



## Article

# Lessons from the South: Research Collaboration as an Educational Practice

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**Abstract:** Between 1998 and 2011, we coordinated three consecutive research projects in three different provinces of Northern Vietnam. The projects aimed at improving the living conditions of various ethnic minorities in these areas. We focused on poverty alleviation, water management, and nature conservation. In all cases, there was a close collaboration between Vietnamese and Belgian researchers. The participation of the local population was an important ambition in the research. In this paper, we describe the three projects and analyze the relationships among the Belgian and Vietnamese researchers on the one hand, and between the researchers, the authorities, and the local population on the other hand. Furthermore, we examine the opportunities and obstacles to interdisciplinary and intercultural cooperation, with the help of critical theories on participation and decolonization. The three consecutive research projects can be considered as intensive learning processes for the researchers, the local communities, and the authorities. The paper begins with a fragment from the log of one of the participating researchers.

**Keywords:** participatory research; development cooperation; ethnic minorities; Northern Vietnam; poverty alleviation; nature conservation; water management

## 1. Introduction

*From the log of Danny Wildemeersch*

*Message from Son La, Vietnam*

*Saturday, October 6, 2001*

*It is nine o'clock on Saturday evening. It has again been a long day of hard work. Starting at six o'clock this morning. First half an hour of jogging. The local community is already moving at that time. A party is being prepared, with barbecue on the footpath. A religious ceremony takes place. The children ride in uniforms to school (on Saturday!) dressed in white shirts, red scarves and blue trousers or skirts. They have a lot of fun when watching this idiot European running in sweat through the streets. But, like all Vietnamese, they are very friendly. They present their most charming smile.*

*After the noodle soup breakfast, we start with the 'social research working group'. Present are: two young Vietnamese researchers with a lot of energy, but with little research experience, Olivier, a French researcher of the VIBEKAP project who lives in Vietnam, Jan, the general supervisor and myself, the co-supervisor for the social-science component. The research plans must be thoroughly adapted to the concrete reality on the ground. Today was another day of permanent negotiation and correction. We now have more or less a global plan for the research activities of the next two years and a concrete plan for the next three months. But even in the short run one has to be constantly willing to adjust the project quite thoroughly. That is certainly the case for the social-science part of the project and much less for geologists, hydrologists and geographers. Apart from language and*

*cultural differences, the Vietnamese and Belgian scientists have relatively similar frameworks and instruments. On the other hand, I do worry about the development of the social-science part. We are faced with incomprehension, misunderstandings, mutual prejudices and thoroughly different scientific paradigms. Also some doubts emerge on how much our work contributes to the development of a poor country like Vietnam. We are not the only ones who ask that question. The white four wheel drives of foreign aid workers are everywhere. The province of Son La, where we work, has also been discovered by the EU, UNESCO and the World Bank. They invest impressive amounts of money in the development here. These projects are particularly welcomed by the local authorities, while our research project originally encountered quite some resistance. Nevertheless, we gradually seem to get more recognition and positive resonance.*

*Tomorrow we travel to Pu Luong and Cuc Phuong, the area where in 2002 the new project starts. It seems that it is one of the most beautiful areas of Northern Vietnam with a lot of tourist potential. The project will focus on 'multi party-negotiation'. There will be a new nature reserve in that area. There is still a lot of negotiation going on between the government, the park managers and the local population that is threatened with resettlement. This may have a particularly dramatic impact on the Muong ethnic minority in this area. The social processes associated with this will be explored and supported by us. The Vietnamese staff on the project is also expected to develop the necessary research skills in relation to this concrete assignment.*

Between 1998 and 2011, we coordinated the following three consecutive research projects in North Vietnam: the VIBEKAP-project, the LLINC-project, and the GEOPARK-project. All three projects were financed by the Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad (Flemish Interuniversity Council-VLIR). They were executed in three different provinces, Son La, Hoa Binh, and Ha Giang, respectively. Larger parts of North Vietnam are mountainous and are formed by limestone (Karst) formations. These areas are sometimes hard to access and are populated by many ethnic minorities. In many cases, these areas are poverty-stricken because of the fairly unfruitful soils, the shortage of surface water, the lack of industrial activity, the poorly developed road infrastructure, and so on. During the previous century, and particularly during the second half of the century, the subtropical rainforest was systematically deforested, which caused dramatic soil-erosion. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese government is making considerable efforts to develop and reforest these regions, to organize literacy campaigns, and to inform the population about the adequate use of the soil. The Vietnamese regime is, formally speaking, communist. However, since the beginning of the nineties, it has stimulated free entrepreneurship (the Doi Moi principle), similar to the model of its neighbors of the Chinese People's Republic. For the development of the country, the government attracts foreign aid from many separate countries, such as from Europe, the United States, UNESCO, and the World Bank.

