



The Role of Social Sciences and Humanities in Sustainable Development in Vietnam: A Case Study of Charitable Activities by Buddhist Nuns in Ho Chi Minh City

Nguyen Cong Thanh Dung

University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
nguyencongtanhdung@hcmussh.edu.vn

Article Info

Received: 29 Jul 2026,

Received in revised form: 21 Aug 2026,

Accepted: 26 Aug 2026,

Available online: 31 Aug 2026

Keywords— Social Sciences and Humanities, Sustainable development, Buddhist nuns (Ni giới), Social charity, Ho Chi Minh City.

©2026 The Author(s). Published by AI Publications. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

Abstract

This paper examines the overarching role of the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) in the sustainable development process of Vietnam. Utilizing a theoretical framework rooted in Social Capital and Community-Based Social Work, this study selects the socio-charitable activities of the Ni giới (Buddhist nuns) in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) as a representative empirical case study. Employing an interdisciplinary qualitative methodology that combines secondary document analysis and in-depth interviews, the findings indicate that Buddhist nuns not only alleviate the welfare strains placed on the public sector through three specialized models (social protection, community healthcare, and alternative education) but also act as catalysts for operationalizing and translating SSH knowledge into urban life. This is achieved by restructuring urban ethics and fostering sustainable livelihoods for marginalized groups. On this basis, the paper proposes institutionalized solutions to optimize this religious resource.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Macro Context and Research Justification

In the strategic development frameworks of developing nations, the paradigm of sustainable development has undergone a significant shift, transitioning from an exclusive focus on economic growth to an integrated, multidimensional model that places humanity and culture at its core. The Resolution of the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam explicitly affirmed this orientation: economic and social development must progress in tandem with social advancement and equity,

the preservation of cultural values, and the comprehensive development of the Vietnamese people. Within this architecture, the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) do not merely serve as academic or scholastic disciplines; rather, they function as vital mechanisms for shaping policy mindsets, forecasting social conflicts, and establishing ethical standards to regulate human behavior amidst the adverse externalities of a market economy.

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC)—a special municipality and the economic locomotive of Vietnam—is currently confronting the inevitable systemic consequences of rapid modernization

and urbanization: intense mechanical migration pressures, deep socio-economic polarization, and the emergence of "welfare pockets." Despite substantial investments, the public service delivery apparatus frequently lapses into a state of strain when faced with the escalating social protection demands of marginalized and vulnerable groups (such as informal migrant workers, orphaned children, and solitary elderly individuals). This reality necessitates the active participation and burden-sharing of non-state actors, among which religious organizations represent a pivotal resource.

Within the religious landscape of HCMC, the Ni giới (the community of Buddhist nuns) constitutes a distinctive social force with a vast number of monasteries and followers. The socio-charitable activities of these nuns have transcended emotional, spontaneous acts of relief, evolving instead into systematic social support networks. Investigating the role of SSH through the empirical prism of the HCMC Ni giới's activities is scientifically imperative. It not only elucidates the theoretical applicability of humanistic knowledge but also addresses the urgent practical demand for mobilizing social resources toward sustainable development goals.

1.2. Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to analyze the dialectical relationship between SSH theory and the practical social interventions of religion. Specifically, the research addresses two core questions:

RQ1: How are the socio-charitable activities of the Ni giới in HCMC structured into operational models, and how do they align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

RQ2: Through the lens of SSH, what mechanisms do these activities activate to intervene in reducing inequality and consolidating the ethical foundations of the urban landscape?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

2.1. Literature Review

A review of the existing literature reveals that relevant studies are generally bifurcated into two main streams. The first encompasses

macro-level research on the role of SSH in reforming policy mindsets and building human resources (Nguyen, 2018; Tran, 2021). The second stream delves into the paradigm of "Engaged Buddhism" and the contributions of Buddhism to social security and welfare (Nguyen, 2019; Le, 2021).

However, most current studies tend to examine Buddhist organizations as a homogeneous entity, lacking a deep gender-based differentiation (specifically regarding the socially constructed gender characteristics of the Ni giới as opposed to the Tăng giới—monks). Furthermore, systematically linking the practical activities of a specialized religious gender group to the theoretical frameworks of SSH for sustainable development remains largely unexecuted. This study aims to fill this scholarly lacuna.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes two foundational theories from sociology and social work:

Social Capital Theory: Specifically drawing upon Robert Putnam's (2000) concept of Bridging Social Capital. This concept explains the capacity of Buddhist nuns to connect financial resources from the middle and upper-middle classes and channel them to individuals at the bottom of the social hierarchy, predicated on religious and social trust.

Community-Based Social Work Approach: This approach is employed to assess the degree of social intervention by the Ni giới regarding capability-building, empowerment, and the long-term self-reliance of beneficiaries, shifting away from the traditional, patronizing model of charitable distribution.

