey of building and implementing the Ethnic Minority program, we established a solid foundation from research using an anthropological approach, and situated ethnic minority communities' experiences and activities at the heart of the program. In this process, we have found ourselves in criticisms of the majority's mindset in development. We have accumulated knowledge and gained a better understanding of systematic barriers faced by ethnic minority groups. One of the biggest barriers is the undoubted widespread acceptance of unilineal evolutionist mindset, the way of thinking that people consider themselves at a lower ladder of development than Kinh people. With a strong belief in agency and cultural competence of the communities, particularly the changes made by the communities themselves, over the past decade, we have had chances to support the ethnic minority communities and experience the journey of *Pride – Confidence – Self-determination* in all regions in Vietnam. Our goal was to nurture an aspiration of creating a joint future, where ethnic minority communities' stories were shared, listened, understood, and became an inspiration for reflecting on equality and development. Our journey went through many challenges, with a lot of scepticism from the outside as well as reflection of the people who built and participated in it. It is an inevitable process to challenge and strengthen our beliefs in the strength of the community, it is also the development philosophy that we have been pursuing.

This document is a part of the efforts to recreate and widely share that development philosophy. With a four-part structure, in which each section is closely related and reflects each other. We start with the **Introduction** section explaining our concerns and choices at the beginning, then introduce the **Foundational Theories** that we were fortunate enough to approach and learn. Section 3 illustrates the **Strategies and Actions**, in which iSEE has applied theories to practical implementation with the community. Finally, part 4 summarises the **Lessons** we have learned after the journey of more than a decade.

Foreword

We are extremely grateful to Dr. Pham Quynh Phuong, Dr. Hoang Cam, and Dr. Nguyen Thu Giang, who have inspired and exposed us to theories since the first days. We appreciate the supports and cooperation from our partners such as Embassy of Ireland, Embassy of Canada, Embassy of the Netherlands, State Committee for Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Area Affairs, CCFD Terre-Solidaire, CARE International in Vietnam, Oxfam in Vietnam, Plan International Vietnam, the Community Capacity Building Center CECEM, etc. We sincerely thank the colleagues and consultants who have underpinned, developed, and shared the foundation throughout the years. Finally, we would like to give our most special thanks to the members of the Tien Phong Network for the voice of ethnic minorities who have trusted and co-authored with us on the journey of learning and realizing the shared beliefs.

In the process of completing this document, we received generous support and advice from experts and generations of iSEE leaders - Le Quang Binh, Luong Minh Ngoc, and Luong The Huy. We also received enthusiastic support from Dr. Nguyen Thu Giang in the role of proof-reader.

We hope that readers would find useful knowledge and experiences in our sharing, and moreover, find strong motivation to continue looking for and exploring new ways of crafting meaningful development.

Regards,

The Compilation team.



Part I
INTRODUCTION

A look at development and culture

When it comes to “development”, the most basic image that comes to our minds is economic criteria. For instance, “Third World” is a term used to refer to “less developed” countries to distinguish them from the “First World”, i.e., powerful countries in terms of economic development. In global reports, countries are often ranked as low-income, low-middle-income, middle-high and high-income, which subsequently represent the countries’ respective levels of development. This high-low scale of economic development seems operational in every aspect of the relationship between countries, governing the lives of billions of people.

The wave of American and European aid to underdeveloped countries in Africa, South America, and Asia began in the mid-20th century. Different from the earlier colonial period, when the so-called “civilisation” process was often accompanied by land expropriation, aid organisations were widely formed after World War II to build facilities and intervene in social life in the name of peace. The aim was to promote “development” – which was considered a positive thing for Third World countries. In the 21st century¹, global development goals continue to work towards economic growth to reduce poverty and social inequality. From the initial support activities, economically oriented projects promoting livelihood development, micro-finance, and commercialisation of agricultural products have become more popular and thus a familiar model in many places in the world.

When “development” becomes a professional field, the economic-oriented approach is widely applied, accompanied by a scale system, evaluation frameworks and intervention models that focus on quantification. The first thing that can be seen notice in the management of development projects is statistics: the number of participants, number of beneficiaries, number of schools built, number of people with access to roads and bridges, etc. With this mindset, cultural factors and the agency of the insiders are easily forgone. The “beneficiary” role is pre-assigned to community members, and accordingly, passivity is sown into the project model. Cultural and intellectual capital, and internal dynamics of communities become secondary and marginalised factors.

¹In his inaugural address in 1949, US President Harry S. Truman laid out an international relations strategy based on the criteria of the level of “development”, thereby officially making “development” the norm in the classification of countries after World War II.

The underestimation of cultural factors and communities' agency in development projects is the main reason for ineffectiveness and unsustainability in aid and charity programs. In his Ted Talk, Ernesto Sorilli, a veteran of implementing development projects in Africa since the 1970s, candidly points out the failures and downsides of the "aid industry". The examination process shocked him and his colleagues at first, because on the fertile valley of Zambezi River in Zambia, there was no sign or effort of agricultural practices to utilise the precious natural resources. Based on the assumption that the inhabitants lacked the agricultural knowledge and understanding for livelihood development opportunities, Ernesto's organisation attempted to solve the issue by teaching the locals ways to cultivate Italian tomatoes and zucchini. When no one was interested to join, the organisation paid people to follow their ideas. A harvesting season that came with fruit-laden trees made Ernesto quite confident about the project's approach, until a herd of 200 hippos attacked and ate the unharvested crop in one night. Ernesto realised that his organisation had never consulted with the locals about reasons for not cultivating in such a fertile land. On the contrary, they had only thought about changing the community's lifestyle and way of thinking, directing them to a life with high productivity according to the Western thought.

More than ever, the definition of development needs to be revisited with a more holistic approach. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Human Development Report once defined development as expanding people's choices so that they lead the lives they want. Kofi Annan, the former General Secretary of the United Nations affirmed: "A developed country is one that allows all its citizens to enjoy a free and healthy life in a safe environment". Joseph Stiglitz, a well-known American economist also said: "Development is about transforming the lives of people, not just economies". Development, broadly speaking, always includes cultural, social, and political dimensions, where values and belief systems are nurtured and rooted throughout history, where humanity interacts with and change one another, and where the human condition needs to be understood before intervention can take place. On the one hand, the cultural background of communities is the key resource that helps them master their lives for generations - which is forged after political and social upheavals and reinforced and maintained in the specific context of each locality. On the other hand, it is also through culture that unequal hierarchies, including economic injustice, as well as human dignity, become deeply rooted prejudices in the mindset of the masses. Cultural prejudice is just as difficult to overcome as the disparity in livelihood opportunities. This means that approaching development issues from a cultural perspective and from a community perspective should be as important as economic intervention. This awareness is especially important in the context of development projects in Vietnam, where cultural factors are often considered secondarily.

Context of development projects in Vietnam

International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) have had relations with Vietnam from early days. Immediately after 1975, about 70 INGOs established relations with Vietnam with an aid value of about US\$30 million/year, which consisted mainly of humanitarian aid (food, medicine, etc.), to help Vietnam overcome the consequences of war. Since 1986, thanks to Vietnam's Reformation and international integration policies, the number of INGOs increased to about 650 organizations in 2006. Among them are over 500 organizations with regular activities, projects, and partners in Vietnam, and an aid value of 217 million USD in 2006².

INGOs' intervention activities gradually shifted from direct intervention in the 90s, such as building schools, constructing irrigation works and clean water supply, savings credit projects that provide loans, etc, to community capacity building and policy advocacy in recent years. The projects' target audience gradually expanded from the poor to more specific groups such as people with disabilities, HIV-infected people, LGBTQI+ people, poor women, ethnic minorities, working class, etc.

Aid programs of INGOs are seen as development assistance focusing on poor, remote and isolated areas and in fields that align with the socio-economic development priorities and orientation of

² <https://sngv.thuathienhue.gov.vn/?gd=26&cn=904&tc=310>

Vietnam, especially poverty alleviation and sustainable development. Speaking about INGOs' assistance, a document of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs wrote that "it was not only material aid but also experience and technology transfer, people's intellectual improvement, medical care, and education universalisation." Phrases like "transfer of experience, technology, people's intellectual improvement" imply that development involves going from bad to good, from backwardness to being civilised.

According to the World Bank, Vietnam's development over the past 30 years is remarkable. The poverty rate dropped sharply from more than 70% to less than 6%. However, the majority of the remaining poor in Vietnam are ethnic minorities.

Although accounting for only about 15% of the population, ethnic minority groups make up for 70-80% of the country's poor and the statistic shows signs of further increase, at 72% in 2018 and 86% in 2021.

One question that needs to be raised is why the results of poverty reduction projects do not have much impact on ethnic minority communities? In other words, are the development models, which is said to be successfully applied with the majority community, suitable for ethnic minority communities? As Arturo Escobar (1995) suggested, instead of struggling to find development alternatives to pursue obsolete development goals with the same approach, it is necessary to look for other options beyond so-called "development".

iSEE's choice when participating in the development sector

In the proposal to establish the Institute for Social, Economic and Environmental Research - iSEE, rather than the traditional method of using macro analysis, outlining goals, or important issues, the founder of iSEE began with a story of a woman in Ha Tay. They wrote: "On a business trip, I went to the Commune People's Committee in the early morning and saw a woman looking ragged, holding a hat, and sitting outside, seeming like she was waiting for someone. At noon, when I returned from the interview, I still saw her patiently rubbing her hat and waiting. When I asked her, I found out that she was waiting for the Committee chairman to ask for a stamp to certify that her family was poor in order to waive hospital fees for her child. Her child with leukaemia was being treated in Hanoi, but she still had to wait to get a stamp. This is one of several motivations for the founders of iSEE to create a change, so that people like her do not have to wait while their

children are hospitalised." We believe that the results of development are not numbers but the faces of actual people and the care about the individuals' life. That is the reason in the early days of establishment, after analysing marginalised groups, iSEE chose to work with two minority groups: Ethnic and Sexual Minorities.

To start working with ethnic minority groups, at first, iSEE focused on researching, analysing, and criticising policy. The first studies and assessments pointed out the systematic barriers to communities' development, namely prejudice and discrimination.

For a long time, many socio-cultural practices of ethnic minorities in Vietnam have been considered as "backward", "less civilised" than those of the majority. The customs are separated from its belief system and original values, placed in the majority's evaluation scale, therefore, the decision-making role of the subject who practices that culture has not been promoted. In order for "the mountains to catch up with the lowlands, the minorities to catch up with the majority", traditional socio-cultural practices of ethnic minorities tend to disappear or to be assimilated into "more highly developed" groups.

The categorical perceptions of the low development level of ethnic minority groups have become the scientific basis for plenty of policies and projects in uplands, creating prejudiced language in policy documents and awareness of development practitioners. Criticism of the "backwardness" of ethnic minorities, which is seen as an obstacle to their development, is still quite common. The "modernisation", the superiority of new technologies, the need to change the "backward" self-sufficient lifestyle of the communities are considered as essential for them to achieve a brighter future. In the explanation of the difficulties in implementing policies in ethnic minority areas, the discourses on "low level of development" are frequently mentioned. Production of marketable goods seems to be considered as an inevitable solution to the success of poverty reduction. However, according to the experience of countries around the world, the market economy is not the only development model that can bring equal benefits to all groups, especially those with no advantages or are vulnerable. The non-market solution in some cases will be suitable for several ethnic minority communities, taking into account the viewpoint of cultural diversity and finding the intrinsic strength of the ethnic groups themselves.

During more than 10 years working with minority communities, iSEE has moved from analysing and policies to working directly with ethnic minorities groups so that the communities themselves can speak up and educate the majority community on knowledge of other outlook on life and cosmology, thereby changing biases.

The journey of more than a decade with ethnic minority communities is a journey of enlightenment, trust, and co-creation for a different way of doing development.

RESEARCH AND POLICY ADVOCACY



COMMUNITIES CONNECTION



DEVELOPMENT PROGRESS

ETHNIC MINORITY PROGRAM OF ISEE

TIEN PHONG NETWORK

2015	25 members 13 ethnic groups Partner with 5 local NGOs, international NGOs and government office
2018	100 members 16 ethnic groups Partner with 10 local NGOs, international NGOs and government office
2020	200 members 17 ethnic groups Partner with more than 20 local NGOs, international NGO and government office

SOCIAL MOVEMENT DEVELOPMENT



I BELIEVE I CAN FESTIVAL

- I believe I can
- I believe I can in Lao Cai province
- The intersection of discourse
- I believe I can - The Harmony of colors -
- Indegenous knowledge - The streams of life -
- Use the heart to light on the right things

Part II

FOUNDATIONAL THEORIES

As we began working with ethnic minority communities, we faced many inquiries regarding the goals and methods of implementing intervention activities. As mentioned, iSEE did not want to proceed with the application of the outdated approach of placing livelihood changes at the centre, as this imperceptibly enhances a community's passivity. On the quest to identify different approaches, the project members gradually realised that changes were not just technical, but that it is necessary to build upon theoretical foundations of justice, culture, and power. During this process, iSEE received support and input from many cultural researchers and anthropologists. This gradually led to a foundation of essential theories to guide intervention activities. At the same time, practical experience from working with communities draws out refreshing reflections and lessons, which also develops and strengthens our trust in the development philosophy provided by foundation theories. In this section, we will present basic concepts that help illuminate the project's activities.

The Story of Equality: Culture, Economy, and Community Participation

If interventions in the development field aim to build a more equal life for disadvantaged communities, then the definition of development and justice must lie at the core of development philosophy. Partial efforts to promote equality and economy do not change the cultural stereotypes towards ethnic minorities. Lack of consideration in economic intervention also risks deepening evolutionary prejudices, which situates minority communities at the “lower” level of development which implies a certain “backwardness”, or “lack of progress”. This perception is imposed top-down through

education curriculums, the media, and in policies. It is also internalised by the minority communities themselves – that is, community members often become subjects of a self-discrimination process. Minority communities can see themselves “progressing more slowly” compared to the majority, and subsequently lack confidence when sharing their experiences and initiatives. These internal and external barriers are cultural before they are economic. Until they are overcome, livelihood changes will not bring genuine equality to disadvantaged groups.

According to theorist Nancy Fraser, justice should have three interconnected aspects:

- 1) Economic equality, that is, equity in access to livelihood opportunities
- 2) Equality in dignity, meaning that all cultural identities should be equally respected;
- 3) Community participation in the struggle on both economic and cultural dimensions³.