The three research projects resulted from the collaboration between Belgian and Vietnamese research partners. On the Belgian side, there was the University of Leuven, the Free University of Brussels, and the Belgian Geological Institute. On the Vietnamese side, there was, in the first place, the geologists of the Vietnamese Geological Institute (VIGMR—Vietnamese Institute on Geology and Mineral Resources), and in the second place, the Ethnological Institute (National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities of Vietnam). There was also the collaboration with an NGO, Fauna and Flora International. The projects were interdisciplinary. We conceived them as intensive processes of social learning of the different actors involved. Researchers from Vietnam and Belgium active in geology /hydrology, geography, agronomics, anthropology, psychology, and pedagogy, collaborated on integrated solutions for problems of water distribution, poverty reduction, nature conservation, and economic development. The research projects had a pre-history in the collaboration between Vietnamese geologists and Flemish (Belgian) speleologists from the Leuven University. From 1993 until 1997, the Flemish speleologists organized expeditions in the North-Vietnamese subtropical Karst mountain range, in view of studying the consequences of the planned barrage in the Son La province (Figure 1), together with geologists of VIGMR. Different mountain ranges cover about 20% of the total

surface of Vietnam. The joint fascination for the geological and cultural heritage, together with the acquaintance with the various problems in these areas, created the need for thorough interdisciplinary research on the possibilities of water management, nature conservation, the preservation of the cultural heritage, and economic development. The VLIR recognized the importance of such interdisciplinary collaboration and in 1998 they were prepared to finance a first research proposal. In the three consecutive projects that were supported by VLIR, the finances were mainly directed towards the activities of the Vietnamese researchers, while the Belgian researchers had their travel expenses reimbursed. In the context of the projects, the Vietnamese researchers also obtained opportunities to qualify themselves under the supervision of Flemish researchers. More than thirty of them acquired a master's- or PhD-degree at the Leuven University and at the Free University of Brussels, over the course of the thirteen years of collaboration. All three projects included intensive participatory activities with the ethnic minorities of the researched areas. Below, we present a brief description of the three projects as well as a short analysis of some of the tensions we experienced, mainly with regard to the social science part of the collaboration. Then, we further described the main challenges we coped with in the field regarding research collaboration, participatory practices, and community development, as well as how we interpreted these challenges from a theoretical perspective.



**Figure 1.** Province of Son La—© Linh Pham on Unsplash.

## 2. Participatory Water Management in Son La

The “Vietnamese Belgian Karst Project” (VIBEKAP—with the official title “Rural Development in the mountain karst area of NW Vietnam by sustainable water and land management and social learning: its conditions and facilitation”) was the first of the three projects that lasted from 1998 until 2002. The project took place in the provinces of Son La (Figure 1) and Lai Chau in North West Vietnam, where an important Thai minority lives. The ambition was to study the earth science and social characteristics in a particular karst area, with an emphasis on the conduct and the management of water. The most important objective of the earth science research was to obtain an improved insight into the hydrology of specific karst catchment areas. Subdivisions of the research related to the picturing of the geology, hydrology, caves, soil, and land use. Apart from that, a geographical information system (GIS)-database was established. The insights developed contributed to a better distribution of water for the agricultural areas and for the provision of drinking water in this environment. The social science division of the VIBEKAP-project related to the study and the enhancement of the reflective processes among the different groups; the negotiations; and the participation of the inhabitants, managers, and

researchers in the areas under investigation. This included documenting and analyzing local forms of knowledge, and the public debate concerning water distribution and use, including the development of a small-scale project of water distribution in two villages, Noong'O and Nam Tien.

The collaboration in the VIBEKAP project among the different actors (managers, local population, and researchers) eventually gave positive results. Together with the villagers, a sustainable water distribution system was developed, with water taps in the individual houses (a system that is still operational today). The process was intensive and fascinating, but not always easy, particularly in the context of the social science section of the research. The socio-cultural differences between the actors hindered the collaboration and the learning processes of the partners involved. We were confronted with often very divergent perceptions about the importance of age, status, and authority of the participating actors. These differences strongly influenced the participation and the learning opportunities of the individual actors; the interpretation of the project objective; and project conceptions, such as social learning, interdisciplinarity, and participation. These differences also created diverse styles of communication, varied practices, and sensitivities that sometimes were at odds with the ambitions of the VIBEKAP-project. We experienced tensions between the Western development discourse and the Vietnamese defensive patriotic discourse, between practices of the natural and the social scientists, between the insights of the managers and the participants, and between the conceptions of the “teachers” and the “students”. Other striking socio-cultural differences relate to the learning- and work-attitudes. The (formal and informal) educational systems in Belgium and Vietnam are very different, which caused big differences in the critical reflective processes. Differences in work attitude reflect in the relationships between supervisors and collaborators and in divergent work rhythms.

