

Impacts of the Interest Groups in Vietnam at Present

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Abstract: An interest group is a collection of individuals or teams that share the same interests but different from those of other groups as well as those of a larger community. Such interest groups try to cause impacts on the guideline, policy and management of administrative institutions at different levels, aiming at maximizing interests of their groups, regardless of legitimate interests of others or negative impacts on the general development of society. There are various types or forms of interest groups in society. Through economic, political, information and ideological modes, they cause impacts on policy - making and socio - economic development policy implementation. In Vietnam, the interest groups have been exerting negative impacts on social development. If those impacts are not constrained effectively and appropriately, the corollaries will be increasingly severer, resulting in social crises in the coming time.

Key words: Interest group, group interest, policy impact, the State, market economy, Vietnam.

1. Recently, there have been many discussions about interest groups and group interests in various forums, as those groups have taken advantage of all possible conditions and tricks to get benefits, causing negative impacts on socio - economic life in Vietnam. Yet, neither the concept of interest group nor group interest has been understood unanimously. In fact, the interest group and the group interest are not of the same concept. Based on different expressions, we can realize the group interest is usually understood as the general and similar interest of a certain group of people in society. In the meanwhile, the interest group is understood as a group of people who have the same interest and want to effectuate jointly the interest.

There are many types of group interests, indeed. The number and names of interest groups also vary, depending on the perspective of analysis and the criteria for classification. Of all group interests generally, some interests are legitimate, reasonable, legal, and progressive, which cause positive impacts on social development; whereas, some others are illegitimate, unreasonable, and illegal, which undermine and hinder development of community and society. Based on types of group interests, different interest groups are formed, in which individuals and teams together carry out activities to gain their group interests to the maximum extent. It is, therefore, possible to say that group

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interests and interest groups are inseparable. Interest groups are formed wherever group interests are found, and vice versa group interests exist wherever interest groups are found. It is, however, noticeable that interests of an individual or an organization are viewed as the group interests by society, only when they are different from common interests of a larger community, and even, only when they cause negative impacts or influence that are contrary to interests of a larger community within the aspect of discussion.

In both theoretical and practical perspectives of the mankind social history generally and Vietnam's social history particularly, group interests and interest groups always exist in all periods. For different periods, however, group interests and interest groups exist in different forms with different magnitude; the number of interest groups and group interests also vary by periods. Thus, the impacts they caused on social development are also different. Interest groups play a really meaningful role in society. The extent and characteristics of interest groups should be viewed in specific relations. For example, the class interests can be seen as the interests of a group in relation to the interests of the whole society; the interests of a province or a local area can be seen as the interests of a group in relation to the interests of the nation, etc. The larger an interest group is, the more people and the bigger community it represents. Consequently, the more participants an interest group has, the greater its social influence will be. The higher and the more

important positions in society the representatives of an interest group hold, the greater impacts the interest group will cause. In reality, therefore, interest groups always want their representatives to hold high and important positions in the social, economic, political, cultural, security, and national defense systems.

When talking about current group interests or interest groups in Vietnam, ones usually use the narrow sense of those phrases, which inclines towards negative impacts on society. Group interests are the interests of a certain group of people, which are considered by those people more important than general interests of a larger group or community; they view those interests as the core ones; and, activities that they carry out to achieve those interests result in bad impacts or negative consequences on general development. Correspondingly, the interest group is a collection of individuals or teams, who share the same interests but different from interests of other groups as well as interests of a larger community; they try to affect the guideline, policy and management of the administrative institutions at various levels in order to maximize their group interests, regardless of negative impacts on general development of society.

No matter whether the concepts of "interest groups" and "group interests" are understood by the narrow or the broad sense, there are different interest groups in Vietnam indeed. In the pre - Doi moi (Renovation) period with the system of administrative subsidy and centrally planning, there were probably

interest groups, but they did not cause much and obvious influence on social life, especially the socio - economic policy - making and implementation; their impacts did not result in big effects, unlike those in the period of market economy afterwards. After Vietnam carried out market economy, furthermore, economic democratization took place together with the opening policy and international integration, making social life more diversified and rapidly stratified. There are more favorable conditions for the emergence and the rise of group interests and interest groups. That's why they are now causing such obviously serious and various impacts on social life.