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis Methods

This study adopts a rigorous qualitative research design:

Secondary Document Analysis: Systematizing annual review reports on socio-charitable works from the Central Ni giới Committee and the Executive Board of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) in HCMC for the 2020–2025 period.

In-depth Interviews: Conducted between late 2025 and early 2026 using purposive sampling with a sample size of N=8. The

informants include: 04 Buddhist nuns who serve as abbesses or directors of social protection centers/shelters/clinics in the peri-urban districts of HCMC (coded as NS1 to NS4); 04 benefactors in HCMC (coded as CG1 to CG4). Interview data were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Structural Classification of Socio-Charitable Models of the HCMC Nuns

Fieldwork data indicate that the operational network of the Ni giới in HCMC has achieved an organized form of structural specialization, shifting robustly toward the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through three strategic models:

3.1.1. Humanistic and Decentralized Social Protection Model (SDGs 1 & 10)

Surveys at shelters managed by the Ni giới (such as the Tu Hanh Pagoda Shelter and Dieu Phap Shelter) reveal a governance mechanism distinct from public institutional systems. These facilities do not operate under administrative or bureaucratic mindsets; instead, they are structured as a "Spiritual Family." Beneficiaries (orphans, abandoned infants, and the solitary elderly) are divided into small cohorts living in spaces that replicate a domestic household, where nuns assume the roles of mothers and older sisters providing direct care.

This system effectively mitigates the profound psychological trauma experienced by orphaned children. In-depth interview data from NS1 indicate: "We do not raise children according to a refugee camp formula. We arrange small group living quarters with a permanently assigned nun in charge to ensure continuous psychological development. The children call the nuns 'mother,' which establishes a firm emotional anchor so they do not internalize social stigma."

3.1.2. Integrated Healthcare and Community Nutrition Model (SDG 3)

This model is operationalized through a network of free traditional medicine clinics integrated within monasteries. Of particular note is the professional standardization of this model;

the nuns no longer treat illnesses based purely on folk experience. Instead, they directly enroll in formal training programs, earning certifications as traditional herbalists or traditional medicine physicians issued by state regulatory agencies.

Additionally, the "Charity Kitchen" model at major public hospitals (such as the Oncology Hospital and Cho Ray Hospital) functions as a social logistics system. During periods of cost-of-living crises, these kitchens provide thousands of nutritionally balanced meals daily, directly alleviating the financial burden of treatment for impoverished patients and their families arriving from rural provinces.

3.1.3. Alternative Education and Cognitive Therapy Model (SDG 4)

In peri-urban areas concentrated with informal migrant workers (such as Binh Tan District and Binh Chanh District), the Ni giới establishes informal charity classes to resolve the educational exclusion of children who lack legal documentation (e.g., household registration or birth certificates). The humanistic innovation of this model lies in integrating applied ethics and mindfulness techniques into the basic literacy curriculum. This cognitive therapy helps students regulate violent tendencies and substantially reduces delinquent behaviors in complex urban environments.

3.2. Mapping Operational Models to Sustainable Development Outcomes

Typology of Model Addressed	Target Core Operational Mechanism	SDGs
Financial Sourcing	Social Protection	SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities)
Spiritual family structure; personalized and emotional caregiving.		85% from public donations; 15% self-sustained via monastic economic activities.

Community Healthcare	SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being)
Integrated traditional medicine; formalized professional licensing. Contributions from benefactors and private herbal medicine funds.	

Alternative Education	SDG 4 (Quality Education)
Basic literacy integrated with applied cognitive and mindfulness therapy.	

Socialization; collaboration with public universities and volunteers.

IV. THEORETICAL ANALYSIS: THE INTERSECTION OF SSH AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Through the theoretical lens of SSH, the charitable activities of the Ni giới are not merely religious phenomena but represent the active operationalization of humanistic knowledge to resolve macro-level development challenges via three fundamental mechanisms:

4.1. The Operational Mechanism of "Spiritual Social Capital" (Sociological Perspective)

The study clarifies the manner in which the Ni giới converts intangible spiritual values into material welfare resources. The ethical prestige and ascetic lifestyle of the nuns cultivate a high level of social trust within the community. Expert CG2 observed: "In a context where certain public or civil charity funds have encountered transparency crises, the Ni giới maintains a remarkably stable stream of donations due to the self-imposed moral vows of monastic life. They act as a bridge, transferring cash flows from high-income urban strata directly to beneficiaries at the grassroots level without losses incurred by intermediary administrative apparatuses." This serves as a vivid manifestation of utilizing bridging social capital to mitigate economic inequality.

4.2. Restructuring the Urban Ethical Foundation (Ethical and Cultural Perspectives)

The sustainable development of a megacity like HCMC cannot be sustained solely through statutory and legal sanctions; it must rest upon an ethical consensus. The engaged behavior of the Ni giới—particularly in caring for groups often marginalized or avoided by society, such as terminally ill patients or children with cerebral palsy—functions as a visual cultural symbol. This imagery exerts a powerful impact on public psychology, awakening compassion, altruism, and a sense of communal responsibility among urban citizens. It acts as a social cohesive agent counteracting the hyper-individualistic and utilitarian trajectories of a market economy.