### 3. Multi-Stakeholder Negotiations in Hoa Binh

The second project had the title “Improving multi-stakeholder collaboration for the conservation of the Pu Luong-Cuc Phuong limestone landscape, NW Vietnam” (abbreviated LLINC- see Figure 2). It was mainly a social science project with a limited natural science section. The most important Vietnamese research partner in this project was the Institute of Ethnology. The geologists played a minor part. The main objective was to support the collaboration with the development of a landscape plan and a management structure for the creation of a new nature reserve, Ngoc Son-Pu Luong, as a corridor between the existing nature reserves Pu Luong and Cuc Phuong. In particular, we wanted to enhance the reflexive depth in the negotiation and decision making process among different groups of stakeholders, while determining the borders and the regulations related to the nature reserve under construction. The different instances involved were the provincial authorities (People's Committee), the instances of forest protection and forest management, the NGO of Fauna and Flora International, LLINC, the local People's Committees, and the village dwellers. The planned reserve of 190 km<sup>2</sup> is situated in the province of Hoa Binh, and includes nine villages with together some 11,000 inhabitants. The villages are mainly populated by the Muong ethnic minority. The core of this research project was the implementation of a feasibility study regarding the realization of the connection between both of the existing nature reserves. Therefore, data had to be collected regarding the natural conditions of the area, the composition of the population, and the perceptions of the different groups that would be included in the negotiation process. The idea to let the local population play a participatory role in the feasibility study and in the following negotiation process was fairly new for the Vietnamese provincial authorities, who were used to making top-down decision in such circumstances.

Throughout the entire process of the feasibility study and the decision-making process concerning the delineation and the implementation of the nature reserve, the LLINC-researchers managed to introduce new approaches and methods (Maertens et al. 2004). The horizontal deliberation between the different actors involved was entirely new. This resulted in a seminar with all of the partners in March 2004, where the results of the feasibility study were discussed. At that occasion, no decisions were taken. The different actors listened to each other's viewpoints and considered these ideas for



further reflection and decision making. LLINC managed to introduce a process of “appreciative inquiry” (Craps et al. 2012), whereby the participants undertook efforts to take an appreciative attitude vis-à-vis each other’s viewpoints. Naturally, this did not go without tensions. The conceptions regarding the borders and the regulation of the new nature reserve kept on diverging. There were also continuous differences in opinion among the provincial authorities and the forest managers on the one hand, and the local committees and the village people on the other, regarding the future use of the terrain. Until that time, the inhabitants had used the forest for hunting, for firewood, and for the construction of their houses. After the implementation of the reserve, this would be forbidden, which would considerably impede the survival of the local population. The tensions were not really resolved and created conflicts even a long time after the implementation of the reserve (Nguyen et al. 2013). Eventually, there remained much confusion about the concept of participation. The different backgrounds (Western-European and Vietnamese) caused different understandings of this practice. A careful process of translation of this and other central notions in the process was necessary, but also difficult. Two Vietnamese researchers, Nguyen Huong Hoai (Nguyen 2009) and Nguyen Ngoc Quang (Nguyen 2014), have described this in their doctoral research. We will deal with this further in this paper.



**Figure 2.** Deliberation among Vietnamese researchers in the LLINC-project.

#### 4. The Dong Van Karst Plateau Geopark in Ha Giang

The third and last research project took place from 2007 until 2011 in the province Ha Giang in North-East Vietnam, close to the Chinese border. The official title was Integrated Capacity Building through Research-Based Geopark Development in Some Areas of Northeastern Vietnam. There was, again, a very intense collaboration between the Vietnamese and Belgian researchers. On the Vietnamese side, it was mainly VIGMR (Vietnamese Institute for Geology and Mineral Resources), and on the Belgian side, mainly the Leuven University and the Belgian Geological Institute. An earlier collaboration among these partners resulted in the exploration of the Dong Van Karst Plateau (DVKP—see Figure 3) near the Chinese border. This area was described by the Vietnamese geologists as a spectacular and very valuable limestone range, with high mountains and deep ravines, where seventeen ethnic minorities had to survive in very difficult circumstances, with the help of relatively primitive agriculture and cattle breeding. Gradually, the idea grew to allow this unique nature reserve to be recognized as geopark by the Vietnamese government, and if possible, by UNESCO. A geopark

is a nature park with special geological qualities. Its purpose is to preserve the geological heritage and make it accessible to the general public, with a view to an educational and tourist surplus. A geopark can also be an asset for the socio-economic development of a deprived area. There is the Global Network of Geoparks (Global Network of Geoparks), which is an important referee in the official recognition by UNESCO of geoparks worldwide. The research proposal intended to support the authorities of the province in developing an application for recognition by UNESCO of the Dong Van Karst Plateau as a geopark. In addition, it would explore how the local population could be involved in the initiative, which educational initiatives were needed, and how a tourist infrastructure could be developed with a view of socio-economic development of the area.