In life, everyone pursues his/her own goals and is ruled by different interests. At a higher level, there are interest groups pursuing and being ruled by the interests shared by all the group members. The interests are expressed in life and activities of the group with specific goals. Theoretically, different groups may have the same specific interests, but they have different viewpoints and awareness of how to carry out and organize activities to achieve the interests. They may coexist, interact, cooperate and compete with one another. Yet, they may be opposed to one another, depending on specific situations. Actually, activities of individuals and interest groups are viewed as one of the motives for social development in various fields, areas, and aspects. During a specific period, each interest group pursues certain interests, creating innumerable different

vectors of targets and therefore causing different vectors of impacts on social life. The combination of all those vectors make social development move differently from the will of the interest groups without depending on any specific interest groups. The social development is, however, influenced by all the interest groups, although influence caused by every interest group is not the same.

2. As mentioned above, once market economy in Vietnam is more developed, the society will be more diversified and stratified; division between people will be increasingly higher and clearer in all aspects. As a result, the emergence and the rise of interest groups will be more vigorous, both tacitly and openly. Some interest groups are recognized and accepted by society in different forms; they are called as officially - established interest groups. In the meanwhile, some interest groups are not recognized by society; even, some are condemned and boycotted by society; they are unofficially - established interest groups that exist implicitly. In both the officially - established and unofficially - established categories, there are different types of interest groups. Evaluating the impacts caused by interest groups on socio - economic policy - making and implementation, it is necessary to pay attention to both the two categories of interest groups. To cause impacts on the policy - making and implementation as well as the management and operation of the state apparatus is the main way used by interest groups to achieve their group interests to the maximum.

In society, there are many types, forms, and patterns of interest groups. In the past as well as at present, interest groups, especially the ones that cause impacts on promulgation and implementation of socio - economic development policies, are not recognized in Vietnam. This is seen as indispensable, according to Vietnam particular mechanism and socio - economic development.

At the time of the centrally planned and State-subsidy economy based on the foundation of public ownership with two major forms of production means, all the political, cultural, social, and ideological powers were dominated completely and comprehensively by the only political party. As a result, there were not any impacts caused by interest groups at all, although the interest groups practically existed. In addition, interest groups were not recognized as officially - established, when they wanted to cause impacts on the guidelines, policies, or the laws. During that period, the existence of such interest groups basically was not accepted in society. Thus, they were not recognized; they did not get any opportunities to cause influence; and, they had neither premise nor favorable conditions to perform and achieve their group interests.

When Vietnam started the market economy, accepting the co - existence of different types of ownership, different modes of economic activities, and different patterns of trade, social stratification and division also became increasingly higher, resulting in formation of various interest groups. The more Vietnam market economy has developed, the more diversified the interest groups have

become. In the context of market economy, it is inevitable that interest groups are formed and developed. The existence of interest groups is surely unavoidable, attached closely to market economy. Once Vietnam recognize market economy as the most effective model for economic activities of the mankind, they have to accept the existence of interest groups. The very interest groups contribute parts towards making market economy dynamic and flexible and diversifying various aspects of social life.

Interest groups, however, did not emerge and they did not cause influence on promulgation and implementation of socio - economic development policies as well as social management, as soon as Vietnam started to carry out market economy. Only when development of market economy reached a particular extent, could the interest groups become powerful enough to affect promulgation and implementation of socio - economic development policies. It means that they require time and certain conditions or premises to cause impacts on policy promulgation and implementation as well as general social management.

Although the demand for time, favorable conditions and premises is satisfied, however, not all interest groups can impact on promulgation and socio - economic development policy implementation. In reality, just some interest groups have sufficient conditions to cause impacts on socio - economic development policy-making and implementation for a certain period. How much the influence can be also depends on various factors relating to society and the very interest groups as well.

The interest groups must be sufficiently powerful in some aspects, including firstly the economic, secondly the political, and thirdly the information (in the present context of information technology) ones. In essence, those groups must have some advantages that other groups cannot have or cannot use. To have one of those potentials, of course, they need time for formation, social interactions, and development; interest groups cannot be sufficiently powerful, as soon as they are formed. The time needed may be long or short, depending on each interest group. There are different ways to get the above - mentioned potentials. And, how much an interest groups can impact on socio - economic development policy - making and implementation firstly depends on its economic potential.

