

# Vietnamese Citizen Participation in Local Governance

Tang Thi Thu Trang<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*Local governance is characterized by the interaction between government agencies and people in the local social management process, in which people are encouraged to actively play a part in government management activities as regulated by laws. This study addresses the people's rights to directly and indirectly participate in local governance activities in Vietnam. A survey of 360 people from 4 localities representing three regions of Vietnam, including Thai Binh province, Hung Yen province (Northern region), Quang Binh province (Central region), Ca Mau province (Southern region) was conducted to evaluate citizen participation in governance activities of commune-level authorities. The results show that the citizen participation in local governance activities do exist, but are limited to the direct participation. To some extent, the people also have rights to self-determine local issues on infrastructure construction and public welfare projects with their own contributions; however, their self-development of programs and projects and proposals to local authorities for implementation has not been clearly demonstrated. These findings suggest expanding the people's rights to participate in local governance activities as innovations for the improvement local governance effectiveness.*

**Keywords:** *Local governance; local authorities; the people's rights; Vietnam.*

## Introduction

Local authorities of Vietnam are statutorily divided into 3 levels: provincial level, district level, and commune level (VNA, 2013), including: 63 provincial authorities (provinces and municipal cities); 705 district-level authorities (districts, towns, provincial cities, cities of municipal cities); 10,599 commune-level authorities (communes, wards, commune - level towns) [GSO, 2023]. The state agencies at local level are the People's Council and the People's Committee, organized and operated in line with democratic principles with regulated – by - law authority, functions and responsibilities.

Local governance practices in Vietnam demonstrate the democratic nature in the organization and operations of local authorities. Accordingly, the people are encouraged to play a part in local governance activities in both direct and indirect forms prescribed by laws (VNA, 2015; VNA, 2022) and in accordance with political, cultural, ethnic features of the country and localities: Discuss and decide on certain self-governance tasks of the community; Give opinions and express wishes to the local authorities through elected representatives at voter contact conferences, etc.

However, in the trend of the civil society to expand, and the democratic nature in the organization and operations of local authorities needs to be promoted to adapt to the changing social context. People have a desire to participate more directly and practically in state governance activities to both increase supervision over government agencies, exercise democratic rights and ensure their interests. Therefore, research on the people's rights to participate in local governance activities is meaningful and always truly in need.

## Literature Review

The issue of local governance has been topic of much debate when it is compared with state management at the local level. Accordingly, state management involves the government agencies' implementation of social management tasks by the centralization of power and coercion by laws. Meanwhile, local governance involves self-management activities of local authorities with the participation of different entities (social organizations, businesses, citizens) in community affairs. According to Ngoc, D.B. (2013), local governance refers to the self-management activities of local authorities, including the adoption of regulations and procedures that allow people (organizations and individuals) to express their concerns and exercise their right to participate in local development. Sharing the same view, Cuong, N.V. (2015) emphasizes that local governance is concerned in terms of the people's active participation to contribute to the development of the local economy, culture, society; demonstrated in the fact that local authorities can mobilize different local resources to develop and maintain security and social order in the locality.

---

<sup>1</sup>Institute for State and Law, Ho Chi Minh National Political Academy, Vietnam; Email: [tranglaw80@gmail.com](mailto:tranglaw80@gmail.com).

From another perspective, Duc, L.A. (2016) believes that the democratization of management decision-making processes of government agencies attached with widespread participation of the people and different organizations clearly demonstrates the nature of local governance. Similarly, Phuong, N.T. (2018) affirms that local governance is implemented on the principle of self-governance; The people can, as regulated, decide for themselves the common affairs of the local community according to the principle of the common benefit of the state and the people. These research approaches clearly show the roles of local authorities and the people in social development management decisions at the local level towards the common benefits. Findings from the previous researches allow to develop the research scale of "Local Governance" (LG) that includes: Local authorities encourage the people's active participation in decisions on local social development governance (LG1); The people are given confidence to actively play a part in the decision-making process of local social development governance (LG2); Local management decisions and policies issued have a positive impact, ensuring the legitimate rights and interests of the people and promoting interaction between local authorities and the people in a democratic way (LG3).