**Figure 3.** Dong Van Karst Plateau—© Thu-Ha Nguyen.

Formulating an application is a fairly complex matter. A rather detailed description is required of the geological qualities of the eligible area. But also, the composition of the population, the socio-economic situation, and the tourist and cultural assets of the area must be mapped out in detail. It must also be made clear which educational strategy will be followed in sensitizing the local population and future visitors. Finally, a solid management structure has to be put in place. The researchers presented these tasks and challenges to the provincial and local authorities at the start of the project, and obtained their cooperation to prepare the application. In the following years, intensive workshops and field trips were organized and data were collected, the local population was informed and sensitized, the “management board” was expanded with more than twenty employees at the level of the province, and the dossier for the application for recognition by UNESCO was prepared under the guidance of the researchers. Against the original expectation, the approval came as early as September 2010, so after three years of intensive collaboration, “starting from scratch”. During this period, a geopark museum was also set up in the provincial capital; various “homestays” were established (lodgings with local residents); the tourist infrastructure was developed; an international workshop was set up with a view to a broad, international introduction to the qualities of the area; and there were information points set up about the geological and cultural qualities of the geopark. In the period of a few years, a capacity has been developed to valorize the heritage; give new impetus to the socio-economic development of the region; and develop all kinds of skills at various levels, from local to provincial, as well as cultural, educational, and scientific. As a result, the geopark is currently visited annually by thousands of tourists from home and abroad. There is an annual increase of 30% in visitors. New socio-economic and socio-cultural opportunities are being developed.

## 5. Opportunities and Obstacles to Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Cooperation

The diary fragment at the beginning of this article sketched some of the uncertainties about our role as researchers in Son La. This uncertainty and the related questions did not disappear in the course of the following years, despite the predominantly positive results of the three projects. The doubt was mainly due to the often-difficult cooperation between the Vietnamese anthropologists and the Leuven social scientists. We experienced big differences in research traditions and principles. We, for instance, considered the research concepts and methods of our Vietnamese social science partners to be relatively outdated. Our Vietnamese social science colleagues seemed to express little openness to the methodology we suggested. They insisted on detailed descriptions of the “folkways” (religious and cultural practices of the ethnic minorities), while we wanted to find out, via participatory observation and interviews, how the residents related to the innovations we wanted to implement in the living environment of the residents. In the social sciences, there are various paradigms (including positivist and interpretative paradigms, or orthodox vs. reflexive approaches) and various views on how research best relates to policy. Because of these paradigmatic and methodological differences, we encountered misunderstandings and had to renegotiate and adjust our planned activities regularly, which in itself is not that exceptional. What you plan in the application phase of a project must indeed be reviewed in the implementation phase, taking into account the concrete situation on the ground. On the spot, it turned out that the frames of reference from which we wanted to set up the cooperation were rather difficult for our socio-scientific Vietnamese partners. Our intention to inspire the project with notions of “participation” and “social learning” encountered incomprehension. We presume that such incomprehension is also related to the hierarchical top-down tradition that characterizes Vietnamese policy making. Vietnam is in many respects a very centralized country that has little experience with bottom-up initiatives of participation, particularly with regard to the participation of ethnic minorities in decision making processes. Various sources observe a strong state control over central policy domains such as economy, nature conservation, education, culture, and social welfare (London 2006; Epprecht et al. 2011; Friedrichsen 2012). This governance approach is the legacy of the “socialist bureaucratic” tradition, installed during and after the American–Vietnamese war at the end of the seventies. Initially, this approach was very successful to overcome the dramatic poverty during the post-war period. However, from the nineties onwards, private initiatives obtained increasing autonomy, particularly in the economic sector. In sectors such as education, social welfare, and minority policies, the centralist tendencies remained quite persistent. Recent evidence in that respect can be found in a report on how the Vietnamese authorities engage with practices of social work, which are a quite new phenomenon in the country. Nguyen et al. (2017) document this in a research project analyzing how the authorities deal with these emerging practices.

Key stakeholders consider social work to be an integral function of the government and as such depend upon the government to lay the foundation for, provide direction to, and make available the resources necessary for the profession to grow. In other words, there would not be a Vietnamese social work profession outside of and without the Vietnamese government. This represents a rather different approach to the development of the social work profession from that of other, particularly Western countries (Ibid., p. 28).