In industrialized nations, big industrial corporations and interest groups usually have a lot of power. They, therefore, can cause a great impact on socio-economic development policy - making and implementation. They even can exert a strong influence on the elections of the president or the prime minister. As a result, they can affect and take control over policy-making, promulgation and implementation for the entire term of the president or the prime minister. In Vietnam, development of the market economy has not been so high that such industrial corporations are formed. It is impossible, however, to affirm that the State-run corporations (such as those in some sectors, including petroleum, electricity, mining, financial - banking, and real estate, etc.) have not yet caused any impacts on policy - making, policy

promulgation and implementation at various levels, from the local to the Central ones.

Although some interest groups may have great economic potential, they cannot take control completely over socio - economic development policy - making and implementation. Herein, we use the term of “socio - economic development policy - making and implementation” in the broad sense. We do not mean it in the literal sense; i.e. to promulgate a new law or policy. In fact, the promulgation is just a stage in the process of policy-making and enforcement. Every socio - economic development policy is necessarily assessed through different stages, from the beginning (when ideas are raised to build the policy) to its promulgation and implementation. The broad sense of the term consists of the entire process. Even, interest groups not only cause impacts on the policy promulgation and implementation, but they also cause impacts on general administration and social management. Once a decision is made, for example, to increase or reduce the cost of a product such as the cost of electricity or petroleum, at a deliberate moment, it will bring great profits to the interest groups involved. Impacts caused by interest groups on those stages vary, in terms of the content and the scope of the policy, the date and the area of policy enforcement, the period of validity as well as general implementation and social management. Impacts of interest groups depend much on institutions, the State apparatus, the laws, the quality of leaders and officials involved directly in policy - making, policy enforcement, and

social management. They are also partly dependent upon impacts caused by other interest groups.

The “economic potential” does not only merely means “a wealth of money” to subvert prices in the market, but it also means “the ability to cause economic impacts” on one or several stages in the process of socio - economic development policy - making and implementation. In the negative sense, it can be bribery, collusion, exchange, or agreement on some economic activity. By now, this type of economic impacts has not been recognized in official documents. For researchers, the stages and the ways how interest groups use the economic potential to cause impacts have not been studied and assessed. Based on the information announced in the mass media, however, such as the case of East - West Highway, the case of Vinashin and Mr. Duong Chi Dung, the case of Mrs. Huyen Nhu, or the case of Vietnam Railways (the Ministry of Transport), we can see that interest groups did use the economic potential to cause impacts on socio - economic development policy-making and implementation to seek profit. Making an in - depth study on each case, we have realized the diversity, complication, and sophistication of the impacts they caused on the system of socio - economic development policy - making and implementation at different levels and different stage. The economic potential - based influence exists together with the system and in all stages of the policy-making and policy enforcement. Interest groups are prepared to cause impacts for the sake of getting advantages. The group interests are always considered the top priority.

It is necessary to add that we are just analyzing and summarizing the factors that are sufficient for an interest group to cause impacts on socio - economic development policy - making and implementation, but we are not talking about the goals and interests of the group. Interest groups may use their economic potential via economic activities to impact upon the apparatus of policy-making and policy enforcement, aiming at achieving “non - economic targets”, which in other words are not direct economic targets; for example, to make a representative of the group fill a position of the government or to help a representative escape from imprisonment or so. In many countries, interest groups have monopolized a link of the authority apparatus, forming the Mafia. (There is also a sign for this in Vietnam, although it is at a low level). In nature, the Mafia is a group of criminals (a form of the interest group) that can take control over the authorities to achieve specific goals for the group. The case of Nam Cam in Vietnam is one of the examples for such a phenomenon. The criminal group of Nam Cam was successful in bribing and taking control over officials of the government to serve its interests.