From Fraser’s perspective on justice, we include cultural as a tactical intervention point, along with promoting active participation of the communities. This choice is *strategic* since it helps to re-balance the over-emphasis on economy in a lot of previous intervention projects. With this choice, livelihood interventions are not disregarded. What we want to change is the limited economic intervention that lacks an understanding of local cultural context and active participation of communities. We also want to change intervention methods that treat ethnic minority people as just “beneficiaries” of top-down projects. In a bid to foster community agency, we aim at making sustainable changes from within and from the bottom-up.

To address cultural conflicts, we adopted three theoretical supports. Firstly, we use the anthropological approach to think, interact, and work with ethnic minority communities. Secondly, we constantly reflect on *power* to analyse different levels of cultural prejudice, including self-stigmatization within the community. Thirdly, we pay special attention to fostering the active participation of community members, nurturing an *aspiration* to speak up and create a better shared future with the community.

In addition to the theoretical basis underpinning the approaches and intervention strategies in the Ethnic Minority program, iSEE also incorporates practical theories to apply in the process of capacity building, both for ourselves and the community. These are the theories of learning and community organising, identifying what is required of us as the co-author with the community, to ensure that each party is constantly improving at the individual, group, and organisational levels. We will now briefly outline those theoretical foundations.

³ Nancy Fraser, *Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation* (1996)

2.1 | Anthropological approach

In the Ethnic Minority program, knowledge about ethnic groups is provided by experts in different fields (media, sociology, and anthropology) and an anthropological approach is most closely aligned with the organisation’s direction – to understand Vietnam’s issues from the Vietnamese perspective - or more broadly, to understand a community’s issues from the insiders’ point of view. Anthropological theories have built the solid foundation for iSEE’s activities from the very beginning.

Cultural relativism

In development, the unilineal evolutionism commonly applied argues that human society undergoes a single development path with different development ladders. Successive ladders are more advanced and ‘civilised’ than those previous. Diversity in cultural practices among cultures, therefore, is not seen as an adaptation to natural, social, and political conditions, but an uneven development trajectory. From this view, wet-rice cultivation is considered more advanced than swidden cultivation, and sedentary lifestyle is more civilised than shifting agriculture lifestyle. In Vietnam, according to unilineal evolutionism, Kinh people, being the majority ethnic group, are at the top of the evolution pyramid and minority communities are located at lower levels.

Although it is a scientific theory, unilineal evolutionism has enormous impacts on political and social aspects. The concepts of high - low, progressive - backward, irrational - rational in the recognition of the diversity of cultural traditions advocated by unilinear evolutionism have been used as a scientific basis for the political and social movements in many parts of the world.

The impact of unilineal evolutionism can be seen in the State’s discourse on modernity and development in the past few decades that often considers minority people at a lower level of development and in need of the more progressive model of the majority. For “mountains to catch up with lowlands, and the minority to catch up with the majority”, the “unevolved” ethnic groups need to change all or most of their traditional socio-cultural practices to practices supposedly more civilised and closer to those of Kinh people. The conversion of “backward” ethnic groups from a lower tier on the “natural” evolutionary ladder to one that resembles the tier of the higher-developed group is also seen as the right and duty of the latter group. This evolutionary discourse and development philosophy, as well as the new socio-cultural categories that accompany them (commonly conveyed in ethnographic researches, policy documents, and press publications), such as “backward”, “not civilised”, “less developed”, “unhygienic”, “wasted”, “uncalculated”, “low awareness”, “superstitious”, etc. have greatly influenced the way both Kinh people and State officials negatively perceive and evaluate the diverse practices in economy, culture, society, and religion of ethnic minorities.

iSEE stipulates that the application of unilineal evolutionism likely leads to ethnic prejudice and stigma. More dangerously, it enables the legitimisation of prejudice. We therefore adopt the theory of Cultural Relativism as a foundation to generate knowledge about ethnic groups.

Cultural relativism is the fundamental theory of modern anthropology. The basis of cultural relativism is that cultures are viewed horizontally and equally. It emphasises the value of diversity, the uniqueness of each culture (without prescribing any hierarchy) and does not take any culture as the standard for “progress” and development as in Evolutionism.

With Cultural Relativism as the foundation for the organisation’s research, iSEE can emphasise the diversity of cultures. According to the Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity (2001): “As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations.” The 2005 Convention also highlights: “Cultural diversity creates a rich and varied world, which increases the range of choices and nurtures human capacities and values, and therefore is a mainspring for sustainable development for communities, peoples and nations.”

In addition to other aspects of human rights, cultural rights are seen as fundamental rights that are meaningful for both the individual and the community. The Fribourg Declaration on Cultural Rights defines a cultural community as “a group of persons who share references that constitute a common cultural identity that they intend to preserve and develop.”⁴ The term “culture” is inclusive of “those values, beliefs, convictions, languages, knowledge and the arts, traditions, institutions and ways of life through which a person or a group expresses their humanity and the meanings that they give to their existence and to their development.”⁵

However, cultural diversity can also be also wielded as a cultural discourse to govern and manipulate other cultures. In this application, ethnic groups’ cultures are acknowledged for diversity, but the existence of difference is not validated, and ethnic cultures are still urged to transition towards more civilised standards. This use of “cultural diversity” does not ascribe to cultural relativism but is still frequently applied and perpetuates prejudice in society in a complex way: recognising, but still opposing ethnic groups’ cultures through the continuous push towards civilisation and progression.

Cautious of this “cultural diversity” trap, iSEE applies cultural relativism in the quest for knowledge, with the greater goal of understanding ethnic cultures and to eliminate prejudice. iSEE uses the three pillars of anthropology to apply this perspective to its activities, namely, to design projects and work with the community.

⁴ Item c, Article 2, <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/instreet/Fribourg%20Declaration.pdf> -

⁵ Item a, Article 2, the same link.

Approaching problems through three pillars of anthropology

Through the consultation with anthropologists in Vietnam, iSEE selected three of the many pillars of anthropology as the foundation for the organisation's approach, namely: the holistic approach; promoting agency/active agent; and listening to the insider's voice (emic views).

THE HOLISTIC APPROACH

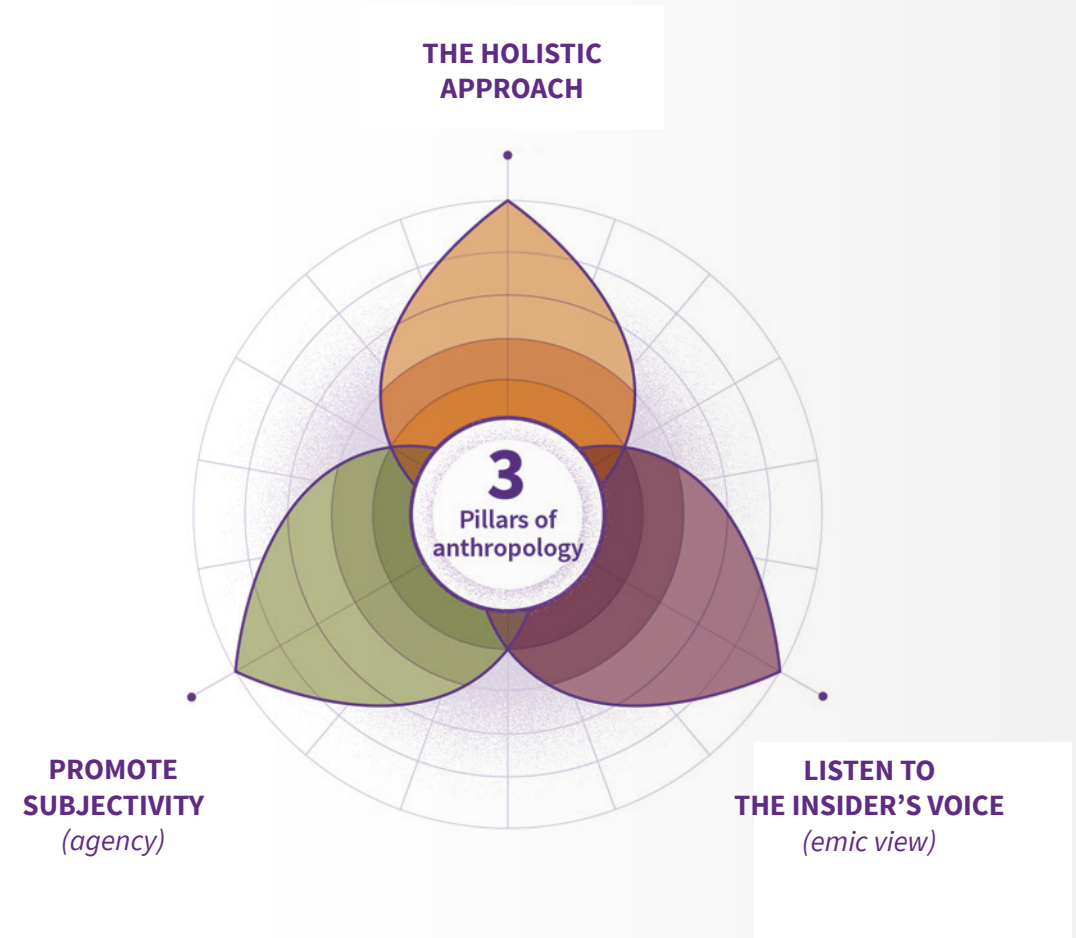
As culture is holistic, a complete and profound understanding of the content, meaning, and function of a given cultural practice can only be achieved in the broadest possible context. Therefore, when studying a cultural element, it is impossible to overlook the natural, political, economic, and socio-cultural factors of the community that owns that cultural practice. In addition, the holistic approach requires locating the cultural elements being studied in a relation to other elements of the same culture.

PROMOTE SUBJECTIVITY

Communities are the subjects of culture. The community possesses cultural knowledge and has the understanding to recognise how changes in cultural elements can affect their lives. The community has the capacity to decide to change cultural practices when they are no longer relevant to their current lives.

LISTEN TO THE INSIDER'S VOICE

An *emic* view is a "view from inside" or the thoughts and interpretations of the meaning of a cultural practice from the owner of the cultural practice themselves. These thoughts and interpretations are often very different from, and in some situations even contrasted to, the outsiders' thoughts and interpretation (the *etic* view). The insiders' point of view is normally shaped by the value systems, customs, beliefs, and cosmology, etc. of the culture that they live in. For that reason, to sufficiently understand the value of a cultural practice of an ethnic group, it is significant to learn how insiders interpret the meaning and function of their own cultural practices.



THREE PILLARS OF ANTHROPOLOGY

2.2

Theories of Power and Discourse

As mentioned, culture is a community space and a power space. Through culture, people have a sense of belonging to a certain place and history, and through that, they relate to a sense of the past, the future and a home in their lives. However, through culture, a lot of oppressive mechanisms also become the norm, such as the majority's mindset about "backwardness" of the minority. Approaching culture from an anthropological point of view promotes the insider's perspective and is inseparable from a critique of the power mechanisms that make culture a locus of oppression. That is why we spend a lot of time discussing the concept of power. In addition to analysing expressions of power, we also delve into the concept of discourse to better understand the operation of power in the cultural domain.

Power is an important element in social relationships, including between State institutions, between the State and its citizen, and between individuals. There have been many theories of power in different fields such as sociology, history, political science, and international relations. According to German sociologist Max Weber, power is "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests"⁶. Thus, power is associated with the will of each subject and the interaction between subjects in society. Understanding the mechanisms of power balances is an important step in recognising its impact on social issues like poverty, discrimination, inequality, and social equality, so that we can propose appropriate way to make change in society.

The concepts of power and power relations are normally understood in terms of powerful groups dominating and imposing their will on less advantaged groups. Therefore, when it comes to "developing power" or "changing power relations", people often think about the relationship of "gain" and "loss" or conflict and confrontation between powerful and disadvantaged groups. In its intervention strategy, iSEE applies the theory and approach of power as a foundation to design community building activities. The Power Cube⁷ - an approach developed by the Power, Participation, and Social Change (PPSC) group in the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) - is a model for analysing power in different dimensions: space, forms, and level, and their interaction with one another. This model helps to better understand the position and relationship among community groups, and between them and external factors. Through this, the ability to create movement and change between subjects is revealed.

iSEE applies the following three aspects of power:

a. Expressions of power: When it comes to power from way of expression, three types of expression are mentioned:

- *Self-reliance (Power to)*, demonstrated by people not succumbing to difficulties, and in their efforts to overcome difficulties.

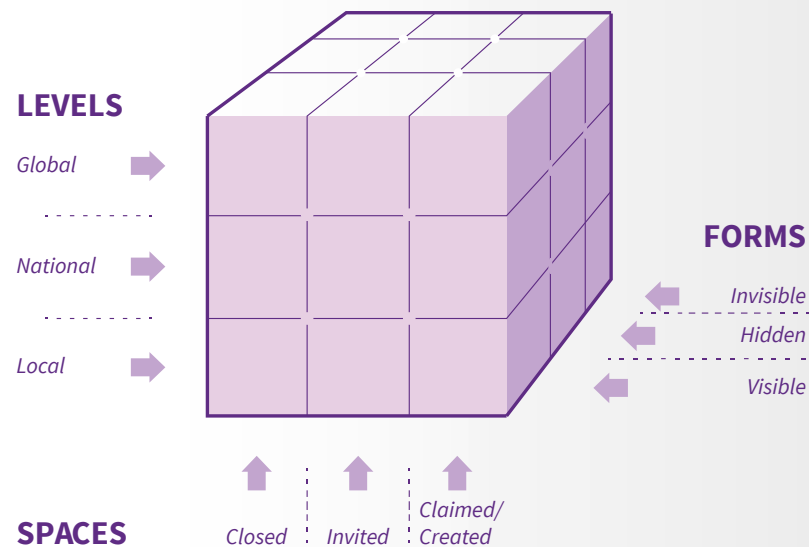
- *Collective power (Power with)*, illustrated by people taking collective action. Collective power is to act together by establishing shared-interest groups to do something. However, collective power/joint action does not automatically come with groups. Not every group has collective strength.

- *Internal strength (Power within)*, represented in people's confidence, pride, and acknowledgement of their rights. Internal strength is the foundation for promotion of collective power and self-reliance.