These differences in opinion and approach manifested themselves much less in the natural scientific part of the research. There was little or no discussion about the starting points and the research methods between the two research groups. In the natural scientific tradition, there are more universal frames of reference and methods than in the social science tradition. Gradually, we found, on the social-science side, a *modus-vivendi*, so that the collaboration remained workable. Based on this, we decided to intensify this collaboration in the second research project (Ngoc Son-Pu Luong). But in the third research project (Geopark), the collaboration with the social-science partners was not continued. The differences between the socio-science component and the natural science component were also noticeable in the research output. The scientific cooperation in the field of the natural sciences

was a great success. On the Vietnamese side, this collaboration resulted in about twenty master's and doctoral degrees, while on the social-scientific side, several doctoral projects were stranded along the way, partly as a result of the contradictions that were difficult to overcome. In the end, two socio-science doctorates were realized, but then with young researchers, who, thanks to a Belgian scholarship, could take a relatively autonomous position with regard to the Vietnamese scientific institutions and policy makers, which enabled them to adopt a critical attitude with regards to certain policy decisions on nature conservation (Nguyen 2009, 2014).

Research inevitably takes place in a certain political-institutional context, especially when the it needs to have development relevance. Our research themes, namely water management, nature conservation, popular participation, and poverty alleviation, are in the international context, but certainly also in the Vietnamese context, are politically quite sensitive and controversial issues. In the background, there are major contradictions between economic development and nature conservation, but also regarding the way in which development projects must be tackled (large-scale, small-scale, etc.). In addition, the research was taking place in the mountain areas of North Vietnam, which are mainly populated by various ethnic minorities. The inter-ethnic sensitivities resulting from this also played a part in the concrete realization of the projects. An important consequence of such sensitivities is that the research cannot be realized autonomously, but must be permanently accountable to the authorities at various levels, and must also undergo constant monitoring. This equally applies to the scientific and social science part of the research. However, especially in the social science research activities, we sometimes encountered suspicion on behalf of the authorities, because we interviewed the local population very intensively. We therefore had to permanently show the necessary diplomatic prudence.

This diplomatic prudence was also of crucial importance in contacts with those responsible in the Vietnamese research institutes where our research partners worked. The most sensitive issues were related to the finances of the project. Collaboration with partners from the West inevitably raises real and less realistic expectations about the extra financial resources for infrastructure and personnel. A particular problem was that in our research project, we could not expect cooperation without additional financial incentives for the Vietnamese researchers. All of this makes it clear that good institutional cooperation between the (Belgian and Vietnamese) research institutes was a crucial condition for the success of the project; and that was not so obvious. In the case of the natural science cooperation, the time needed to build a sound basis for collaboration lasted about three years. In the case of social-science cooperation, we needed twice as much time to achieve a workable basis for collaboration.

An important obstacle in the research collaboration was the language differences. The knowledge of English among our Vietnamese research partners was relatively limited, although this gradually changed, especially with the younger generation. This means that all research activities had to be constantly translated, both in writing (reports and publications) and orally (meetings and consultations with the authorities). The translations were not always reliable. In a number of cases of oral translation, the translation was used to adapt the message to the cultural or diplomatic sensitivities. This had disadvantages, but also advantages. Because of the permanent translation necessity, the research activities also went considerably slower. But, a more important consequence of the lack of language skills was the fact that foreign sources were difficult to access for the Vietnamese researchers. As a result, they remained very strongly oriented to their own, trusted sources. This was again more the case with social scientists than with natural scientists. For the natural scientists, it is relatively easy to master foreign scientific jargon as it is not so different from their own jargon.

Another important problem associated with language and culture was the lack of an (international) publication tradition. Especially in the social science research projects, data is continuously collected. However, the processing and reporting of the data is much more difficult. Many data therefore remained unused. This also had to do with the limited "analytical" tradition of the researchers, as mentioned above. Interpretation in connection with theoretical frameworks is much more difficult and sometimes also much more delicate.



Also, the cultural differences created some problems. We experienced delicate matters, such as respect for hierarchy, authority, and age. We tried to respect these feelings as well as possible, so that we gradually gained credit from our partners. This does not alter the fact that at times there were serious tensions as a result of a mix of financial, scientific, and cultural differences. Gradually, both the Belgian and the Vietnamese partners learned how to handle these tensions better. They have also become less acute from the moment that the Vietnamese partners received greater policy responsibility in the research projects. This applies both to our natural science partners and to our social science partners. One of the most important cultural characteristics of the Vietnamese partners is indeed their need for respect and the recognition of their capacities. However, these particularities have not led to insurmountable conflicts. On the contrary, the process of cultural encounter between the researchers was usually experienced as very enriching, both at the level of work and beyond.