Hence, it can be seen that in addition to state agencies' management as admitted, the people's active participation is the criterion for evaluating the effectiveness of local governance. The people's participation is understood as in direct and indirect form. According to Phuong, N.M. (2015) and Le, D.T. et al. (2023), in the form of direct participation, the people have the right to directly discuss and decide on self-governance tasks of the community; In the form of indirect participation, the people's opinions and recommendations are mainly synthesized by elected representatives and informed to representative agencies and state agencies for consideration and approval. This study brings discussion on local governance activities in Vietnam. Besides the reference to findings from previous researches, current Vietnamese legal provisions have been mainly employed to build the theoretical framework addressing on the people's participation in the operation of local authorities in the direct and indirect forms.

#### *a) The people's direct participation (DP)*

Vietnamese law stipulates that the people have the right to directly discuss and decide on self-governance tasks of local communities (VNA, 2015; VNA, 2022). Their direct participation is expressed in face - to - face discussion and decisions on village regulations and the organization of self-management apparatus in their locality (village)<sup>2</sup>; Firsthand decisions on the people's self-contributed funds; Giving direct opinions and recommendations to programs and projects related to local socio-economic development and implemented by local authorities<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, the people are encouraged to show initiatives, propose programs and projects for economic, cultural, and social development to foster considerations and approval in local authorities. However, it is necessary for local authorities to reach a consensus on this encouragement to promote local resources for socio-economic development.

Current legal regulations are summarized and expressed in the scale "The people's direct participation" (DP) in local governance activities as follows: The people can directly discuss and decide on village rules and regulations; directly elect, and dismiss the Village Head; directly elect and dismiss members of the People's Inspection Board and the Community Investment Supervision Board (DP1); The people can directly discuss and decide on policies and financial contributions made by themselves to build infrastructure and public welfare works within the commune and village (DP2); The people are allowed to directly give opinions and make recommendations on programs and projects related to local socio-economic development and implemented by local authorities (DP3); The people are encouraged by local authorities to show initiatives, propose programs, and projects related to economic, cultural, and social development for consideration and approval from local authorities (DP4).

#### *b) The people's indirect participation (IP)*

The people's indirect participation is regulated by law on the right to petition and report to government agencies through voter contact conferences and suggestion box (VNA, 2015; VNA, 2022). Accordingly,

<sup>2</sup> Discussion and decisions are made under government supervision; If more than 50% of the total number of voters or voters representing households in the village or the commune agree, the decisions will be made and valid for implementation.

<sup>3</sup> Programs and projects announced and implemented publicly by local authorities include: Socio-economic development plans in the commune; Plans for implementing programs and projects in the commune; Projects for new establishment, merger, division of commune administrative units, adjustment of commune administrative boundaries; Land use plans in the commune and other issues related to community interests.

commune-level authorities organize annual voter contact conferences for elected representatives to listen to the people's opinions and wishes; The conference is held before and after the meeting of the People's Council - the local elected body, so that the elected representatives can synthesize, consider and report to the People's Council, as well as inform voters about conclusions at the People's Council meeting. Along with organizing voter contact conferences, local authorities place suggestion boxes at the headquarters and check every week to collect opinions from the people. The ones in charge of administrative work of local authorities and the representatives of the Local People's Inspection Board weekly open the suggestion box, synthesize and propose appropriate solutions to the people's inquiries, report to local authority leaders for consideration and approval, then response to the people.

Current legal regulations are summarized and expressed in the scale "The people's indirect participation" (IP) in local governance activities as follows: The people are allowed to express their wishes and opinions to elected representatives through annual voter contact conferences before and after the People's Council meeting (IP1); The people receive responses to their inquiries and wishes through voter contact conferences before and after the annual People's Council meeting (IP2); People have rights to express their inquiries and wishes and get responses under the supervision by the Local People's Inspection Board (IP3).