⁶ Max, W. 1947. The theory of social and economic organization, English version, Oxford University Press, New York, p.152

⁷ <https://www.powercube.net/>

THE LEVEL SPACES AND FORM OF POWER | THE POWER CUBE



When an individual/community has all of three expressions of power, that individual/community can make decisions and choices (agency) – an indispensable condition of the process of raising voices and status. That is why consolidating and raising the internal, self-reliant, and collective power of the disadvantaged groups is one of the main strategies of iSEE when working with minority groups.

b. Forms of power: Power manifests in different forms, particularly in how someone/something impacts others. The identification of these forms of power determines the success and effectiveness of strategies for lobbying, policy advocacy, and changing beliefs. There are three forms of power:

- **Visible power:** This is defined by positions/titles and has direct influence on decisions. For instance, a person in a community, group, organisation, or a society has a title that comes with power, like a group leader, head of an office, project director, or head of a village. In the example of a classroom, the title “teacher” also gives the person standing on the podium power over the students. In a lineage, the title “head of the lineage” also indicates that that person has power over other members of the same kinship group.

- **Hidden power:** This is determined by the intervention in decision-making mechanisms and agendas. Hidden power is used to exclude or include something/

someone into the agenda, to create areas of “closed power” or extend areas of “representative power”. For example, the annual parliamentary program in Vietnam that decides which laws to consider and which to take off the list is a form of hidden power.

- **Invisible power:** This is expressed through the beliefs and norms that regulate behaviours and manners in society. Belief automatically regulates individual/community action. Imagine that A believes she is inferior to B. Then, we might presume that A will listen to what B says and believe in what B decides. In another instance, if community X believes that they are more backward than community Y, X members will tend to see Y as a standard to “strive” towards; and if community Y thinks that they are more civilised, they will impose their thoughts, lifestyle, and way of doing things on community X.

c. Spaces of power: This is a very important dimension for understanding power. Spaces of power are not physical spaces, but opportunities, moments, and channels through which people can act to make changes in policies, discourses, decisions, and relationships affecting their lives and relative benefits.

Such spaces of power are not formed accidentally but are the product of power relations. They can be understood as boundaries and limitations that determine who/what is involved in discussions, decision-making, and so on. There are three main spaces of power:

- **Closed space:** This is a space in which

the decision-making process is in the hands of a group of politically powerful people, and not ordinary ones.

- **“Representative democratic space” (invited space):** This is a space that allows some experts and people’s representatives to contribute to the discussion, such as a few citizens invited to comment on the plan of socio-economic development, or public and expert consultations on upcoming policies, etc.

- **Open space:** This is a space created by the people themselves to discuss or solve problems that they care about. These are spaces that are naturally formed based on shared interests. In development projects, open space is a space where groups experiencing injustice come together to raise their voices and practice speaking out to change the injustices they are suffering.

When using “spaces to practise power” as a lens through which to look at power dynamics, people see that capacity built in one space will influence on participation in other space. For instance, if people are not allowed to practice decision-making in an open space, they will passively listen to others when invited to a “representative democratic space” for designing socio-economic development. However, if they exercise decision-making in open space, like conducting research on the impacts of a poverty reduction policy or study discourse, etc. all by themselves, their ability to make decisions and to negotiate will be improved, helping them to contribute better to the representative democratic space.



Photo: Workshop "The intersection of discourses"

Discourse

Discourse is a term initially used in linguistics, and then in the famous works of Foucault like *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, published in French in 1966. Its application has been expanded to explore subjectivity, knowledge, and power in modern societies. Phenomena of the objective world still exist, but they gain meaning only through discourse. Discourse is considered as *a special way of talking about and making sense of the world*. Discourse is a space of meaning, and a way of creating meaning that helps human to understand themselves and the world. In other word, discourse is a concrete network of language, actions, laws, beliefs, and ways of organising life based on a certain understanding of life.

Distinct from the notion that language is only a means of reflecting an “objective reality”, discourse emphasises the specific historical, cultural, and political conditions that shape the way people envision the world and thereby create their own reality.

For example, drought is understood to be a climate phenomenon whereby an area experiences water shortage for a period of months or years. As soon as people begin to explain the phenomenon, it ceases to be the story of an “objective” existing natural phenomenon but becomes a part of discourse. Some would interpret it as an unusual natural phenomenon – meteorological discourse. Others interpret droughts as a result of improper farming, leading to the depletion of water resources - that is, agri-economic discourse. Others argue that it is unreasonable macro-planning of water resources - political discourse. Then again, others see it as a harbinger or punishment of some divine being - religious discourse. Each of these interpretations not only lead to different and even contradictory visions of the world, but also serve as the basis for creating different interventions to change the situation. To alleviate the drought phenomenon, one can make artificial rain (meteorological discourse), change crop varieties (agricultural-economic discourse), adjust macro policies (political discourse) or practice rituals in accordance with local religious traditions (religious discourse). Thus, discourse not only creates meaning but also guides action. As one of iSEE’s websites (dienngon.vn) writes: “*Rooted in language, discourse creates belief, belief turns into knowledge, and knowledge creates power*”.

Discourses can coexist, but they can also be competitive and mutually exclusive (in the example above, for instance, scientific meteorological discourse does not reconcile with religious discourse). This exposes **the power aspect of discourse**. There are hegemonic discourses, containing “correct” or normative implications”. On the contrary, there are discourses on the margins of life that are considered “unusual” or “wrong”. Throughout each historical period, certain discourses tend to take centre stage and are considered “right” according to the way people interpret the world. Alongside that process, some discourses tend to be marginalised or considered “wrong”, and these sometimes disappear completely. In other words, the process of power negotiation between various discourses is also the process by which certain groups can easily create meaning in a way they want and impose it on others. As it is a negotiation process, discourse has relative stability, but is also always fluctuating due to various collisions between different spaces of meaning. Therefore, there can be no knowledge that is an absolute objective truth.

Questioning who has the authority to create discourse, providing opportunities for marginalised discourses to emerge, and engaging in dialogue with dominant discourses can contribute towards changing the balance of power between groups in society. iSEE applies these theories on power and discourse to design interventions for social changes within the community.

2.3

Aspiration as a cultural capacity

If the anthropological approach allows us to get closer to ethnic minorities' lives and the concept of discourse helps us to realise the mechanisms of power through language, our goal is to use this foundation of cultural knowledge to promote the active and creative participation of the ethnic minority people in the process of changing prejudice. The fact that iSEE choose the name Pride – Confidence – Self-Reliance for the Ethnic Minority Program reflects this goal. The more we work with communities, the more we believe that sustainable change needs to come through community assets. These resources are plentiful because they lie deep in cultural knowledge and lived experiences in the local context of ethnic minorities, but they need to be fostered and organised in a persistent and proactive manner. With this goal, our activities can be seen as a collective endeavour in imagination, reflection, and construction of another future, where wisdom, voices, and initiatives of the ethnic minorities are listened to and become the main inspiration for thinking about equality and development. The future that we build together is a place where ethnic minorities are no longer concerned with meaningless end-goals, namely to “catch up with lowlands.” Instead, ethnic minorities can raise their voices to tell the stories of their communities and work together to protect the future of the community in equality, respect, and dialogue.

When we reflect on the relationship between disadvantaged groups and their future, we find theoretical support in anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's concept of aspiration⁸. After many years of working with the poor in India, Appadurai recognises the key but often neglected role of culture in development projects. He recognises that the greatest obstacle to connecting culture and development is the absence of any notion of the future. He pointed out that, when talking about culture, people immediately think about the past: heritage, tradition, memory, customs, etc. Even though culture is a key resource for community strength, the pervasive connection between culture and the past makes it difficult for the concept of culture to be reconciled with “development” projects, which aim to break free from negative constraints of the past. Arjun Appadurai proposes to bring the future into the way we think about culture, thus making culture a strategic intervention point in development projects.

To connect culture with this concept of the future, Arjun Appadurai develops a new intention for the “aspiration” concept. Instead of seeing aspiration

as a psychological feeling, it becomes subjective. Appadurai considers aspiration in a cultural capacity⁹, like other capacities such as our ability to perceive language, to make friends, read maps, or criticise policy. According to his definition: “The capacity to aspire is thus a navigational capacity.” The navigation here is the capacity to visualise, establish, adjust, and actualise a certain route to help people go from a specific “present” to a certain “future”. In Vietnamese words, what Appadurai calls “aspiration” does not stop at the pursuit of money, fame, and happiness for oneself or the community, but rather the ability to establish and maintain a “vision” into the future, accompanied by the ability to actualise that “vision”.

Like many other cultural capacities, aspirational capacity is affected by social structures. Appadurai puts it this way: “The more privileged in any society simply have used the map of its norms to explore the future more frequently and more realistically, and to share this knowledge with one another more routinely than their poorer and weaker neighbours. The poorer members, precisely because of their lack of opportunities to practice the use of this

⁸ Appadurai's perspective on the relationship between culture, future, and aspiration capacity is presented in the famous essay “The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition”, in *Culture and Public Action*, Stanford University Press, 2004.

⁹ *Ibid*, 69

navigational capacity [...] have a more brittle horizon of aspirations.”¹⁰ For this reason, the capacity to aspire is unevenly distributed among social groups. Even though anybody can, in theory, aspire to a better future, privileged groups will easily find means, justifications, and systematic supports for their routes, while disadvantaged groups often stop at short-term or even fantasised calculations. If the underdog were to foresee a path to a better future, that path, to borrow Appadurai’s words, “is often more rigid, less flexible, of little strategic value.”¹¹.

Strengthening the capacity to aspire for disadvantaged groups, therefore, cannot just be an inspiration in a carelessly optimistic spirit. The process itself has no ready-made answers, but fluctuates according to each specific object, context, and power structure. During more than a decade of working with communities, iSEE has gradually begun to foster the aspiration to build an equal and understanding space together with them. We have had many discussions about the future of certain projects, and about the fight against prejudice against ethnic minority in general. We have also gone through a lot of experimentation, from working together to uncover different levels of cultural discrimination, to collecting and maintaining indigenous

knowledge. Together we seek allies and organise many cultural activities to increase the presence of ethnic minorities in the common discourse. Throughout this process, we have persistently built and expanded our community with an openness to criticism and a willingness to change. Instead of just focusing on quantities, we aim to jointly establish and nurture the quality of mutual aspiration on a democratic platform. Amidst that process, among the expanse of work that needs to be done, between the bustle of their own lives and the growth of the community, between the difficulties created by the mechanisms and the hopes coming from the spring of the indigenous cultures, we gradually become co-authors, jointly fostering faith in an open future for the ethnic minority communities in Vietnam.

Aside from theories which help to identify the approaches and strategies of intervention in the Ethnic Minority Program, iSEE researches practical theories for the process of capacity building, both for itself and for the communities. These are theories in learning and community organising, which helps us to define our role as co-authors with the communities and ensure that each party is constantly improving in their own capacity at an individual, group and organisational level.

^{11, 10} Ibid, 69

2.4

The theory of Capacity Building

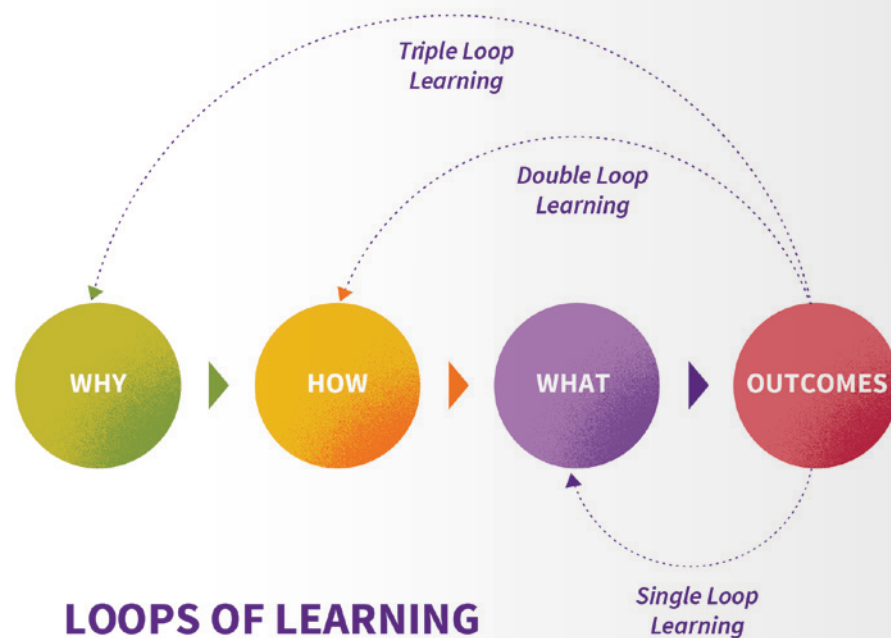
Creating a space to promote learning has been one of our priorities since we started our intervention activities. The learning process is not only for community members, but also for iSEE staff and our partners in working with communities.

Learning and the Experiential Learning Cycle

Learning doesn't just happen in the classroom, it is a continuous process of acquiring new understanding, knowledge, behaviour, skills, values, attitudes, and interests. The process of learning has three important characteristics:

- **Proactivity:** Learners improve their knowledge for themselves by exploring the world around them, observing and interacting with both things and phenomena, exchanging and connecting with each other, and linking new ideas with the existing level of understanding
- **Enrichment:** Learners will build upon the existing platform of understanding, at the same time enriching, developing, and changing existing perceptions.
- **Dedication:** Learners are required to be motivated and committed.

In addition to a learner's proactivity, learning happens at different levels, requiring different levels of thinking and efforts. According to Argyris and Schon (1974), there are **three loops of learning**:



• Single-loop learning:

In this loop, learners address the question “Are we doing things right?”. In this stage, learners mostly focus on their actions, examining and evaluating them based on the standards and model of knowledge. They have not challenged the taught knowledge, have not dug deep to understand the beliefs and logic underlying their knowledge. This level of learning is suitable for making small changes and providing immediate solutions.