## 6. Questions about Interventions in the Global South

The kind of tensions and also the disappointments we sometimes experienced, especially in social-scientific research work, are the subject of reflection and discussion in the tradition of so-called postcolonial research in social/human sciences. This literature regularly criticizes the dominance of Western/Northern knowledge forms in relation to knowledge forms of the Global South. Many authors from this tradition wonder how processes and mechanisms of oppression, which were installed in the South by the European colonizers, still continue to work through in postcolonial times. Gayatri Spivak, for example, poses the question, in her famous text “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), whether the postcolonial criticism is not again dominated by Western, especially male academics, even when they denounce the exploitation of the Global South by the neoliberal West (Europe and the United States). In her text, she refers to the famous post-structural French philosophers, Foucault and Deleuze. Although she agrees with many of their insights, she notes that both speak from a European frame of reference, paying little attention to “epistemic violence”, even of the Western intelligentsia, with regard to the Global South. According to Spivak, their insights are mainly informed through their analysis with regard to specific Western/European phenomena and experiences. Their statements are therefore colored by this context, making it very difficult for them identify with the perspectives of the subjects from the Global South, who have no face, no name, and no voice. “It is impossible for Western contemporary French intellectuals to imagine the kind of power and desire that lives in the Subject-without-name from outside Europe” (Spivak 1988, p. 75).

With epistemic violence, is meant that Western scientific truth claims are presented as the only valid claims, while local knowledge forms from the Global South are implicitly considered inferior. The Portuguese sociologist Santos (2005, 2016), who has studied the relationship between the North and the South for years, even speaks of “epistemicide”, or the dismantling of knowledge from the South by the North. “The crises and disasters caused by careless and exclusivist science are much more serious than admitted by the dominant scientific epistemologies” (Santos 2016, p. 207).

Santos brings up a concern that also occupied us during our Vietnam projects. We realized that, as researchers from Europe, we brought insights and practices with us into the Western context, logics, and working methods. For example, the framework within which our projects took place was that of interuniversity development cooperation (VLIR-UOS). This framework implies implicitly but also explicitly that the relationships between the partners involved (the institutions, research centers, and individuals) must be understood as a cooperation based on a shared interest that encourages involvement and leads to reciprocal enrichment. This close involvement is also expected to have a strong sense of ownership. It is unmistakable that, in the way in which the people involved (the people of the VLIR secretariat, but also the professors, institutional coordinators, etc.) talk about the “cooperation”, this cooperation is strongly linked to the representation of intercultural, interdisciplinary, and international dialogue, where much attention is paid to the demand-driven approach and the participation of the stakeholders (e.g., translated into the use of Project Cycle Management method), and increasingly also to what is called pursuing a win-win situation (all partners, including those

from the North, benefit from the cooperation). So, the idea of collaboration is linked to concepts such as dialogue, ownership, demand-orientation, participation, and win–win.

Take for example the concept of “participation”, which plays an important role in the allocation of funding for development cooperation projects. Also, in our case, in the philosophy of the VLIR, the notion of participation is central. Participation is understood as a power-free dialogue between those involved in the project from the North and the South. Participation is a condition for the recognition of the project, but this condition is not actually negotiated. In this way, all kinds of power relations actually play a major role. It is assumed that there is a shared interest, while there may be many different, often contradictory or conflicting interests. Even the “question” itself (hence, the identification of the needs) is constructed in part by the project-based approach. This question does not simply exist on beforehand. Yet, it needs to be answered. The “question” is also determined by what one thinks the project can offer, and the financial possibilities that are associated with it.

Likewise, there are inevitably always clashing logics. On the one hand, there is the participatory logic, which emphasizes local planning and local capacity building. In addition, practices and concepts such as participation, sustainability, a bottom-up approach, empowerment, and democratic attitudes are presented as important project concerns and objectives. On the other hand, there is the logic of efficiency and effectiveness. This is linked to the operational concerns of the project supervisors and of the managers. This is reinforced by the accountability requirements of the donor, aimed at the correct use of funds and the realization of the predetermined quality results. The importance of this justification cannot be denied. But this logic also promotes all kinds of hierarchical management forms. For example, the project supervisors actually determine where the money is going, because they have to account for themselves within the financial and administrative frameworks of the donors and their own financial services. As a result, social hierarchies that are challenged officially in project documents and in the discourse on participatory planning, are immediately reproduced in the implementation. Participation aims at countering certain power relations (traditions and hierarchies), but it is also always a form of exercise of power. In this way, it continues, in a certain sense, the colonial tradition and the ambition to form new participative and responsible individuals, for example, by transforming the members of the traditional communities into individual active, learning citizens, and transforming the researchers into ones who comply with international disciplinary communities and tribunals targeting researchers. So, they are not only given the message that they have to act themselves, but also that the norm of this self-acting is implied.