When local authorities attract the proactive participation of the people, local governance activities will achieve positive results; The interaction between the local authorities and the people is increased and maintained at a regular pace. In other words, the proactive participation of the people, encouraged by the local authorities with a mechanism to ensure implementation, will become a factor that positively influences the local governance effectiveness. Based on the preceding researches, this study has developed the theoretical framework with a research model consisting of 3 scales: 02 scales - independent variables, including "The people's direct participation" (DP) and "The people's indirect participation" (IP); 01 scale - dependent variable "Local governance" (LG). The above scales include 10 observed variables, designed into 9 questions in the survey questionnaire and measured with a 5-level Likert scale: 1 - Strongly disagree; 2 - Disagree; 3 - No opinion; 4 - Agree; 5 - Strongly agree (Table 1, Figure 1).

**Table 1.** Theoretical framework.

No	Scales	Code	5-level Likert scale				
			1	2	3	4	5
<b>I</b>	<b>The people's direct participation</b>	<b>DP</b>					
1	The people can directly discuss and decide on village rules and regulations; directly elect, and dismiss the Village Head; directly elect and dismiss members of the People's Inspection Board and the Community Investment Supervision Board.	DP1					
2	The people can directly discuss and decide on policies and financial contributions made by themselves to build infrastructure and public welfare works within the commune and village.	DP2					
3	The people are allowed to directly give opinions and make recommendations on programs and projects related to local socio-economic development and implemented by local authorities.	DP3					
4	The people are encouraged by local authorities to show initiatives, propose programs, and projects related to economic, cultural, and social development for consideration and approval from local authorities.	DP4					
<b>II</b>	<b>The people's indirect participation</b>	<b>IP</b>					
5	The people are allowed to express their wishes and opinions to elected representatives through annual voter contact conferences before and after the People's Council meeting.	IP1					
6	The people receive responses to their inquiries and wishes through voter contact conferences before and after the annual People's Council meeting.	IP2					
7	People have rights to express their inquiries and wishes and get responses under the supervision by the Local People's Inspection Board.	IP3					
<b>III</b>	<b>Local Governance</b>	<b>LG</b>					

8	Local authorities encourage the people's active participation in decisions on local social development governance.	LG1					
9	The people are given confidence to actively play a part in the decision-making process of local social development governance.	LG2					
10	Local management decisions and policies issued have a positive impact, ensuring the legitimate rights and interests of the people and promoting interaction between local authorities and the people in a democratic way.	LG3					

Source: Synthesized through literature review.

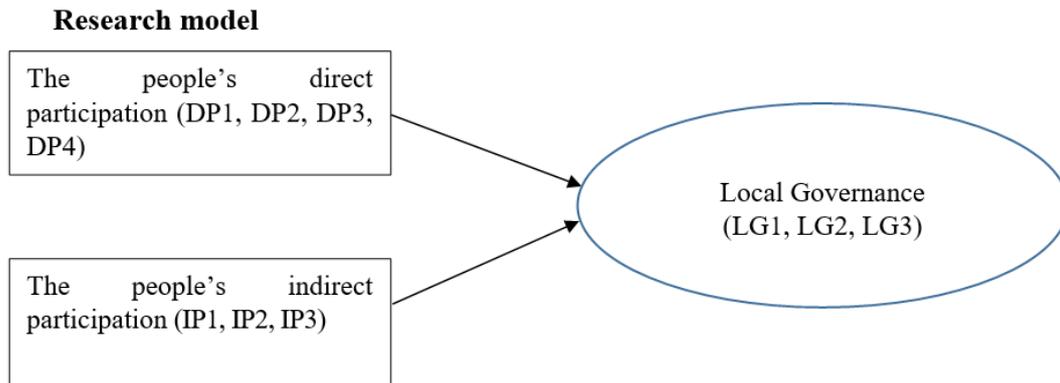


Figure 1. Research model.

## Methodology

Qualitative methods (collect and analyze secondary data), quantitative methods (collect and analyze primary data) are used in this study to approach and implement the research issue. Collecting and analyzing secondary data are carried out with published documents; Collecting and analyzing primary data are performed through the survey of opinions from 360 people. For the survey to collect primary data, there are two steps: preliminary survey and official survey.

### a) Preliminary survey

Based on the theoretical research framework and the three-scale research model including 02 independent variables and 01 dependent variable with a total of 10 observed variables, a survey with 10 questions as 10 observed variables is designed; the observed variables are measured with a 5-level Likert scale (Table 1). According to Hair, J.F. et al (2009), the minimum sample size needed for regression analysis in this case is  $N = 10 * 5 = 50$ . In fact, a sample size of  $N = 360 > 50$  is performed, showing the high reliability when the survey is conducted.