• Double-loop learning:

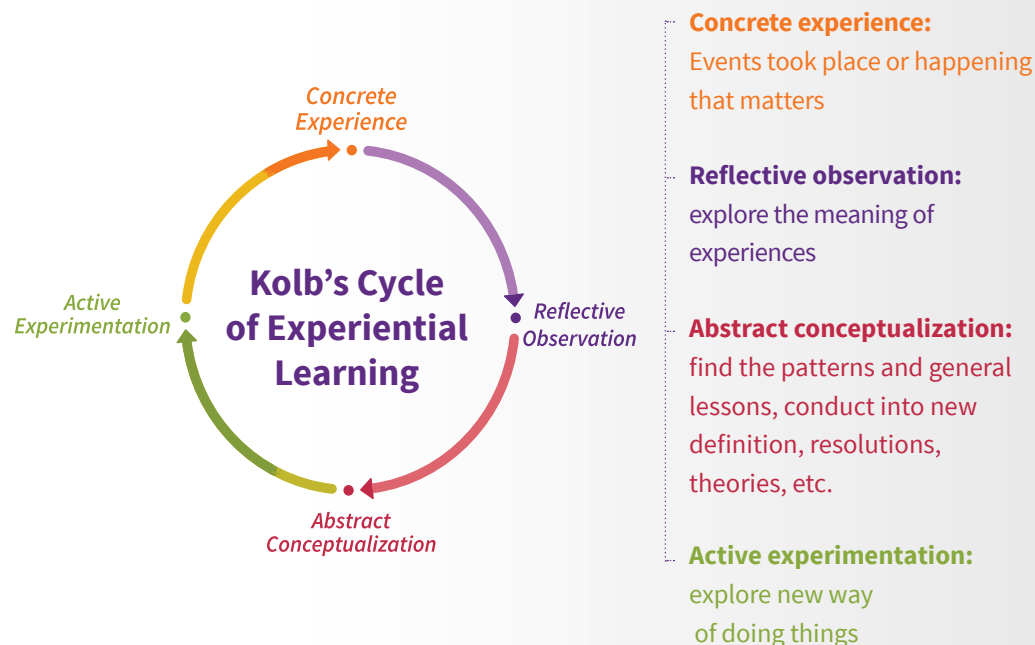
At this level, learners answer the question “Are we doing the right thing?”. The difference between the first and the second levels is that learners start to doubt the knowledge that they are imparted, reshaping the way in which action and knowledge are created. They began to change the way they made decisions and deepened their understanding of their hypotheses.

• Triple-loop learning:

The third level addresses the question “How do we decide what is right?”. This stage is when learners transform the entire way of looking at a problem and re-examine their perspective and worldview. The way of creating knowledge has been and is being shaped by what factors?

Therefore, learning needs to be established in all three loops to ensure that we do not “fall asleep” with habits in thinking and acting, and promptly recognise the necessary changes.

To build a culture of learning among community members and collaborators, we strive to make every moment a learning opportunity. We apply Kolb's 1984 theory on the Cycle of Experiential Learning, which explains the natural learning process of people. All that we learn goes through this cycle: every time we do or experience something (experience), we can recall and analyse what we did/experienced (analyse) and then draw lessons (generalise) for how to do this differently and perhaps improve next time (apply). When we put those lessons into practice, we can have new experiences, and if we continue to analyse, this learning cycle continues. People learn from a very early age through this natural learning cycle. Therefore, if the lessons follow this cycle, learners will actively discover and master knowledge.



However, not all experiences are analysed, and analysing alone does not ensure that the right lessons are drawn. Even then, not every right lesson will be successfully applied. This explains why in life, sometimes we make the same mistake repeatedly, doing the same thing many times and still struggle to succeed.

Understanding learning processes in general helps us define our learning facilitation as co-authors with the community, to ensure learning continuity and create a culture of learning. Understanding the loops of learning and the cycle of experiential learning helps us understand how that task must be accomplished so that all parties learn timely and meaningful lessons.

The Sense of Community and Collective Action

Gusfield (1975) divides concepts of community into two types. The first is a geographical one – people living in the same village, a commune, or a country. The second is a shared-interest community – people who share a common characteristic, or an interest, or hobby, regardless of geographical differences. However, community is only possible when its members have a sense of community, to really feel that they belong and have a desire to act with and for the community.

According to David W. McMillan and David M. Chavis¹², the sense of community is fostered in four aspects, namely:

- *Membership*: The sense of belonging to a community because that community shares common values, emotions, and interests.
- *Influence*: The feel of having added values and making a distinct contribution to the group, as well as getting back from the group.
- *Integration and fulfilment of needs*: This is obtained when individual needs are shared and met by the group's material and mental resources.

Shared emotional connection: The commitments and beliefs of members that share many things in common, such as their history, their place, the era they live in, experiences, and even future aspirations or prospects.

ISEE seeks to promote the voice of ethnic minority communities through developing a network of ethnic groups' representatives. The network members may be from different regions, origins, backgrounds, and with different experiences, but they share the similar values, emotions, and interests in issues relating to ethnic minorities. They can utilise their common resources to actualise their enthusiasm with the community, to feel that they can have an impact and contribute to the common effort. They can foster an awareness of their collective power as well as trusting and committing to the Network's mission, to constantly strengthen and develop it as their own community. All of this can only be achieved through working, studying, and practicing values, building necessary capacities, discussing and making decisions and actions together to create common experiences, lessons, and achievements consisting of individual and collective contributions. These activities help realise the value of shared efforts and solidarity in creating change. Therefore, fostering a sense of belonging and collective action is one of our core foundations to construct and develop communities.

¹² <https://www.drdauidmcmillan.com/article-1/>

Part III

STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS

3.1

Applying the anthropological approach in analysing problems and choosing actions

We design and implement strategies and actions based on application of the mentioned foundational theories. We continuously utilise three pillars of methodological approaches in anthropology in perceiving and analysing problems before deciding to act. Below are some examples.

Holistic approach

We perceive culture/community as a complete whole. Hence, it is significant to situate culture in the broadest context in which that culture or community exists and is necessary to view culture through all of the aspects in which it is located, namely nature, economy, society, and politics. These elements intertwine and affect each other as parts of a network. When one element is affected and changed, the whole network changes.

In Livelihood transformation and credit issues of some ethnic minorities in Central Highland and Northern mountainous regions¹³, the authors show that the trend of transforming the agricultural farming model from “self-sufficiency” into commodity production - from the viewpoint of the government and a number of people, is a change from an outdated form to a civilised and more progressive form. In reality, this transformation does not only result in crop changes (from hill rice to industrial crops) or changes in farming methods (switching from intercropping, polyculture to monoculture of coffee and corn) but also affects numerous other factors in life:

(1) Causing debt (affecting viability) for the people, because people do not have much capital to invest in seeds and fertilizers.

(2) Migration, which changes the social space of communities (because of substantial debts, ineffectiveness of industrial crop cultivation, people have to look for jobs in other provinces).

(3) Changing local people’s ability to own resources because in order to pay debts, people have to sell land, their biggest asset to help them survive.

(4) Reducing quality of life when people lack food from livestock due to monoculture farming. In the past, when intercropping, people still combined raising pigs and chickens in the cultivation area. In the current monoculture, people only grow industrial crops, and cannot combine to raise livestock or grow crops on the same piece of land.

(5) The disappearance of the moral economy in which community members support each other.

In addition, a cultural expression or practice never solely exists. A cultural practice is always found in the interference and influences, and is the result of natural, socio-economic, cultural, and political factors.

¹³ <http://isee.org.vn/Content/Home/Library/502/tin-dung-cac-toc-nguoi-thieu-so.pdf>

MAP

REASONS FOR EARLY MARRIAGE



Child marriage in ethnic minorities is often discoursed as a result of culture – an evil custom of ethnic groups. Children are seen as victims forced by their parents and family. In iSEE’s research in Dien Bien, Yen Bai, Hoa Binh, and Quang Tri¹⁴, the decision to get married is decided by children themselves. This decision is affected by several socio-economic factors. The “agricultural economic life”, in which working is essential for living, and ethnic cultural norms are the root causes. Living in a context that requires children to work and contribute to their home economics, ethnic minority children are considered mature quite early compared to the legal age for marriage. The given circumstance of “working” to survive influences perceptions and practices in love and marriage. Men and women reaching adulthood are expected not to enjoy life, but to focus on working for a living. In other respects, in the context of patriarchal cultural norms, getting married has a symbolic meaning that changes children’s social status and life significance. The thought that marriage is an indispensable and necessary destination of love has become an idea that is maintained and strengthened among ethnic groups, through the process of individuals receiving education from family and community. Boys are expected to be the breadwinners and responsible for their family, girls are supposed to be wives and mothers. Because of the importance of work for living, almost all life activities serve the purpose of survival. Education, if it does not meet that purpose, becomes secondary.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Child marriage in some ethnic minority communities in Vietnam - http://isee.org.vn/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/2017_ChildMarriage_Report_VN_FINAL.pdf

¹⁵ Ibid, 7

Through the holistic approach, we realise the need to be mindful with the activities of community projects. A phenomenon (child marriage) is not solely about marriage customs but a consequence of economic factors (lack of employment and household economics depending on manual labour to survive) and social aspects (showing maturity and gender roles in community).

When approaching the problem holistically, we wonder about our own prejudice against the cultures and communities we work with. Different cultures are not ranked on a high-low scale; and there is no similar rank for practices within a culture, and no cultural practices are “more civilised” or “more backward”. Bringing our prejudices into activities can lead to impacts that we are unaware of. In the context of the child marriage issue, when we quickly perceive it as backward or evil customs, we omit the impacts of “modern” cultural waves recently. “Children’s access to modern means of communication such as the internet, Facebook, Zalo, well-invested infrastructure for transportation, boarding education, the increase of private transportation (motorcycles, the popularity of television, as well as the simplification of marriage rites compared to traditional ones reduce the financial pressure on marriage, etc.”¹⁶

It is not straightforward to understand culture as a whole. With each project, we seek advice from multidisciplinary experts - helping us to see culture from different perspectives and fields. More importantly, it is necessary to have participation and consultation from the community themselves as the cultural subject, who have the ability to influence and bear the full impact of the cultural change.

¹⁶ Ibid, 8

Emphasis on agency

In development projects, the question arises: Who defines the problem of the community? Who decides what a project will do? The question of a community problem is not easily answered. For numerous years, the community’s problems are rarely spoken of by the community or identified by the community. Community problems are often defined from an outsider’s point of view: economic problems - according to the economic standards of communities that are supposed to be more economically developed; cultural issues - based on the cultural standards of supposedly more civilised places; indigenous knowledge - as per a given research question of researchers outside the community. Those predetermined scales and goals bring the community’s problems into question, but does the community really need such a change? To touch on agency, we must first answer this question: Who has the right to decide the changes of the community?

The community is the decision maker, which is the first priority of iSEE when approaching the issue. This is because community is the subject of culture. Communities/ individuals in the community are the insiders, receiving all the consequences of the changes to local economics, society, and natural environment - whether they succeed or fail, they are also the recipients and owners living with those changes for the rest of their lives. iSEE believes that the community has enough knowledge to know what needs to be changed, enough vision to see the risks, enough responsibility to worry about the effects that are close to their lives. With such capacities, why is the community often perceived as ignorant, backward,

and lazy? Is it because they live in an environment where their talents don't get a chance to manifest? In its approach to community agency, iSEE looks for ways to open up spaces in which the community is self-determined and identifies its own problems - this is not a simple approach, nor can it be implemented right away.

As change makers, we worry about our invisible powerful status when working with the community on projects. With this power in our hands, we have the capacity

to make decisions that are sometimes far from, or even opposite to, the community's wishes. Thinking about our correlation with the community, we wonder - are the community members providing data for research, or do they define research questions? Do the community choose what problem(s) to solve or do project officers determine problems at the beginning? To answer these questions, we apply working methods such as Community Initiative, Co-research, and Co-creation.



Photo: Tien Phong Tour in learning about community organizing models: Mr. Nguyen, ethnic M'ngong- Tien Phong Dak Nong shared: "I live here, so I know exactly who need what, know their own thoughts and difficulties, depending on these circumstances, I'll have different approach".

Community initiative is a method in which the community identifies local problems and decides which is its own. Community initiatives assist project workers and outsiders to realise that the community has more problems and concerns than the labels often attached to them in the press, such as poverty and backwardness. The initiative also shows the concerns and essential and practical issues that the community wants to solve.

The study of the Pakoh conducted by Tien Phong Quang Tri demonstrates community's independent capacity in detecting local problems. It was not economics but identity that the Pakoh people in Quang Tri worry about and always seek to raise: the Pakoh is classified in the same ethnic group with the Ta Oi but they want to be recognised as an independent ethnic group. The research team - Tien Phong members who were Pakoh in Ta Rut, Quang Tri - collected photos, written language, and ancient stories of their ethnic group to prove that the Pakoh is not the Ta Oi. Based on the classification of ethnic groups in Vietnam, an ethnic group is determined through three factors: language, cultural practices, and ethnic origin. The Pakoh has distinctions in all three factors.

The initiative of the Tien Phong Dak Nong to build Dream Bridges has broadened the perspective of what is community from an insiders' view. In Dak Nong, the bridge over the Dak Rmang River was made by many different ethnic groups, including local people (the M'ngong) and migrants (H'mong and Kinh people). The concept of community was broadened much more extensively than what the iSEE initially thought. In addition, the Dak Nong Tien Phong group mobilised resources and supports from different local groups (church, school, government) in the Dream Bridges initiative. With each group and individual, Sardong Nguyen had a different approach so that all stakeholders shared the common wish of having a bridge connecting two riverbanks, a bridge built by the locals that was not a part of planning maps or state-owned projects. This practice, which only comes from someone who understands each person and each group in the community well, shows that when the community play a self-determination role, they will do things that outsiders have to work very hard or with much greater resources to achieve.

When implementing community initiatives, the iSEE team learned to step back and slow its decisions and activities. What we wish to do is always plentiful, but if it is not what the community wants nor needs, then we need to understand and adjust our desire to create social changes. This is a difficulty, and the main challenge to the desire to change the world according to the will of people who consider themselves all-knowing.

Along with community initiative, co-research and co-creation are ways of facilitating spaces for a community's self-determination in the fields of research and artistic creation. The greatest challenge in these fields is that conventionally, the knowledge of ethnic minorities is often written and communicated by the majority; art products on ethnic minority themes are made and presented by professional artists. The role of experts (such as researchers and artists with official degrees/licenses) as outsiders is more highly appreciated than the role of the community they work with. As a result, the community does not possess knowledge about their own culture. The right to determine values of a culture, often seen as backward, is in the hands of the expert. The community does not have an opportunity to denounce nor decide the meaning of knowledge "about them", or "belonging to them".

Co-research resets the roles of experts and communities. In this practice, researchers play a supporting role, opening a space for discussion. The community goes through a process of exploring and selecting topics to frame research questions.