## 7. “Translation” as a Strategy of Intercultural Dialogue

The problem of clashing logics, but also of the insidious dominance of Western forms of knowledge in the interaction between partners from the North and the Global South was extensively analyzed by the above mentioned Santos (2005, 2016). He recognizes in this interaction a certain arrogance from the actors from the North, enacting feelings of superiority with regard to the knowledge and skills considered necessary to tackle the challenges of the South. The wealth of experiences and insights from the South are often ignored. Such experiences are made “invisible” or cataloged as “non-existent”. Thus, a Northern “monoculture” of knowledge is created and continued. Santos has also experienced these challenges in his commitment in the World Social Forum (WSF). This is an international association of NGOs, trade unions, social movements, and action groups from the South and the North, which tries to counterbalance the dominant, neoliberal forms of economic development, which confirm and strengthen the existing dependency relationships. This is done through annual meetings, mostly in the South (Porto Alegre in Brazil was the first meeting place in the year 2000), where concerns and ideas are exchanged about alternatives for neoliberal globalization and about practices to realize these alternatives. This also happens through study work and the preparation of papers on crucial development themes. The thousands of participants in this partnership come from very different cultural, social, political, and economic backgrounds, which does not make the collaboration self-evident. The tensions and difficulties that are experienced are also related to the

power differences among the actors involved. The conversations are not always power-free and conflict-free. Santos (2005) has, based on his experiences at these meetings, developed a vision on how to organize an intercultural dialogue between these heterogeneous partners. Central to his analysis is the concept of translation, which he defines as follows: “Translation is the procedure that allows for mutual intelligibility among the experiences of the world, both available and possible, ( . . . ) without jeopardizing their identity and autonomy, without, in other words, reducing them to homogeneous entities” (Santos 2005, p. 16).

Translation, in Santos’ view should take place on two levels—translation of concepts and translation of practices. In the first, the translation of concepts refers to becoming aware of the fact that many notions that we often use innocently are not at all neutral. The example of the familiar concept of “human rights” makes this clear. Santos observed that this concept, which has a natural positive meaning for many Europeans and Americans, evokes resistance in many countries in the South. We experienced this ourselves when, in the project description of the European Commission’s Development Cooperation Service, the promotion of human rights was included as a condition for recognizing and subsidizing project proposals. The Vietnamese partners for whom our project application was intended had a very difficult time with that condition. For them, “human rights” is a very Western, especially American, concept that conceals the injustice that the North—in this case the United States—has done to the South, and is still doing. Santos has experienced a similar controversy concerning the significance of this notion. That is why he proposes, in addition to becoming aware of the connotation of such concepts, looking for translations that are acceptable to other cultures, through which a dialogue becomes possible. As an alternative he explored, with partners from the South, the concept of “human dignity”. In so doing, they explored possible concepts from other cultures that could be linked to human dignity. Muslims put forward the notion of “umma” (community) and Hindus suggested the concept of “dharma” (cosmic harmony). This translation work provides insight into the strengths and weaknesses of each concept separately, and also creates the possibility of a “contact zone” within which to search for connections and ways to overcome the shortages of culture-related concepts, without the domination of one particular concept. The same process can be applied when introducing practices or interventions aimed at solving problems or improving strategies and methods of development work. In that case, the translation work explores the possibilities of a mutual clarification of different organizational forms, objectives, strategies, and concrete working methods. One of those methods that is ubiquitous in the development of work today is participatory practice.

## 8. The Discourse of Participation

Participation is now a must in many project-based working methods, both within the world of research and the world of practice. In the context of development projects, participatory practices, such as the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), have become “incontournable” or indispensable. They are now part of the expertise that Western development workers are supposed to have in their toolbox when engaging in their practices in the South (Chambers 1983). As researchers, we could not ignore this concept in our project applications, if we wanted to have a chance to have them approved. Yet, we had previously expressed our doubts about the predominantly functionalist interpretation of this concept and its associated practices (Baggen et al. 2000; Masschelein and Kerlijn 2006). We then argued that the participatory discourse was subject to a depoliticizing process, in the sense that power relations in participatory processes are not or hardly discussed, and the participation practice remains within a strict instrumental and functionalistic framework. “As a result, other forms of thinking, experience and consultation that relate to questions of power and belief are excluded or reformulated in such a way that their critical potential is neutralized” (Baggen et al. 2000, p. 316, translation DW).

This analysis is confirmed by the in-depth study of Cooke and Kothari (2004) about the participation discourse, in their book “Participation: the New Tyranny?”. They conclude that “power of the people” is no longer a slogan of radicals who drastically try to change the balance of power

in favor of the oppressed. It has now become an important tool for marketeers, quality controllers, development workers, world bankers, politicians, managers, consultancy firms, and so on. All of them have recently introduced democratic procedures that are supposed to put the voice of the citizen, the customer, the student, the farmer, the place, and the viewer in the foreground. The hidden agenda of such participatory practices is that they actually “teach” the participants, so that they learn to define themselves as self-managing actors in an “active” society.