After the survey questionnaires are completed, the preliminary survey is carried out in Thai Binh province with a sample size of  $N = 90$  people. The preliminary survey results in Thai Binh province show that the measurement scales and observed variables are reliable enough to be used in official surveys on a wider scale.

### b) Official survey

The official survey is conducted in four localities representing three regions of Vietnam, including Thai Binh province, Hung Yen province (Northern region), Quang Binh province (Central region), Ca Mau province (Southern region). The selectively determined participants include 360 people who graduated from high school education or higher and within the last 3 years had at least 3 transactions of administrative records and interactions with local authorities at commune – level.

The preliminary interviews are performed to collect information about the standards of the surveyed people and survey forms are distributed on the basis of the participants' willingness to answer. The survey results receive 360/360 valid votes, achieving a 100% response rate. With the collected data, scale testing and regression analysis continue to be performed to test the relationship of the scales and draw research conclusions.

## Findings

### a) Reliability of research scale

On the basis of the theoretical framework, the survey is conducted with 360 people living and working in 4 localities representing three regions of Vietnam, including Thai Binh province, Hung Yen province (Northern region), Thai Binh province (Northern province), Thai Binh province Quang Binh (Central region), Ca Mau province (Southern region).

The data collected from the survey allow Cronbach' Alpha test to be conducted to identify the reliability of the scales and observed variables in the research model. According to Hair, J.F. et al (2009), the scales are reliable when they meet the Cronbach' alpha standard  $> 0.6$ ; Observed variables are reliable when they meet the standard condition of Corrected Item-Total Correlation  $> 0.3$ . The test results show that all 3 scales and 10 observed variables in the research model are reliable for further analysis [Table 2].

**Table 2.** Statistical results and testing results of the scales.

Scales	Observed variables	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach' Alpha	Corrected Item-Total Correlation
1. The people's direct participation (DP)	DP1	360	3	5	4.23	.612	.602	DP1 = .467
	DP2	360	3	5	4.18	.622		DP2 = .446
	DP3	360	2	5	3.71	.641		DP3 = .422
	DP4	360	1	5	3.23	.697		DP4 = .334
2. The people's indirect participation (IP)	IP1	360	3	5	4.38	.601	.636	IP1 = .501
	IP2	360	3	5	4.33	.593		IP2 = .526
	IP3	360	2	5	3.86	.578		IP3 = .479
3. Local Governance (LG)	LG1	360	1	5	3.93	.624	.644	LG1 = .495
	LG2	360	2	5	3.61	.628		LG2 = .504
	LG3	360	1	5	3.77	.635		LG3 = .511
Valid N (listwise)		360						

**Source:** Authors' survey results.

Data in Table 2 shows:

+ Observations on the scale "The people's direct participation" (DP), "The people's indirect participation" (IP), "Local governance" (LG) are all evaluated on average Mean  $> 3.23$ , statistically significant according to the defined Likert scale (1-5).

+ However, the observed variables of the scale "The people's direct participation" (DP) are evaluated at a lower level than "The people's indirect participation" (IP): Mean (DP1) = 4.23, Mean (DP2) = 4.18, Mean (DP3) = 3.71, Mean (DP4) = 3.23, showing that the people rarely have direct participation in local governance activities. Of these figures, the lowest is Mean (DP4) = 3.23, which confirms that the people are rarely encouraged to proactively propose initiatives, programs, and projects for economic, cultural, and social development to local authorities for consideration and approval.

The data shown in Table 2 reveal the people's participation in local governance activities in Vietnam. Accordingly, the people's participation in local governance activities do exist, but are limited to the direct participation; The people's interaction with government agencies is almost in the indirect forms through elected representatives at voter contact conferences or through the people's inspection boards, etc.

### b) Multivariate regression analysis

With the scale test value and observed variables meeting the standards (Cronbach' alpha  $> 0.6$ ; Corrected Item-Total Correlation  $> 0.3$ ) [Table 2], the regression analysis are performed to examine the relationship of independent variables "The people's direct participation" (DP), "The people's direct participation" (IP) with dependent variable "Local governance" (LG) [Table 3].