The research Finding Hmong letters¹⁷ has a goal of finding out what the community in Sapa wants to learn. At first, the research team "was very interested in macro issues such as forest land, mining, and ethnic prejudice because they thought that [these issues] were "attractive", "important", and comprehensive. Although aiming to transfer the right to choose research topics to the people in accordance with the concept of co-research, in their mind, the research team still expected the community to choose the topics relating to those issues." However, after discussion and interviews with Hmong researchers in Sapa (Sa and Cua), the main concern of the community was Hmong writing – a "micro" issue that

¹⁷ http://isee.org.vn/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/2015_Di_tim_chu_Mong_VN.pdf

was beyond the expectations and understanding of the team¹⁸. The more they progressed with the co-research process, the more surprises they got. Studying Hmong writing was not only to record songs and customs (cultural matter) but also to know how to calculate and run businesses as well as to search for information (economic matter) and to affirm Hmong identity, of which the absence led to confusion in ethnic self-respect. The research initially aimed at Uncle Ho's Hmong letters, but in fact, the community wished to use the international Hmong writing to communicate with other Hmong people around the world. The international Hmong writing was more widely used but the community was hesitant because of obstacles in ethnic policy in Vietnam.

The result of Finding Hmong letters proves that the transfer of community's role in research helps researchers to realise what the problem for the community truly is. The project also visualises the seemingly minor/vague/hidden/forgotten issues that have an important impact on ethnic life - things that only people in the community know. The result also helps the community to have the opportunity to display their ability to research, learn and create their own knowledge.

¹⁸ Ibid, 5

VIỆN NGHIÊN CỨU XÃ HỘI, KINH TẾ VÀ MÔI TRƯỜNG



ĐI TÌM CHỮ MÔNG

Nghiên cứu cùng cộng đồng Mông thôn Giàng Tra, xã Tả Phìn, huyện Sa Pa

iSEE care ĐHQG HÀ NỘI NHÀ XUẤT BẢN ĐẠI HỌC QUỐC GIA HÀ NỘI

Co-creation originates in the idea that “communities are the voice makers and artists are the visualisation creators” (in the Touch, Untouch, and Retouch group exhibition, 2017). Co-creation is a process for artists and communities to encounter, interact, and co-create. In this process, the role of the creator and the voice of the community are often examined repeatedly to varying degrees. To prepare for this process, at the most basic stage, the artist and the community need to be introduced to each other first; be equipped with knowledge and approaches so that the creative process is not one-way.

In “The land of choice” (a product of the group of artists and Tai migrants in Dak RMang), artists’ role is to guide villagers to create puppets and compose puppet shows. The play is in the form of a grandmother telling her grandchildren about the traditional wedding in her hometown (Thanh Hoa), or a father telling his children about the Thai stilt house in their hometown, etc. All the materials for the process of creating performances are found within the community - the artist only helps to form the image’s appearance in a different way, like a godmother rather than a creator of the work.

For four years of co-creation of different artists and Tien Phong groups, the questions of “What story does the community truly want to tell?” and “What is the role of the artists?” are raised constantly by the participating artists and project officers.

Photo: The process of crafting the art piece “Land of choices”: after listening to their fathers and grandmothers, local youth drew based on their imagination



In the work ‘Souls’, which was conducted by Kieu Anh, Nguyen Phuong, and Tien Phong group of Tai people from Dien Bien, Tong Van Han, a Tien Phong group member, participated in several in-depth discussions with the two artists. The discussions focused on the essence and the image of souls in Tai culture in Muong Thanh in general, and from the perspectives of Tai people in Noong Luong and Thanh Chan communes in particular. After completing the sketch and presenting the idea to the community, the two artists received comments from Dien Bien Tien Phong as well as their disapproval of the expansion of the original idea. Therefore, the artists actively did not expand the idea and kept the plan as presented before.

From another aspect, approach of agency requires attention to and reflection on what ‘community’ is and who has the agency, as well as who are the insiders and who are the outsiders?

At the first stage of the Child marriage project, we used photovoice to study the matter from inside perspectives (promoting the insiders’ view by having the community take photos of their own lives by themselves). However, the people who did the photovoice were those chosen because of their project experience, rather than those who really care and were members of the family having child marriage practices. As a result, no photograph of early marriage was taken - because families who had early marriage did not want to invite outsiders to the wedding, nor did they want to “show off” an illegal act to outsiders. The prejudices of people accustomed to doing development projects to young brides and grooms also presented in photos and stories. These people were community members but not the insiders of the kinship groups having early marriage. Therefore, the practice was illustrated from outsiders’ point of view. As a result, the told stories were about “the others” instead of “me”. Realising this mistake, the project changed its participants, from “agile” people who were long-time collaborators in projects to those who, after being surveyed, showed that they were willing to participate in the project. More than 50% of this group got married at the age of 15 and 16. The project also changed its initial target to three matters that the community concerned over:

(1) Household livelihood: the decision to get married early was caused by livelihood issues, in which lack of education led to unemployment. Thus getting married early meant that the family had an additional labour, and changed an individual’s status to adulthood, which allowed them to make their own decision on their livelihood.

(2) The education of girls: because of gender roles of the community, girls had lesser opportunities in employment than boys did.

(3) Access to the Internet: easy access to the Internet offers teenagers more chances to meet, date, and get married early. This selection of three matters demonstrates that the choice was made by the community themselves (agency) closely associated with other elements in the community life (holistic) and would reflect insiders’ view (emic view).

Listen to the insiders' voice

In 2017, iSEE conducted research on LGBTQI ethnic minorities with a desire to study the lives of people at the intersection of identities. To start the research, the LGBTQI Program in iSEE hypothesised that ethnic minority people who were homosexual, or bisexual, or transgender faced two layers of prejudice, which were ethnic discrimination and sexual discrimination. The research was implemented in the Flower Hmong community in Bac Ha (Lao Cai) and Black Tai (Tai Dam) community in Nghia Lo (Yen Bai). However, initial interviews suggested that the problem was the opposite to the intersectional prejudice in iSEE's hypothesis. One of the interviewees said that: "Poor homosexuals, they are not allowed to get married". This indicated that, from the community perspective, homosexual, bisexual, and transgender people did not necessarily face prejudice in the same way they did in urban area/Kinh communities. They were sympathised with because they could not build a family (in a traditional way, between a man and a woman) and had disadvantages, such as no family support or no children, values that the community appreciated. After interviewing, the project team decided to discontinue the project and return funds to the donor since the team realised the substantial gap between the hypothesis and community's perspective and its potential risk to the community.

Through the above story, iSEE become aware of that the majority's prejudice may not exist in other cultures and both parties' perceptions of certain issues may be distinct, even when they served the same purpose of supporting the disadvantaged.

By approaching from the insider's point of view initially, iSEE can better understand a community in terms of their desires, thoughts, and concerns. To do so, iSEE always leaves an open door for directional change in project implementation. Community consultations are also held throughout the process, from design to implementation.



Photo: The association of senior leaders in A Lieng village, Ta Rut commune discussed about customary tenure and roles of senior leaders in contemporary lives

In the Customs – Land Law project, Ma A Pho, a Hmong person in Lao Cai, was involved in the designing stage. In the implementation, the perspective on customary law was constantly being broadened since each community had a different view of the customary law of land management. From the initial vision of a co-researched activity, the project developed into three different topics related to land management: community forest management of Tai people in Dien Bien, the role of village elders' council in land dispute mediation of the Pakoh in Quang Tri, and how the village elders convey information of the Ede in Daklak. This process could not have been defined from the beginning, but gave way to a range of directions. The relevant topic transitioned from customary law to land management – from something initially unfamiliar to many communities, it gained a closer purpose, being examined from different perspectives.

Approaching from the insider's view also promotes the voices of the disadvantaged, when the right to speak out in mass media and law, etc. belongs to the people in power, such as reporters, who are usually outsiders. The absence of insiders' voices weakens the diversity in society and causes a lack of specific stories that results in a one-dimensional perception of social issues. For a more equal society, in which issues are considered from diverse voices, meaning, and dimensions, iSEE and communities open spaces for insiders' opinions to be shared, and find means for their voices to be conveyed to the general audience, policy makers, media, etc.

Photovoice and video voice are co-research methods of presenting the insider's view by letting communities take photos of the topic they want to cover. Before photovoice, ethnic minorities' photos were often taken by outsiders (colonisers, tourists, and researchers) and showed outsiders' viewpoints. French colonisers' photos emphasise female indigenous' sexuality, and tourists typically focus on ethnic minorities' smiles and traditional costume. Although those photos visualise communities, they are illustrated through outsider eyes. The community insiders appear frequently in the media, but they are voiceless. By using photovoice, photographers are community insiders who tell their own stories by choosing and taking their own pictures.

“One day, I heard that our ethnic minorities were described as having too many extravagant festivals and lazy. I was angry because we worked really hard and were not lazy. So, I raised my hand to join although I was embarrassed. I was an old woman among all men, even young guys did not raise their hands. After I raised my hand, others did the same. Then, I still felt awkward and nervous, but I wanted to tell our ethnic stories to celebrate our culture... After 4 days of training, I run to take pictures of stacks of straw and people who were digging a hole and who were working on their field”. Straw is valuable, I can spread it on our fields to plant vegetables and use them to feed livestock. But there is little straw in our village, so I mainly use it on my field. The stack of straw looks like waste but it is not.” (Ms. Kieu, Tien Phong Soc Trang, a participant in My culture).

With the purpose of promoting communities' voices, in the process of applying photovoice, we need to discuss what the outsider's role is? How much can a project officer affect the imagined products?

On selecting photovoice products, Hoang Huy Thanh, the project officer, shared: “While working with participants to build a set of criteria for selecting photos, I just gave my opinion; people proposed and chose for themselves. What technical requirements should be ensured for selected imagines? What are the elements of image content? At that time people discuss [photos that are not] cut off heads or legs photos that have characters and [what is] the right content to tell... These are very small observations in each stage of the project; project staff are aware of their role and the ultimate goal is the story the community wants and chooses to tell.”

The exhibitions and seminars where communities own the space enables their voices to be heard. Through co-creation, the “voice” of the community is formed in the process of composition and elevation at exhibitions in Hanoi to reach the public and the media.

The 2019 exhibition “Going Against the Light” was a space for mainstream discourses about ethnic minorities to be viewed by the communities themselves. The work *Parallel Worlds* by Ede group revealed the connection between the forest and the community, in which the forest is an environment, a birthplace, sacred, and needs protection, needs to be feared. The Ede people understand the forest and are afraid of the forest. They also know the law of the forest, so they need to protect the forest. In other discourses about ethnic minorities: they are who “slash and burn the forest for farming”, or the belief in spirits is “superstitious”. Discussions about the concept of ghost and forest were opportunities for insiders and outsiders to observe and reflect on how the media continues to inform about prejudice from a different perspective.

Photo: The parallel world



The talk “Listen to the People’s Hearts” revealed stories that the numbers in the government’s reports in 30A and 135 Poverty Reduction programs did not show. According to Poverty Reduction project evaluation reports, Lao Cai province is no longer lacking in transport infrastructure, water supply, and drainage. However, the story of Tien Phong Lao Cai showed an inefficient ditch project, which resulted in households lacking clean water and taking turns blocking the ditch to collect water. Other stories from Thanh Hoa, Quang Tri, Soc Trang, Thai Nguyen also demonstrated poverty reduction projects that were completed in terms of form but had poor quality, endangering people’s lives and wasting public budget. These stories were in addition to the reported numbers without human faces and illustrated the people’s responsibility in the supervision of budget for public works.

“Tien Phong Perspective” is a series of seminars for the community to critique policies and issues affecting their lives and to bring insiders’ perspectives directly to the press and media. The seminar “Discussing civilised funerals” responded to the Meo Vac (Ha Giang) government’s ban on leaving remains outside for a long time, and the requirement to carry out civilised funerals in which people place the remains in coffins and shorten funeral time. The seminar guests were Ma A Vang (a Hmong person from Lao Cai) and Giang Mi Ho (a Hmong person from Ha Giang). Explaining the customs in the funeral, Vang said: we leave the body for several days because we hope that the children and grandchildren can see their parents’

Photo: Tien Phong Talk: Discussions of ‘Civilized Funeral’:

Giang A Be (MC) introduced the issue with Mr. Ma A Vang (ethnic Mong, Lao Cai) and Giang Mi Ho (ethnic Mong, Ha Giang), Ms. Nghiem Hoa (human rights specialist) and Mr. Hoang Cam (anthropological researcher)



faces when they pass away. Using carrying rods (ki) is a symbol for the horse to bring the soul back to the old hometown. Because the Hmong are migrants with a distressing history and always want to return to their old hometown, the mourning songs (leading the way home) and the image of the ki express the ethnic group’s wishes. Changing a small detail in a funeral without comprehensive understanding will greatly affect the meaning of the culture that has been passed on from generation to generation. During the seminar, Ho said that his family was determined not to give up the traditional practice, while Vang said that in Sapa, the dead had been transferred to coffins, which helped to ensure hygiene and did not take as much time to guard the body as before. However, to change from the ki to the coffin, the aunt (who oversees the ceremony) must withdraw her prayer about the ki and add a compliment about the blessing received by using coffins. Through the dialogue between two people from different Hmong communities, the audiences clearly saw the difference between the changes made with the will of the outsiders (implementing civilisation, eliminating so-called backwardness) with the decisions of the insiders (expressing the meaning of cultural practices in funerals). An insider’s point of view, when expressed, also adds to the shortcomings that the policy has not considered and helps the project implementers understand that the ethnic communities are very diverse; both being the same Hmong, but the two people differ in choosing to improvise with new social changes and to meet new needs.

Fostering an insider’s perspective is the process by which we learn about our roles and our limits as outsiders to communities. Initially, when designing the content for the seminar “Discussing civilised funerals”, iSEE could not have foreseen that the communities had different ways of improvising with different views on the State’s process of promoting civilised funerals. The inside view from the community reaffirms belief in the communities’ capacity to select and change cultural practices by themselves. Those changes need to be consulted on by insiders and solutions should be created together, accordingly.

The holistic approach, agency upholding, and appreciation of insider voices are three anthropological pillars that iSEE chose to apply when working with communities. However, these three pillars are not separated or hierarchical, rather they support each other. Spaces owned by communities contain insider views, and these views always include multi-dimensional impacts and interactions. Throughout the process, we have raised questions about our roles as project implementers as well as where our affects could possibly be so that we can be the co-author, nurturing communities with self-determination while respecting their point of view as much as possible and being cautious with multi-dimensional impacts of the projects. The application of these pillars is a learning and practicing process based on communication and dialogue between the project team and communities and among the team members ourselves.

3.2

The development of Tien Phong Network for the voice of ethnic minorities

To understand the process of formation and development of Tien Phong, it is necessary, perhaps, to first understand the context relating to the ethnic minority communities and what they thought about themselves before coming to Tien Phong.