In the context of our VIBEKAP research project in Vietnam, we concluded that interdisciplinary, participative, and reflective learning in an intercultural context is a very interesting, but also very challenging experience (Tessier et al. 2004). It creates exciting new opportunities for research and learning. Yet, it also raises specific problems and dilemmas in life. These problems and dilemmas are linked to the inherent difficulties of interdisciplinary, intercultural, and participatory learning, with the complex nature of the research object (in our case, water management in karst areas) and with the specific conditions in Vietnam. They are also connected with the private structure of a project funded by outsiders, and above all, with the rather naive assumption that by simply identifying the stakeholders and inviting them to active participation in joint activities and round table meetings, opportunities are created for all actors, so as to learn and to guide the project. In practice, such cooperation is extremely complex and vulnerable. Hoai Huong Nguyen (Nguyen 2009), a researcher in our Vietnam projects, investigated the complexity of this type of participatory consultation in her doctoral thesis. She analyzed the developments in LLINC, our second Vietnamese research project. In line with Santos’ analysis, she makes clear how “participation” as a concept and as a practice is very differently understood by the Belgian researchers on the one hand, and by the Vietnamese partners on the other.

The intention of the researchers was to include the inhabitants of the area of the planned nature reserve into the entire decision-making process. Particularly, these people would ultimately undergo, to a large extent, the consequences of the re-use of the area. In order to meet their concerns, “participation” was a central notion in the research proposal. In carrying out the research, however, we encountered a lot of problems when we mentioned the phrase “participation of the local people”. In a first phase of the study, participation was linked to the concept of “stakeholders”. We asked various actors who, according to them, should be involved in the deliberation and the interpretation of the nature reserve. The answers showed that no one thought of “the local population” as a stakeholder. For this reason, the researchers asked the more direct question about the participation (“tham gia” in Vietnamese) of the local population. The researchers regarded this as an open question, with the intention to create maximum opportunities for all those involved to express their opinions in that respect. However, they had to conclude that this question hardly produced any response.

Some of the interviewees did not understand the question. Others asked them to repeat the question. This showed that the concept and practice of “participation of the local residents” for most of them was a completely new element. When the LLINC researchers used the word “tham gia”, their idea was that the participation of the local population would have an emancipating effect on the group of local residents. However, the delegates of the “people’s committees” understood the term “tham gia” in terms of a top-down approach, in which the management of the nature reserve would be assigned to the “forest protection guard” (supervisors of the nature reserve), under the responsibility of the state. The “empowerment” of the local residents, as the researchers understood it, was not at all an issue for them. The ambition of the researchers to actively involve local residents in the decision-making process was restricted in this case. This relative success was the result of a careful translation of the practices and concepts, as suggested by Santos, so that ultimately, a form of dialogue between the heterogeneous partners could be established.

## 9. Conclusions

As indicated earlier, we consider the research projects we carried out in Vietnam between 1998 and 2013 as relatively successful. Both the research and the outcomes of the interventions produced

positive results. In Son La, a water distribution system was developed in two villages. In Hoa Binh, a new nature reserve was created on the basis of very intensive multi-actor consultations, in which the local population was not completely overlooked. A Geopark was created in Ha Giang, which today attracts thousands of tourists every year and offers new perspectives for the development of the region. There were also several Vietnamese, but also Belgian students, who obtained a master's or doctor's degree in connection with the research projects. The successes were also accompanied by smaller and larger tensions, and sometimes also disappointments. The interdisciplinary and intercultural dialogue with fellow researchers in Vietnam and with the local and regional authorities did not always develop smoothly. The European and Vietnamese stakeholders were in some ways rather strange to each other. There were major language and cultural differences. There were major differences with respect to scientific and practical matters, especially on the social-science side. There were quite a few differences of opinion about the funding of the research. The criteria and rules of the funding body limited the autonomy of the Vietnamese researchers. Nevertheless, we have found solutions for many of these problems in close consultation. This presupposed prudence, creativity, and mutual respect. Over the years, relations between Vietnamese and Belgian researchers have improved. Unfortunately, the social-science component did not ultimately meet all of our expectations. Sometimes, the differences were not bridgeable. Nevertheless, both the Vietnamese and the European partners have learned a lot from each other. A central element in this learning process is that concepts and practices that are taken for granted in the context of research and community development in the North, such as participation, democracy, and human rights, often have a very different meaning in the South, and hence, need careful translation.

Perhaps the most important reason for the success of the three successive research projects is the fact that it involved a lasting collaboration of almost twenty years. Six years prior to the actual research projects, a relationship of trust was built between the Vietnamese and Belgian speleologists. This trust relationship formed the backbone of the interdisciplinary research collaboration. The participation that was built up in this way was not of the type that is currently widely promoted by the sponsors of development projects, with very concrete results to be achieved in the short term. Good cooperation in interdisciplinary and intercultural projects requires a lot of patience, time, and respect for each other's individuality, traditions, and culture. We have had the opportunity to gradually create such cooperation by carefully dealing with each other's history, culture, and vulnerability. Cautiously recognizing and respecting each other's strangeness is an important prerequisite for a successful intercultural cooperation and interdisciplinary dialogue.

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