4.3. Shifting Interventions Toward a "Developmental Charity" Paradigm (Social Work Perspective)

A key finding of this research is the conceptual shift within the Ni giới's operational methodologies. To ensure long-term sustainability, monasteries have embedded short-term vocational training workshops (such as industrial garment manufacturing, artisanal candle making, and vegetarian food processing) directly within the organizational structure of their shelters.

This intervention aligns precisely with the core tenet of professional social work: helping people help themselves. By providing the tools for livelihood generation, the nuns transform passive aid recipients into agents capable of economic self-reliance, contributing directly to HCMC's sustainable poverty reduction targets.

V. SYSTEMIC LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES

Despite positive outcomes, the empirical analysis identifies major systemic bottlenecks that constrain the maximum efficacy of this model:

Institutional and Legal Misalignments: Currently, there is a lack of complete synchronization between the Law on Belief and Religion and specialized laws governing education and healthcare. The nursery schools and free clinics operated by the Ni giới frequently encounter administrative hurdles during formal licensing processes because the infrastructural and personnel criteria are designed for commercial or public state entities, lacking a specific, customized category for religious establishments.

Deficit in Professional Project Management Knowledge: While the nuns possess high altruistic motivation, the majority lack specialized skills inherent to modern social work, such as quantitative social impact assessment, financial risk management, and crisis communication. Consequently, certain models lapse into operational strain or reduced efficiency when scaling up.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

To optimize the contributions of the Ni giới to sustainable development strategies under

the guidance of SSH knowledge, this study proposes a three-tiered systemic solution:

6.1. Institutionalizing Partnership Mechanisms and Public Service Delegation

The HCMC municipal government should promptly institutionalize a "Social Public-Private Partnership" (SPPP) framework. The state should issue specific guidelines, streamline bureaucratic procedures, and implement policies to allocate state budgets or subventions on a per-capita-beneficiary basis to accredited religious social protection facilities, thereby decompressing the fiscal burden on the public sector.

6.2. Professionalizing Human Resources via Academic Alliances

Formal partnerships should be established between universities specializing in SSH (e.g., the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, VNU-HCM) and the Vietnam Buddhist Academy in HCMC. Academic institutions should proactively transfer knowledge by designing short-term certificate programs in Professional Social Work, Clinical Psychology, and Non-profit Organization Management tailored specifically for core monastic personnel.

6.3. Digitizing Governance and Enhancing Resource Transparency

The HCMC Ni giới Committee should be encouraged to build and adopt digital management platforms for personnel tracking, beneficiary archiving, and the financial disclosure of charitable inflows. Digitally verifying and transparently mapping fund allocations is the core solution required to safeguard the moral authority of the Ni giới, while simultaneously attracting funding and partnership opportunities from international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and development funds.

provides robust empirical evidence affirming that when religious moral values intersect with the methodologies and principles of SSH, they unlock a potent welfare resource for society. To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in a substantive manner, the national governance system must recognize and integrate this "spiritual social capital" as an organic, strategic component within the country's comprehensive social security matrix.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ban Ni giới Trung ương [The Central Buddhist Nuns Committee]. (2023). *Báo cáo tổng kết công tác Phật sự và hoạt động từ thiện xã hội giai đoạn 2018–2023 [Report on monastic affairs and socio-charitable activities for the 2018–2023 period]*. Giáo hội Phật giáo Việt Nam [Vietnam Buddhist Sangha].
- [2] Bourdieu, P. (1986). *The forms of capital*. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.
- [3] Lê, T. Đ. (2021). *Tôn giáo và an sinh xã hội ở Việt Nam hiện nay: Thực trạng và những vấn đề đặt ra [Religion and social security in Vietnam today: Current status and issues]*. Tạp chí Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo [Journal of Religious Studies], 198(6), 45–58.
- [4] Nguyễn, H. D. (2019). *Vai trò của các tổ chức tôn giáo trong việc xã hội hóa hoạt động y tế, giáo dục và bảo trợ xã hội ở Việt Nam [The role of religious organizations in socializing healthcare, education, and social protection activities in Vietnam]*. Nxb. Khoa học xã hội [Social Sciences Publishing House].
- [5] Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.
- [6] Trần, T. M. (2022). *Phát triển bền vững vùng đô thị lớn từ tiếp cận khoa học xã hội và nhân văn [Sustainable development of large urban areas from a social sciences and humanities approach]*. Tạp chí Khoa học Xã hội TP. Hồ Chí Minh [Ho Chi Minh City Journal of Social Sciences], 284(4), 12–23.

VII. CONCLUSION

The Social Sciences and Humanities are not scholastic theories confined to lecture halls; rather, they are the instrumental frameworks that shape humane and sustainable development trajectories. The case study of the HCMC Ni giới's socio-charitable activities