The first method for causing impacts is to use the economic potential, which is very common, important, and effective as shown in practice. In reality, interest groups apply economic potential - based impacts variously, sometimes rapidly and vigorously, but sometimes tacitly and slowly. Yet, economic potential - based impacts are always more effective than other types of impacts. They usually combine economic potential - based

impacts with other impacts; they rarely apply economic potential - based impacts separately and solely. To cause economic potential - based impacts is one of the most fundamental and the most ancient ways, which has been used in all social systems.

The second method for causing impacts originates from the second factor, which is the political potential. Many interest groups are really powerful in the economic aspect, but they may not be powerful in the political aspect. The interest groups, which have high political potential, are often the ones, of which representatives are authorities or have relationships strong enough to take control, to some extent, over a part of the state apparatus, especially in the stages involved directly in the process of policy - making, implementation, supervision, or management of socio - economic development policies. Herein, the term of “political potential” is meant to be capable of dominating and getting information of the policies, which are about to be promulgated or effective, in order to make proper preparation to cope with or participate in for the sake of getting the most advantages for the group. The key is that the group can rule over a part or an authority of the state apparatus involved directly in policy - making, policy promulgation, implementation and management. The person can be a member of the group in the literal sense. Yet, he/she can be a member of the state apparatus, but he/she works for interests of the group.

Since the interest groups have some relationships, which are strong enough to take control over some stages, some parts

or some individuals of the state apparatus involved directly with policy - making and policy implementation, they can make the policies most favorable for their interests, immediately when ideas for the policies are suggested or when the policies are amended. They try to get benefits from all stages of the policy orientation, policy implementation, social management and supervision, regardless interests of other individuals, other groups, or the whole society as well. The particular characteristic of the impacts caused by the interest groups of political potential or, in the other words, the way to cause political potential-based impacts is always relating closely to the state institutions and systems.

In Vietnam and many other countries as well, this type of impacts has been used by interest groups, affecting national interests and development. In the current context, however, it is hard to point out directly those interest groups and their impacts, since the legislative agencies and state institutions have not exposed them yet. Those who work for the interest groups are disguised very well in the state apparatus. Only agencies of investigation can find out who they are, despite difficulties. For some cases, it takes a lot of time. In reality, high-ranking leaders, legislative officials, specialists, and managers at various levels have mentioned this issue in public forums for several times, but people still have different opinions about it. A lot of people agree with the opinion against political potential-based impacts, but some do not. Especially, analyses and demonstrations of this type of impacts have not shown specific

evidences, except for some cases that have been already investigated and judged on trial. As a result, opinions against this type of impacts are often raised allusively, though the attitude is shown very drastically.

At the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee, the Secretary General Nguyen Phu Trong (Nguyễn Phú Trọng) affirmed that it was necessary to give up “the term thinking” (*i.e. short-term and inconsistent thinking, according to which leaders just try to accomplish easy tasks to keep the position for the term in office, avoiding and leaving difficult and innovative tasks to those of the next term*) and “group interests” in public investment as well as strategy - building, planning and policy - making in the investment sector. We think the term thinking just creates a short-term vision; at that time, officials just take care of their own interests with many other negative manifestations. In fact, it is also a specific manifestation of the individual interests; if it is combined with other individuals, an interest group will be formed. Tran Du Lich (Trần Du Lịch), a member of the Parliament, commented that renovation of economic institutions cost a little, but resulted in high effective consequences. This is, however, one of the most difficult tasks, as it is involved with interests of every local area, every sector, and every interest group. Le Dang Doanh assumed that some local authorities tried to set up projects for industrial parks, factories, sea-ports, airports, and heritage preservation zones, etc., which were not effective for socio-economic development,

but advantageous for some interest groups. Truong Phuoc Anh, the President of the Viettin Company Limited and a member of the People’s Council of Da Nang City, also affirmed that interest groups existed in reality and they were one of the key factors or “motives” for the shortcomings and difficulties of our economy at present [3].

As impacts caused by interest group via the political potential are closely relating to the state apparatus and the system of the state officials, one of the inevitable consequences is that those authorities/officials benefit some special privileges. Once an interest group gets the political potential, it will aim at seizing special rights, special advantages, and special privileges at different levels. After seizing all those things, it has kept a significant position and it will try to strengthen further its political potential. Owing to the political potential-based impacts, special rights and special advantages are gained, bringing interests to those who are closely attached with the authority system. In the meanwhile, special privileges are given by those who have the special rights and special advantages to others, in order to strengthen and improve the power of their groups in all aspects. Even, special privileges are handed over from generation to generation; they are provided for individuals or parts of the authority system, aiming at strengthening more and more power of the interest groups through generations.