As described before, the hegemonic discourse about ethnic minorities has been heavily influenced by the unilineal evolutionist mindset and led to prejudices against these communities and their subsequent internalisation of prejudices. Consequently, many minority groups become timid and lacked confidence in interactions with the majority. The self-prejudice aspect causes most ethnic minorities to think that they are inferior and more backward than the Kinh, thus they are afraid of speaking their minds and grow to accept an inferior status. In a training course of iSEE's, about prejudice and discrimination in 2013-2014, participants shared the same opinion that individuals, as members of society, need to obey rules and "State officials". At that time, no one had any concept of policy critique or contributions to socio-economic development programs.

When comparing prejudice and discrimination faced by ethnic minority and LGBTQI communities, iSEE staff realised that the latter group have been dealing with a more direct discrimination that leads to a strong sense of injustice. Meanwhile, discrimination against ethnic minorities is covered under the banner of "support" such as "Kinh and Bahnar people are brothers and the older [people] should help the younger". Ethnic discrimination is therefore less obvious and ethnic minority groups feel "grateful" to people discriminating against them. For that reason, they have less motivation than the LGBTQI group to speak out and seek change. In other words, where the LGBTQI identity is not recognised by society, they have a strong desire to increase their presence, assert their existence and demand recognition. Meanwhile, ethnic minority identity is recognised but lacks regard, and this must be realised to motivate the demand for the deserved respect.

The process of building Tien Phong is also a process of breaking down self-prejudice, influencing discourse and changing the status of ethnic minorities in the power relationship with the majority. Several networking strategies were employed in this process.



Photo: Tien Phong group photo

Promoting the spirit of Pride – Confidence – Self-determination

Pride – Confidence – Self-determination is a strategic logic that our team utilises to help Tien Phong members to eliminate prejudice and gain confidence in their own voices. There is a reason for the initial aim of promoting pride instead of confidence. When ethnic minorities feel inferior to Kinh people, the encouragement to be more confident only emphasises the idea that “you are lacking confidence”, which reinforces their low self-esteem.

The idea that people define their own capacities in their interactions with others, and the belief that different ethnic groups possess different cultural beauty worth knowing and learning from, is the foundation of the **“I believe I can” festival**, which has been organised annually since 2015. The event is for different ethnic groups to share about their cultures, especially the meaning of cultural practices in their lives, so that they have the opportunity to understand their own cultures through the audiences’ response.

Photo: Harvest Choreography: Members of Tien Phong Dak Nong developed the choreography based on their daily lives motion in harvesting



The first event called “I believe I can – A harmony of diversity” was held in January 2015. iSEE sent invitations to different project partners, including communities and non-government organisations. Each group registered to attend with their own performance and only had about a month to practice and two days of rehearsal in Hanoi. However, the night was marvellous with beautiful performances, and the most touching [aspects] were the explanations about the meaning of the lyrics, dances, and cultural practices that made the audience excited. For example, the story of the Hmong wife-pulling custom was recreated on stage. In that performance, Hang Thi Sa, who was pulled five times, detailed this practice and concluded that “I am very proud that I was pulled five times. It means that I am desired by a lot of people. Only when I met someone whom I also liked did I accept the marriage proposal.” Plenty of people did not believe that groups had only one month to prepare performances. Speaking at the closing ceremony, Ma Hung, a Tay person from Lang Son said, “These dances and lyrics are in our blood, and we just need to “take it out” to show it off”.

The success of the event made the whole group “ecstatic”. People were surprised to see that their event was well received by the public: “it turned out that my culture was very interesting and made a lot of people excited”. When the community realises the treasure they have, they are proud of themselves in their interactions with people from other communities. This pride is the basis for them to gain more confidence and make decisions and choices on their own.

After this event, the Tien Phong Network was officially established. Even the name “Tien Phong for the voice of ethnic minorities” was considered and chosen by the group members themselves.

The Pride – Confidence element is sustainably grown through experiential learning. Each event is an experience for members of the Tien Phong Network. The team takes time to reflect on what happened, analyse, and draw lessons immediately after the event. The use of the Experiential Learning Cycle as a tool during the accompaniment process is one factor enabling real learning to occur spontaneously and continuously, wherein the confidence of Tien Phong members is also built up gradually. It is a confidence that has a foothold - I know who I am, what I am, and how I am different from you. And when they are confident, the members of Tien Phong also actively do what needs to be done.

When iSEE informed that the National Target Program for Sustainable Poverty Reduction 2016-2020 was conducting a mid-term review, Tien Phong chose to conduct an independent assessment to provide more insight into the program's effectiveness. Members participated voluntarily without any financial support. Truong Thi Thuy, a Muong ethnic female in Thanh Hoa said: "Every day after coming home from work, people met at the same house, made tea and peeled sugarcane to eat, then we learn and collect stories together". Ly Thi Hong Kieu, a Khmer female in Soc Trang and Ma A Pho, a Hmong male in Lao Cai said: "We went to the market and asked people we met there." The collected stories that related to the content of supporting policies and how they were implemented locally provided a detailed and insightful view of the program's effectiveness. Luyen, a Nung female in Lang Son said: "I wanted to get acacia mangium but they gave me the hybrid one. When I went to receive the seedling, I asked the reason for this, but the commune official said "Why do you ask so many questions? Plant whatever seedling you get". My family was very upset, but we couldn't say anything, because they are the officials and we are just ordinary people, we can't talk back". Other stories, such as the provision of lawn mowers to households who had no grass and so the mowers eventually became rusty iron lumps in storage, or supplying fertilisers to households having no arable land, were also told one after the other. The people themselves analysed very clearly and thoroughly the shortcomings of the policy supporting agricultural materials, such as its irrelevance to farming conditions, waste, the lack of transparency in the implementation process, etc. and proposed options for co-organisation and self-monitoring of the program in order to save budget, keep transparency, and ensure efficiency. The stories were then shared in the event "Listen to the people's hearts" organised by Tien Phong, as well as at different forums and seminars coordinated by the State Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs and the Office of Poverty Reduction in collaboration with stakeholders. Tien Phong's findings touch the heart because they have an advantage that no other social science researcher has - time to interact and "understand" the community.



Photo: Mr. Ma A Pho assessed the construction of the dam invested by Program 135 (photo taken from a documentary in the workshop: Listen from grassroots)

To nurture that confidence and self-determination, Tien Phong needs a lot of opportunities to practice and learn through practical experiences, to strengthen their belief in their capacities as well as their values. Although Tien Phong was initiated by iSEE, from the very first day of its establishment, we prepared for our withdrawal so that Tien Phong could be self-reliant and self-determined. This position has helped us to remain aware of our accompanying role, preparing the transfer process and supporting Tien Phong to gradually take on the works at a different scale.

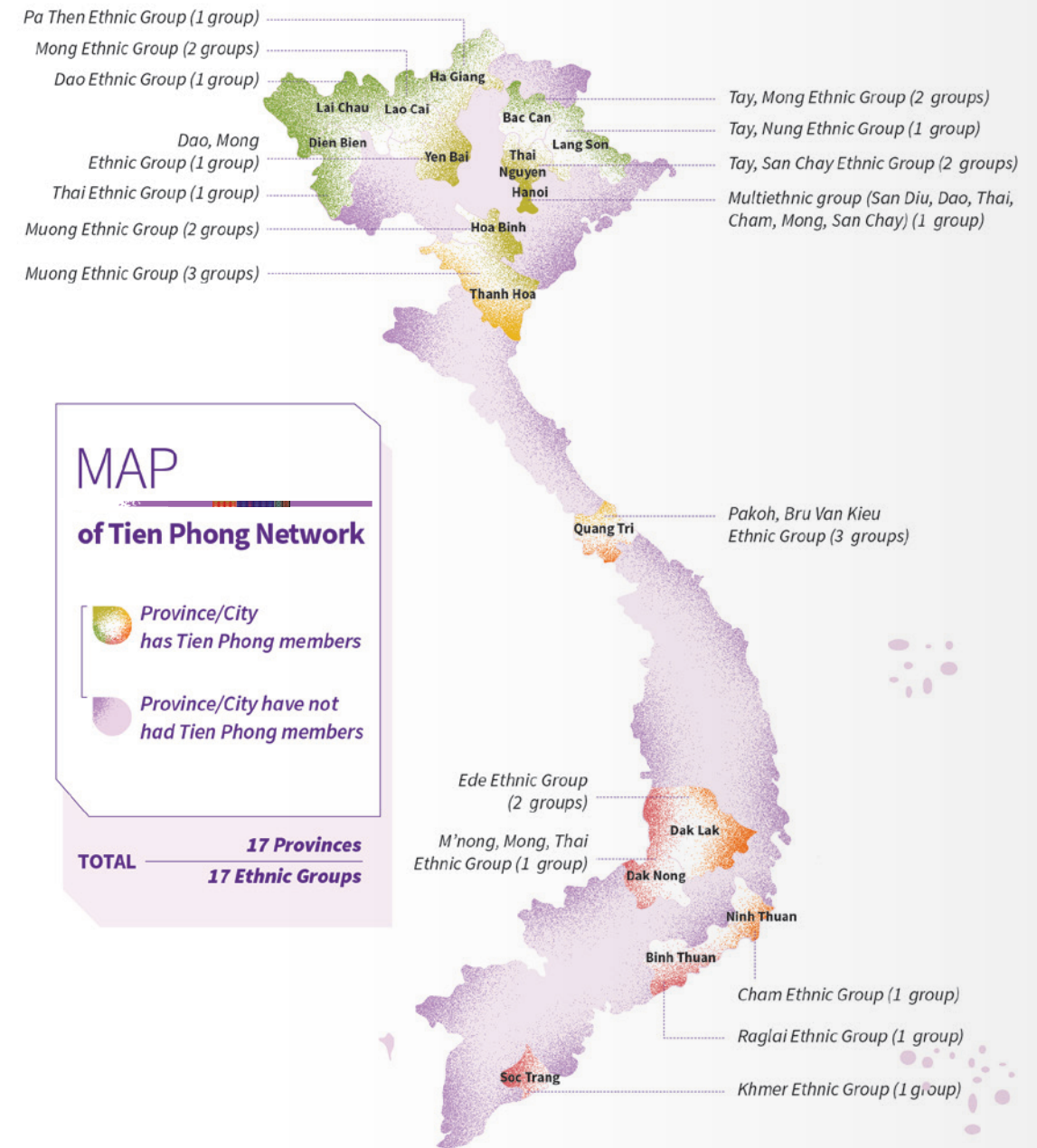
Most of Tien Phong activities are community members' proposals and initiatives because we believe that they understand their problems more than anyone else. This approach surprised other development organisations. When seeing "community initiatives", they frequently asked us: what initiative was about? In which field? etc. and we could only respond that we did not know yet - the communities would let us know what they need and want to do.

Aware that Tien Phong members were nurtured and grew up in a cultural environment in which obedience and following instruction, rather than self-determination and initiation, were encouraged, the Network allows itself time to learn and practice decision-making. The decisions range from selecting members to attend meetings in Hanoi to whether Tien Phong should accept an invitation to join certain activities or how to implement a work, etc. Although each decision takes a lot of time and sometimes does not bring the expected result, the experiences are essential for the members so that they can analyse and draw lessons together, and more importantly, people can practice self-reliance and self-determination in order to understand their values and challenges.

That practicing process needs co-authorship and instruction from the outside to be effective. From observing Tien Phong's discussions and choices, we notice that people are easily influenced by the "halo effect" in decision making. For instance, when a member achieves certain success, that person becomes the centre and tends to be given the right to choose the next activity, which is not necessarily related to their capacities or their previous success. A member selected to be a collaborator at iSEE is immediately elected to an important position of the Network Executive Board because other members believe that she or he is skilful, has the ability to coordinate work, and is suitable to represent Tien Phong. When a member has a very convincing and appreciated input at a project summarising workshop, the next day, that person will be selected to open another Tien Phong activity, although that person was not directly involved in the beginning and did not know it well. Such decision-making practices run the risk of leading to irrational and emotional decisions. As the co-author, we share our observations with the Network and ask questions to analyse and learn more about critical thinking and the decision-making process.

Being aware of Tien Phong's independent status, whenever receiving an invitation to send a community representative to participate in forums and seminars, instead of choosing people by ourselves, iSEE always asks partners to send invitations directly to the Executive Board to gradually build the legitimacy and self-determination of the Network. Tien Phong's name is mentioned at forums and in project documents as an independent partner rather than being associated with iSEE. In addition, Tien Phong always act as the host to welcome guests, give the opening speech, and close the ceremony of different events. Tien Phong, along with iSEE representatives, proactively met with sponsors, development partners, and state management agencies such as the State Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism to discuss future development direction and seek cooperation opportunities. Recently, Tien Phong started experimenting with crowdfunding to create operating funds for the Network and has received strong support from crowds of individuals and organisations.

After more than six years of operation, Tien Phong has become a network with more than 200 members from 17 ethnic groups in many provinces and cities across the country. Positioning itself as a representative network of the people, Tien Phong chose the mission of jointly preserving the cultural identities of the ethnic groups, maintaining and developing indigenous knowledge, participating in policy advocacy, and spreading information to society to promote a correct understanding of ethnic minority communities, contributing to building an equal, diverse, and sustainable society. Tien Phong has been constantly exploring and experimenting to find the most suitable management model and operational practice, helping the Network to be self-reliant and self-determined in the process of carrying out its mission.



Ma Van Hung, from the Nung ethnic group in Lang Son, told a story when he attended a seminar on livelihoods for ethnic minorities. Knowing that he bred chickens for six months before selling them, an expert told him that he “needs to change the way of farming poultry by applying science to raise industrial caged breeds that can be sold after three months”. Hung replied: “I bred them for six months but sold [them] for nearly twice the price. And now, 150 people have pre-ordered all of chicken. I do not need to bring [them] anywhere to sell” (at a time close to Tet). Hung added: “Maybe that expert has never bred chickens!”



Photo: Mr. Ma Van Hung - Tien Phong Lang Son

Creating opportunities for ethnic minorities to actively talk about themselves

The first two “I believe I can” events focused on ethnic cultures and festivals, but for the third event, communities demonstrated ethnic knowledge. This third event, called “Indigenous knowledge – Spring of life”, positioned indigenous wisdom alongside scientific knowledge. While for a lot of people, scientific knowledge is still considered the only “reliable” source of information, statements like “need to change the way of doing business, must apply advanced science and technology” accidentally or intentionally deny the values of indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge is accumulated over multiple years, even centuries, sometimes at the expense of people’s lives, and so it needs to be properly understood and appreciated. Repositioning indigenous knowledge alongside scientific knowledge is also an indirect way of changing the view of what minority communities have and contributes to changing the balance between communities and researchers, and between minority and majority communities.