The influence caused by combining both the economic and the political potentials on socio - economic development policy-

making and implementation always results in very serious and immeasurable social consequences in all aspects. On the one hand, the combination brings enormous advantages to the interest groups. On the other hand, it causes huge damage to society, since most of interest groups consider their own interests above the general interests of society, and even in opposition to the general interests of society. In Vietnam at present, as remarked by some experts, a common particularity of interest groups is that they have a very close relationship with authorities or those who have power, especially in some sectors such as personnel promotion, financial, banking, state budget, investment, land-use, mining, forestry, sea-exploitation, and natural resources, etc.. The relationship of interest groups may slip in any areas, where they can find advantages. They often carry out activities flexibly around a case, around some individuals or sections of the authority system. All interest groups and their way to cause impacts on policy-making, implementation, supervision, and management are now considered unofficial and unorthodox. They are not legally accepted. They are sometimes judged as law - breaking [3]. They exist and secretly cause impacts; they disguise activities and incomes earned from the interest group very carefully.

It is noticeable in reality that there are different interest groups, existing at the same time and using various ways to cause impacts, by both the political and the economic potentials, on socio - economic development policy - making and

implementation to gain advantages for themselves. This results in negative consequences for the national socio - economic development. In the legal system as well as socio - economic measures and policies, however, policy - makers and researchers have not paid appropriate attention to the existence of interest groups and the ways they use to cause impacts on development. The sanctions and legal framework to be applied for interest groups have not been prepared yet. This makes it more and more difficult to take control over interest groups, especially those which have the political potential. They, therefore, have more opportunities to lord it over people, causing more and more damage to vulnerable groups and the entire society. This is the very latent reason for political and economic instability in future.

In developed countries with high - technology, the information potential is also a very important factor for impacts on promulgation of socio - economic development policies. Those who know information always get the advantage and they can use it to make profits for their own groups. Theoretically, different types of information such as technology information, policy information, trading information, and organizational and personnel information, etc. have become special commodity in the present context of information technology. For a lot of cases in reality, information plays a decisive role in success or failure of an or some interest groups (an enterprise, for example), bringing financial profits or improving the

status of interest groups. In Vietnam, the information potential and its impacts are not great and popular, compared with the impacts caused via the political and economic potentials. Yet, there are also interest groups using the information potential to cause impacts. The proper information about urban planning and development, for example, can bring enormous profits to the interest groups in the real estate sector. To get those profits, however, they may cause severe damage to other individuals, social groups, and the State, leading to the situation of disorder in the real estate market.

The information potential and the ways to cause impacts via the information potential are related closely to the political as well as the economic potential. In a specific situation, interest groups are very flexible in using the way to cause impacts; they can combine different types of impacts or carry out them alternately. Apart from the three above - mentioned types of impacts, there are also impacts caused by interest groups on the basis of the cultural and thinking potential. Some scholars have also mentioned another type, which characterizes interest groups in the East. It is the interest group of “kin and relatives”, which causes impacts on policies, owing to the ties of the bloodline, kinship and relationships with relatives, neighbors, and friends. In Vietnam, however, the ways to cause impacts on the basis of the political and the economic potentials still remain the major ones.

In the West, interest groups are usually formed officially and they carry out activities publicly. They have to follow the lobbying regulations of the government. There are different types of interest groups: some are formed by business, occupation, and sector; some are formed by the trade unions; some aim at environmental protection, childcare, or gender equality, etc.. In fact, the first interest groups were formed around 5,000 years ago. For the entire length of history, interest groups always dominated and took control over the state power. At present, in all member nations of the UN, governments are more or less influenced by interest groups [6].