Photo: I believe I can - The stream of life:
Ms. Lau shared about her indigenous species of rice and explained its suitability to local geography and land

“Meeting of Discourses” and “Moral Moments” were the themes of “I Believe I Can” in the following years, in which minority communities shared their ethos and human outlooks. After listening to the stories of Y Bhiao Mlo, H’Nun Mlo and Y Tri Mlo - Ede people from Dak Lak and Kray Suc - Pakoh ethnic group from Quang Tri about how the communities think about forests and interactions between people and forests as well as among people, Dr. Pham Quynh Phuong (Cultural Studies) expanded further on the discourse perspective: “When the Kinh people look at the forest, they immediately calculate how many cubic meters of wood and how much money they will earn. Thus, how can they understand the Ede’s ethos, who considers

the forest a sacred being, a refuge, which has tree gods, and that every time people ask for a tree, they must pray!”. Or the story of Tong Van Han, a Tai in Dien Bien about the practice of catching pregnant fish and releasing them instead of eating them, and numerous other stories, which have opened up opportunities for the majority of the community to learn more about ethnic minority morals and how it affects the way people live in harmony with nature.

On their journey, Tien Phong has always been a place for ethnic minority communities to speak about themselves. Accompanying Tien Phong, iSEE plays the role of creating opportunities to nurture and promote insider voices to be heard.

Empowerment through influencing power dimensions

If empowerment is understood as “providing power”, or “enhancing power” in general, the Power Cubic Model suggests a strategy with diverse tactics to influence different power dimensions to achieve that goal. During the formation and development of the Tien Phong Network, a variety of tactics were applied to elicit a power shift between minority and majority communities and those given tangible power.

Photo: Tien Phong local groups are doing an exercise to realize the changes of their local communities through mapping (a method in co-research of customary laws in land and resources management)



At the individual level, **power within** and **power to** are awakened and nurtured. The members learned to understand their rights, to identify state origins, as well as acknowledge their position in interactions with “state officials”. Discussions on freedom, equality, and tolerance help members to identify and name inequality/discrimination and increase a sense of injustice. However, if they stop at only recognising injustice, they can fall into a state of bitterness and helplessness. In the process of accompanying, Tien Phong members are also equipped with methods and tools to make it easier to speak up. Co-research and photovoice are two tools introduced to Tien Phong to tell their story proactively. Co-research allows ordinary people, not just researchers and scientists, to create knowledge. That knowledge is the foundation for people to speak up. Photovoice is a tool for people to present themselves - to describe themselves, the life of their community, rather than just being photographed and re-enacted by outsiders. Providing these tools is a process that fosters a sense of possibility.

Belief is an invisible force. When you change your belief, you will change the way you work. The process of building Tien Phong is also a process of influencing the beliefs of the Network members and their communities. After a period of operation, the idea that ethnic minority cultures are backward and contain many “evil” customs has gradually been transformed into a mindset of equality and appreciation for all cultures. The very name of the annual event “I believe I can” is also a message. When we believe that change is possible, we will continue to look for other ways to make it work despite countless obstacles, but if we believe that the status quo is immutable, we will accept our “fate”.

At the group level, **power with** is reinforced through the promotion of a sense of community and collective action. Several teambuilding activities were organised. A number of discussions and exercises were purposefully designed to enhance each individual’s sense of belonging to the Network.

Dự án bao gồm

1 Phần thảo luận online thông qua trang Facebook của ngày hội Tết Mông Xương Phố.

2 Thảo luận trực tiếp thông qua tọa đàm "Chuyện thời trang thời nay" với sự tham gia của nghệ nhân thổ cẩm Lý Thị Ninh, nhà thiết kế người Mông - Sa Bình, và NTK thời trang Thảo Vũ, cùng điều phối viên Khang A Tủa và thảo luận trực tiếp với các bạn thí sinh thi tìm kiếm tài năng Tub Ntxhais Vam Meej trong ngày hội Tết Mông Xương Phố 2020 về chủ đề thời trang thời nay.

TẾT MÔNG XƯƠNG PHỐ
Xyoo Tshiab Nram Nroog - Tết Mông Xương Phố
@xyootshiabnramnroog

Irish Aid
Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

At the official establishment of Tien Phong in 2015, although everyone had known and worked together for about four years before, joining Tien Phong was not taken for granted. Each member needed to go through a special activity to feel that their choice was meaningful and recognised by other members. Coloured scarves were used to create an enclosed space representing the "Tien Phong house" and each person

Giới thiệu

SÁNG KIẾN "TẾT MÔNG XƯƠNG PHỐ" 2020

Chuyện của thời trang thời nay là một dự án truyền thông nhằm thúc đẩy thảo luận về vấn đề thời trang của người Mông trong bối cảnh hiện đại.

Ban tổ chức mong muốn thông qua dự án nhiều bạn trẻ người Mông sẽ ý thức được vai trò của mình trong việc giữ gìn và phát triển trang phục truyền thống của người Mông trong bối cảnh hiện đại ngày nay.

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expressed their decision by entering the circle and sharing why they chose to be one part of this collective. In the presence of all, that activity served as a "rite" marking their choice to come together because they shared common values and interests. Having a common identity as a "Tien Phong member" was an important milestone that created a sense of belonging for each member.

The deep sense of belonging to a certain group manifests itself in all three aspects: physique, emotion, and mentality. Identity creates physical belonging. At first, there was only the identity of "Tien Phong member", but in the process of development, people gradually created new local identities such as "Tien Phong Dien Bien", "Tien Phong Dak Lak", "Tien Phong Cam Thuy", etc. In every meeting, people always start by sharing

about themselves. Initially, they speak of special parts of their own people, be it food, dance, or a certain cultural practice. Then there is the sharing of something new about the individual or family since the last time they met. This novelty can be having more children/grandchildren, building a house, or growing a certain type of tree. These shares create an emotional connection between Network members. In addition, social networks also give the group an opportunity to connect more comprehensively, such as sending greetings to each other on holidays and festivals of different ethnic groups; frequently asking about and encouraging one another when someone shares unhappy news on Facebook, etc. This is significant to Tien Phong members, just as Dao (Tay ethnic group, Bac Kan) shared: "I feel like I have relatives all over the country".

Cập nhật

SÁNG KIẾN BẢO TỒN NHẠC TRUYỀN THỐNG CỦA NGƯỜI KHMER

Nhạc ngũ âm/ bát âm là loại nhạc truyền thống của người Khmer. Là sợi dây gắn kết giữa con người với Phật. Đời sống tôn giáo rất quan trọng đối với người Khmer.

"Đó là loại nhạc giúp mình lên được với thế giới của Phật"
- Cô Lý Thị Hồng Kiều

Cùng với chiếc máy ảnh, các thành viên nhóm Tien Phong Sóc Trăng sẽ đi thu thập lại các bài trình diễn nhạc cụ dân tộc và đi phỏng vấn những nghệ nhân chơi đàn, lưu giữ lại tri thức về các nhạc cụ.

Canada



Photo: The performance of ethnic Pakoh members of Tien Phong Quang Tri in I believe I can event - The stream of life



The opportunity to discuss and care for Tien Phong is the foundation for creating mental attachment. Every time they meet in Hanoi, the members spend a lot of time discussing Tien Phong's works, from naming the Network to answering the question of why Tien Phong is needed? Or, what do they want Tien Phong to be 10 years from now? That attachment is reflected in the joy and pride that follows each successful event, as well as the frustration and anxiety when not being able to use the name and image of Tien Phong in a local activity. The mental sense of belonging is also demonstrated in the way members consider Tien Phong's work as "family matters" such as instructing each other to take the bus to save money, asking the workshop to spend time to introduce Tien Phong, or proposing to print the Tien Phong logo on a publication that they contributed to, etc. Activities do not need to be identified by project name, donor name, and participating locality, because they are simply of the Tien Phong Network for the Voices of Ethnic Minorities.

Preserving and practicing values are a compass for the Network's activities, and they are also a way to foster cohesion between generations of Tien Phong members. Regular discussion and reflection on the practice of selected values, including equality, freedom, and tolerance, in internal and external dealings, is always emphasised. With its internal diversity, Tien Phong contains a lot of differences, providing numerous opportunities for members to learn and practice tolerance. When Tien Phong chooses to respond to an advertisement for the energy drink Ho Van or video clips about Hmong funerals, the group always discusses internally and consults with experts on culture and human rights to ensure their responses are constructive and do not inadvertently attack others. It is the constant practice of these values that helps Tien Phong members to stick with and love each other, and at the same time, create connections with stakeholders. The values of Tien Phong are preserved by its core members who strongly believe in and are committed to practicing them, and spread to new generations of members, creating a cohesive team on a solid foundation.



The concept of power space helps us to clearly identify the goal of community capacity building by answering the question: “In each space, what capacity does Tien Phong members need in order to effectively exercise their power?”

The establishment of Tien Phong is the opening of a self-made space of ethnic minority groups, where their voices are nurtured and practiced. The space is safe enough for members to explore their potential and try something that they have never done before. There have been several “first times” happening in this space: the first time being MCs, the first time running and voting publicly to elect members of the Executive Board, the first time organising press conferences and communicating with press before events, etc. So, in the self-made space, they will need to nurture the daring, the willingness, and the skill to speak up, initiate, and execute ideas together.

After exploring and honing their abilities in this self-made space, Tien Phong members gained confidence and are well prepared to enter the representative democracy and seemingly closed space. When invited to share at a consultation workshop on socio-economic development plans for ethnic minority areas, Tien Phong members actively approached the Organising Committee to ask to speak on the morning of the event, after being informed that the conference program would be shortened. This would not have been possible if they had not exercised their right to speak up and understand the value this brings. Before each opportunity to access these spaces, Tien Phong members need to be

equipped with additional knowledge, related information, and situational skills to maximise the opportunity. When the representative of Tien Phong was invited to share the results of an independent assessment of the National Target Program on Sustainable Poverty Reduction in the 2016-2020 period, with careful preparation of program content, practical local information, stories, and findings of the assessment, the presentation by Tien Phong was highly appreciated by all parties.

Following experiences in the Tien Phong self-made space, members are encouraged to create similar spaces in their own localities through initiatives, in which they exercise rights to self-determination based on their local understanding, civic spirit, and collective actions. At that time, they need to be equipped with more skills to analyse problems, choose solutions, mobilise communities, and organise works to implement initiatives with local people and authorities. At these spaces, it was not only Tien Phong members who were introduced, but also the Tien Phong’s spirit of Pride – Confidence – Self-determination, which continued to spread and inspire other community members through the activities they participate in, equipping them with the necessary competencies to be more available in other power spaces.



Photo: Tien Phong Ba Thuoc, Thanh Hoa discussed about the meaning of the textile and weaving techniques in “Weaving our stories” project

The impact on several dimensions of power creates numerous conditions of possibility to increase the power of individuals and community groups. There are long-term interventions such as changing beliefs and cultivating inner strength, and there are short-term ones such as creating opportunities to learn, to try, and to fail. Above all, the diverse experiences of power exercising will help Tien Phong to recognise values, overcome obstacles, and strengthen their beliefs in the possibilities for changes.

Creating social change through influencing discourses

To deconstruct the ethnic prejudice being spread by the majority and internalised by the minorities, one of Tien Phong's strategies is challenging hegemonic discourses. Being aware of unilineal evolutionism impacts, Tien Phong has re-questioned the deep-rooted discourses in public speaking and understanding of ethnic minorities, once perceived as a single truth.

In the seminar “Do the mountains need to keep up with the lowlands?”, participants had an opportunity to discuss what seemed to be true: the mountains were more backward, not as developed as the lowlands. The concept of rich and poor was also explored. Who defined wealth? While the common conception of Kinh people is that being rich means “owning things and savings”, Thai people think that being wealthy means to give - so which one is the “standard”? The hegemonic discourse on wealth and prosperity of the ethnic majority was often perceived as the only truth, until minorities’ discourses emerged and people suddenly realised that “the only truth” was in fact not the only one.

Moreover, the seminar “Meeting of discourses” opened a space to discuss discourse and its power. In the event, discourses on “remote areas” were analysed from central and peripheral perspectives by the two guests, an anthropologist, and a cultural researcher. A member of Tien Phong Dak Lak, Y Tri Mlo said: “Now I realise that I am in my own home in my own land, but why do people keep saying that I live in a remote area? Where is it far from?” That moment of great reflection helped a large part of the majority realise that they were living in a context of meaning in which there seemed to be no room for the discourses of minorities.

Tien Phong not only questions the hegemonic discourse, but also provides additional ways of speaking and understanding that are closer to the practices of minority groups.

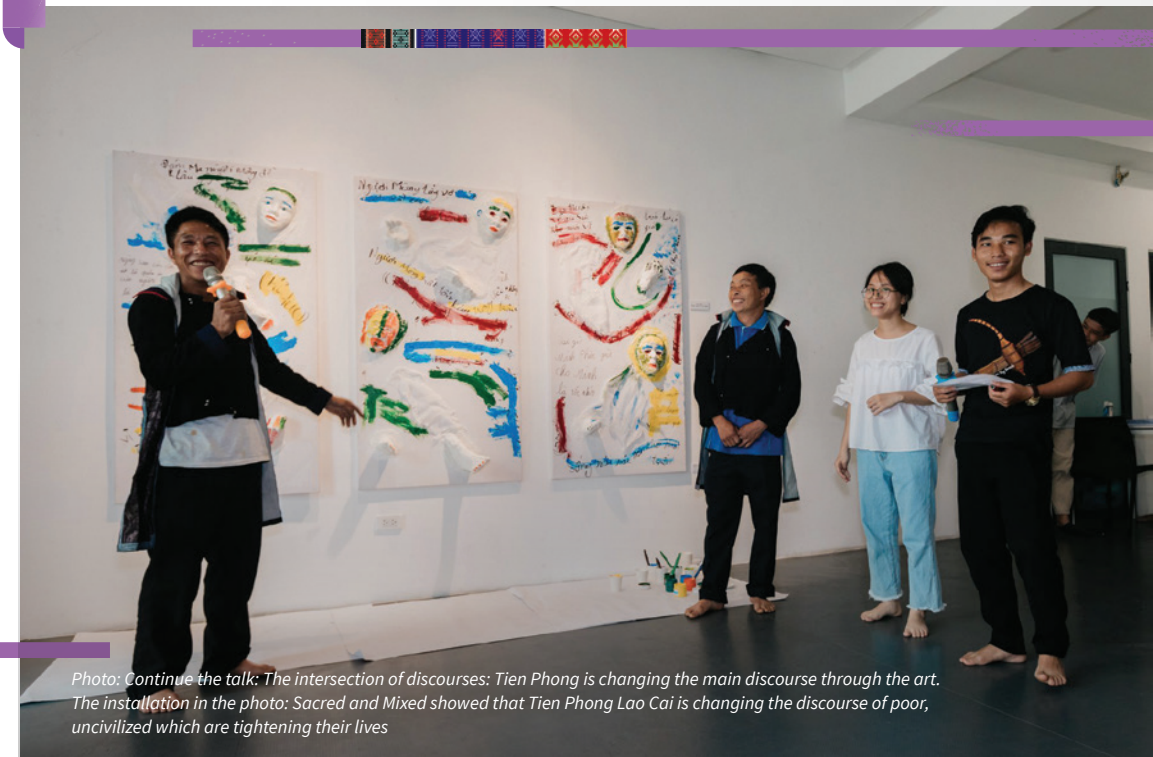


Photo: Continue the talk: The intersection of discourses: Tien Phong is changing the main discourse through the art. The installation in the photo: Sacred and Mixed showed that Tien Phong Lao Cai is changing the discourse of poor, uncivilized which are tightening their lives

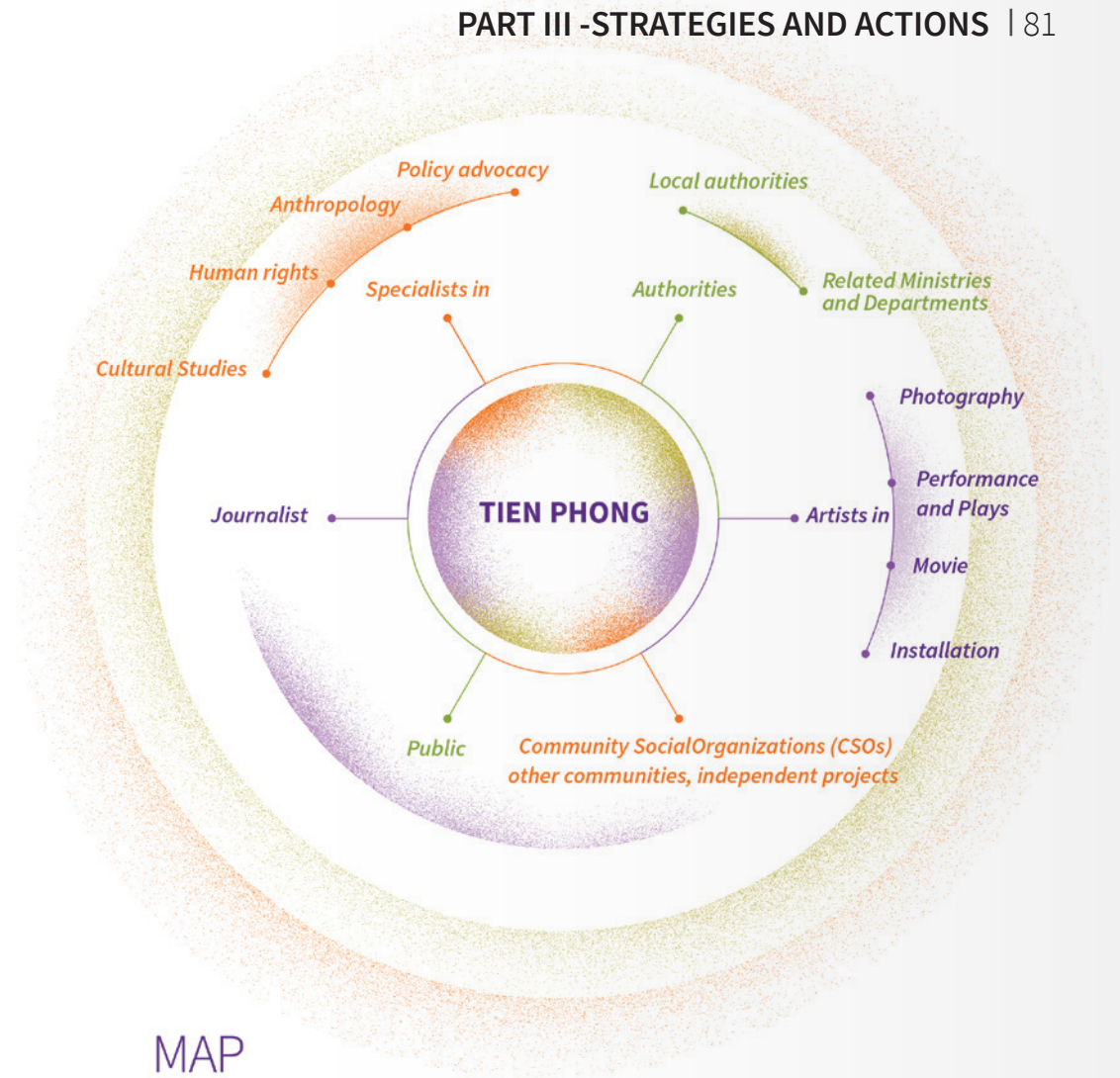
The photovoice exhibition “My Culture” displayed photos and stories taken by community members themselves and told of the cultural practices of the ethnic groups. Since then, in addition to the discourse on superstition of the Pakoh people’s disease blowing custom, the audience has been provided with another explanation that the practice is a combination of medicine and psychology. There were herbal leaves in a bellows that had a healing effect, and with the prestige of the healer, the patient gained more optimism and confidence to overcome the disease. The performance re-enacting the custom of pulling wives of the Hmong people in the event “I believe I can” gave the audience a different perspective on this practice, instead of the name “wife robbery” and the very common misconception in media, etc.

iSEE influences discourse by creating opportunities for insider voices to be heard. iSEE’s efforts to enhance the presence and impact of fringe discourses has contributed to changing the balance of power among stakeholders in society.

Building a network of alliances

From the perspectives of power and discourse, Tien Phong are ordinary people in a very humble position when it comes to speaking out. Therefore, it is necessary to have allies so that the voice of Tien Phong gradually becomes stronger. As a companion, iSEE defines Tien Phong's ally selection strategy as finding people who share values, supplement their missing competencies, and respect the principles of self-reliance and self-determination of the Network in a cooperation process. In the early stages, iSEE connects Tien Phong with suitable partners. Then, in its development, Tien Phong actively seeks and builds its own relationships. To date, Tien Phong has established a network of alliances with several artists/art practitioners, researchers/experts, policymakers, and general advocates.

Photo: Meeting between representatives of Tien Phong and iSEE and Department of Ethnic Culture, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism



MAP

Of Tien Phong Network allies

Artists/art practitioners are selected to collaborate with the belief that Tien Phong members have stories – the voice makers, and artists have methods of expression – the visualisation creators. Sound and visuals are combined to produce a co-created work. After the success of the project Touch – Untouch - Retouch, Tien Phong has had several collaborations with artists/art practitioners to perform works displayed in the events “I believe I can”, helping to bring the stories and messages of the community closer to the audience. The process of interacting with artists not only creates products with social impact, but also helps to change the perspective of artists about ethnic minorities as well as their beliefs and roles in promoting equality and tolerance in society.

The group of researchers and experts, who have cooperated with Tien Phong from a very early age, are people working in the fields of anthropology, culture, human rights, and communication. Not only do they share their insights with Tien Phong, but they also use that knowledge to sharpen Tien Phong's messages and help them reach more people. For example, when discussing the discourse "ethnic minorities are dependent", Kray Suc shared that in Pakoh language, there is no word "dependence" but only the word "tôn ngung" with the connotation of mutual help in the community, and since the word "dependence" was introduced into the community, the behaviour among community members has also changed. Dr. Thu Giang uses that story to explain the incommensurability in cultural interpretation, thereby helping the audience to become aware of the invasion and influence of hegemonic discourses. In addition, the appearance of experts in a number of events also attracted the attention of those working in the fields of development and policy-making, opening up opportunities for discussion and reflection on the current practice methods of development in Vietnam. Tien Phong has recently started to expand its network to community experts – artisans and community researchers – who have a lot of indigenous knowledge and have potential to contribute to the voice of the community.

In addition, Tien Phong has had the opportunity to work with government organisations such as the State Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs, the Office of Poverty Reduction under the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, and the Department of Ethnic Cultures under the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, etc. Through the process of cooperation, Tien Phong has also connected with policy makers who understand their values and are willing to listen to the voice of the people so that they can develop appropriate and effective policies for ethnic minority communities. They will be valuable bridges to help convey and reflect the community's opinions in official documents and policies.

Finally, the network of alliances is indispensable for Tien Phong supporters. They are people who have attended Tien Phong's events or know about Tien Phong's activities through the media, friends, and social networks. They are the people who share the enthusiasm to preserve and promote ethnic cultural values and traditional professions, and who are inspired by the work of Tien Phong. The Network's fan page has 3,600 likes and more than 3,800 followers. In the first crowdfunding round¹⁹, Tien Phong received donations from about 130 individuals, groups/organisations.

¹⁹ The patterns used to design this document are taken from "The colour flow", a product of the first Tien Phong's crowdfunding raise.

Part IV

LESSONS LEARNED

As mentioned in the Introduction, the decade-long journey of accompanying ethnic minority communities is a journey of **enlightenment, trust, and co-creation** for different way of doing development. We have learned numerous precious lessons that could be of benefit to you also, and so are worthwhile sharing.

1.

Development programs should have theoretical frameworks for the design of intervention strategies and activities:

The process of developing and accompanying the Tien Phong has shown the importance of theory. As a result of theoretical frameworks on anthropological approaches, discourse, power, social justice, and community building, interventions are strategically designed in order to create radical changes and avoid falling into the trap of continuing to reinforce stereotypes about ethnic minorities, such as certain projects on livelihoods, employment rate increase, and income growth for ethnic minorities, which emphasise changing their “backwardness” and ignore the structural impacts for redistribution.

2.

Development implementers should have a philosophy and beliefs about development from which to properly define their role

“When you change what you believe, you change the way you do”. We believe that the community has the capacity to manage their own lives, they are just bound by prejudices. Therefore, instead of coming to “teach” the community how to develop, the practitioners only assist the community in recognising their shackles and trust that they can release themselves. This belief helps us to clearly define our role as the co-author, the role of a mirror to help the community with self-reflection and decision-making.

3.

Nurturing and promoting value practices are critical to community building

The core of a community is the value it upholds. The quest for values that a community desires to create and spread is their mission. At the same time, values connect different generations of the community, so that they always have a sense of belonging to that community. Therefore, it is essential to nurture and promote the application of chosen values. Tien Phong believes in and wishes to spread the values of freedom, equality, and tolerance in society, so it is the Tien Phong members who need to constantly observe and reflect on these practices internally and in dealings with other parties.

4.

Learning “moment by moment”

When you understand that to learn is to obtain more, such as new ways of looking at an age-old problem or the realisation of a new problem, learning will not merely be training. We are always highly appreciative of learning and strive to constantly build a culture of learning in the communities we work with, by applying experiential learning theory to transform our actions to learning opportunities. To learn thoroughly, learning needs to take place at all three levels so that we do not rest on our laurels with habits in thought and action, and promptly identify the necessary changes. The “Why” at level 3 made us reflect on what we once believed in with so-called development.

5.

Creating an “ecosystem” for development

“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together”. In our journey with Tien Phong, we realise that each stakeholder plays a role and increases the value of the common work. Artists/art practitioners may not initially seem to have much to do with ethnic minority groups, but their co-created works with the community have produced unexpected effects. Researchers and experts seem to be only observing social movements from afar, but they have made great contributions in the design and implementation of community interventions. Every development initiative needs an “ecosystem” to create conditions of possibility for it. Therefore, keep an open mind and constantly innovate to create an environment in which any participant can unleash their potential for the desired growth.

Epilogue

Over 10 years of working in iSEE's Ethnic Minority Program is more than 10 years of learning and fostering knowledge about development. The theories and approaches we demonstrate in this document are the results of a process of reflection and continuous learning, not something chosen at inception of the program in 2008. Throughout the whole process, our anchor to question, reflect, and learn uphold the values of iSEE - freedom, equality, tolerance - and the vision of the issue that iSEE wants to change, the beauty in the way of Tien Phong members' thinking and living, as well as their own local communities.

Compared to 2008, when iSEE first started working with ethnic minorities, the issue of ethnic prejudice has changed significantly. The evaluation of the effectiveness of poverty reduction policies has acknowledged that stigma is one of the causes adversely affecting the results. Discourses like "the mountains need to keep up with the lowlands" that were once taken for granted are now being questioned for their accuracy. More and more actors have been involved in the process of changing social perception and as a result, iSEE has connected with countless individuals and communities who share the same values of cultural diversity. The people who share common views with iSEE are, foremost, the ethnic minorities we work with, and then the state agencies, journalists, researchers, artists, and the public. The Vietnam Tien Phong Network has actively raised its voice in public spaces as well as in policy environments to provide insiders' discourses.

Ethnic prejudice and low-high cultural classifications of evolutionist mindsets are systematic phenomena. Therefore, iSEE and Tien Phong still require a lot of effort and

cooperation from people who embrace equality and freedom to create structural changes in the road ahead. At the time of completing this document, Vietnam was implementing social distancing due to the impact of COVID-19. The pandemic has created new challenges for iSEE's work, and for the development sector in general. Changed ways of working not only questions activity effectiveness or arrangement, but also presents opportunities and challenges in a new realm - the Internet - where ethnic minority issues are presented in a varied, new, and complex way, with speed and density that spread faster than ever.

Those challenges are new on the one hand, but also show the immutability of development work that is always facing changes and therefore, always requires co-authoring. When facing new challenges, it is even more meaningful for iSEE to look back on the process of accompanying and developing with ethnic minority communities. It reinforces the development philosophy that iSEE has believed and chosen - the community will have agency to solve its problems. It affirms the importance of practicing the values of freedom, equality, and tolerance. It helps to systematise processes and methods of capacity and community building - pride, confidence, and self-determination. And this is the "capital" with which iSEE will continue to operate in this new context with new challenges.

By sharing our story, we hope that the content of this document engages readers, development practitioners, and people interested in social issues or ethnic minority topics. We hope that together, we will think, learn, and explore the right direction and methods to work and contribute more valuably to development.

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