In Vietnam, researchers argue that there is difference between the “interest group” and the “group interest”. Yet, both of them exist and cause positive as well as negative impacts. They are closely connected with corruption [7]. Some authors affirm different forms of interest groups in Vietnam, including: the group of kin and relatives; the group of the same interests; the group of partial interests; the group of officials who use enterprises to earn their own profits; the individual mercenary group; the group of protection of illegal activities. Although we do not completely agree with this classification of interest groups, we agree with those authors about the affirmation that interest groups exist in different forms in Vietnam at present and they cause impacts on the authority system as well as social life by various ways, resulting in unforeseen corollaries.

Some authors acknowledge the existence of a lot of interest groups with different

types at present [2], such as: the interest conservative group; the State - run enterprise interest group; the State officials' interest group; the police interest group; and, the Renovation group. Mr. Le Nhu Tien, Vice Chairman of the Parliament Committee of Adolescent Culture and Education affirmed [5]: "interest groups are the biggest risk of squeezing the state budget. Based on 3 serious cases on trial in early 2014, including the case of the Agribank Leasing Company No. 2, the case of Huyen Nhu, and the case of Duong Chi Dung, we can see that group interests are very 'lively' and the greatest goal of interest groups at present is to squeeze the state budget. They are prepared to commit a crime; they take advantage of the professional knowledge and the loopholes of the law as well as the tardiness of the authorities' management to make profits and corruption, causing serious damage to the whole society".

One of the manifestations of interest groups and the use of economic potential to cause impacts in Vietnam can be realized via the existence and use of companies under the protection of the State - run enterprises among kin and relatives of important officials in the State authority system [8]. This phenomenon is shown clearly in the economic potential of the interest groups, the way they build their potentials and positions, and the way they cause impacts on policy - making, as well as promulgation, implementation and management of socio - economic development policies.

Negative interest groups carry out profit-making activities, regardless interests of

others and the whole society; they always cause severe damage to the national economy and properties as well as deteriorate moral values in society. Comparing the national GDP in 2012 with the total damage caused by interest groups in 5 big cases on trial, including the case of the Project Management Unit No.18 (PMU18), the case of the Vinashin/Vinalines Vietnam National Shipping Lines), the case of Huyen Nhu, and the case of the Agribank Leasing Company No.2, we can realize the seriousness of this problem. To exert influence on policy - making and socio - economic development policy promulgation, implementation and management, it is necessary to have a close linkage and cooperation between individuals or teams in the authority system as well as connections with those who have political, economic, or other potentials to form an interest group.

The influence of interest groups on policy - making and promulgation, implementation, management, and supervision of socio - economic policies is very great; the ways to cause impacts are also very "flexible", diversified, but they are mainly done via two major forms, including the economic and political ones. For the two categories of interest groups, the "positive" and the "negative", directions and corollaries of the impacts on socio - economic development policy - making and implementation are contrary to each other. Remarkably, the harmful influence of the "negative" interest groups on socio - economic development policy - making and implementation and its social corollaries have been increasingly severer, threatening

the political and security situation as well as the contemporary social state. At present, one of the most common expectations and desires in society is that the operation of the State authority system will be improved, in order to avoid negative impacts from interest groups.

The existence of interest groups is a social phenomenon with both positive and negative aspects, but by now attention is just drawn to the interest groups of special rights and special advantages (also called as the interest groups of “kin and relatives”), which are formed and organized to manipulate, monopolize some areas, especially economic and political ones, and commercialize the political power [1]. This means that interest groups exist in Vietnam as an objective phenomenon. The influence on socio - economic development policy - making and implementation and social management is also objective.

Unfortunately, on the one hand, the present State institutions do not provide favorable conditions for formation and development of officially - established interest groups so that they can be seen as a part of the civil society, ensuring the diversity of social development. On the other hand, the institutions are not effective enough to prevent negative impacts from interest groups, leading to dangerous corollaries at present and future. Furthermore, the institutions do not help to promote positive impacts from positive interest groups. It is a really sad reality. This is different from the situation in some other countries in the region and the world as well [4]. That’s why negative interest groups have been causing harmful social impacts in

Vietnam, resulting in unforeseen corollaries for not only socio-economic development policy-making and implementation, but also all the development aspects of society. If the impacts are not prevented actively and effectively, their corollaries will become more and more serious and social crises surely will take place in the coming time.

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