**Table 3.** Multivariate regression results

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>	
---------------------------	--

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	VIF
		B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	.615	.337		3.216	.000	
	The people's direct participation (DP)	.452	.221	.431	3.892	.000	1.715
	The people's indirect participation (IP)	.548	.203	.498	7.041	.000	1.715

a. Dependent Variable: Local Governance (LG)

R Square = .664; Durbin-Watson = 2.101

Source: Authors' survey results.

Data in Table 3 shows:

+ R Square = .664, confirming that the scales "The people's direct participation" (DP), "The people's direct participation" (IP) explain 66.4% of the variation of the scale "Local Governance" (LG);

+ VIF = 1.715 ( $1 < VIF < 2$ ), showing that the regression model does not have multicollinearity; Durbin-Watson = 2.101 ( $1 < d < 3$ ), showing that the regression model has no autocorrelation phenomenon, confirming the scales "The people's direct participation" (DP), "The people's direct participation" (IP) are independent and both have influences on the scale of "Local Governance" (LG).

+ The regression coefficients of the two independent variables "The people's direct participation" (DP), "The people's direct participation" (IP) are both statistically significant with Sig. = 0.000 (Sig. < 0.05) and has a positive value: B (DP) = 0.452, B (IP) = 0.548, confirming the positive relationship between the two independent variables "The people's direct participation" (DP), "The people's direct participation" (IP) and 01 dependent variable "Local governance" (LG).

On the basis of the generalized regression model  $Y = B_0 + B_1 \cdot X_1 + B_2 \cdot X_2 + \dots + B_i \cdot X_i$  (Hair, J.F. et al., 2009), the multivariate regression model of the study can be determined as:  $LG = 0.615 + 0.452 \cdot DP + 0.548 \cdot IP$ .

In the above regression model, the regression coefficient shows the degree of correlation of the independent variables and the dependent variable in ascending order: "The people's direct participation" (DP), "The people's direct participation" (IP).

## Conclusion

With the results of statistical analysis (Table 2) and regression analysis (Table 3), the research conclusions are drawn, which are: The people's participation in local governance activities do exist, but are limited to the direct participation; To some extent, the people also have rights to self-determine local issues mainly on infrastructure construction and public welfare projects with their own contributions; however, their self-development of programs and projects and proposals to local authorities for implementation has not been clearly demonstrated.

In fact, there are other community development issues, which are directly related to the people's rights and interests, need to be discussed and decided directly by themselves. If so, it can be beneficial for both the people and local authorities. These issues normally refer to production and business activities associated with community connections and indigenous culture (community tourism, traditional handicraft products, etc.). The findings suggest innovations related to promoting the people's ownership rights: Expanding the people's rights to participate in local governance activities. In terms of goals and content, it can be specifically explained:

- Firstly, expanding the people's rights to participate in local governance activities aims to promote local democracy: It not only promotes the people's right to mastery, but also helps local authorities mobilize different resources to serve strategies and plans of local economic, cultural and social development

- Secondly, expanding the people's rights to participate in local governance activities should be in the direction of: (1) Encouraging the people to propose initiatives, programs and projects for local

development; Promoting the right to request or put pressure on local authorities to consider and implement the initiatives, programs and projects to serve the common interests; (2) Requiring research competence and accountability from local authorities in receiving and implementing local development initiatives, programs and projects proposed by the people.

When people are encouraged to participate in local governance activities in an extensive and substantive way, they will pay more attention to local authorities' management activities. Along with local authorities, the people will actively contribute to local development. As a result, local authorities will be able to mobilize different resources for local development; maintain regular interaction with the people, which is essential to develop local authorities close to the people and serving the people.

## References

1. Duc, L.A. (2016). "Local governance: Theory and conditions for implementation". *Proceedings of the International Conference on Local Governance: The reasoning and practice of France and Vietnam*. Hanoi University of Home Affairs, Vietnam.
2. GSO - General Statistics Office (2024). *Administrative Unit*. General Statistics Office Website, address <https://www.gso.gov.vn/phuong-phap-thong-ke/danh-muc/don-vi-hanh-chinh/>
3. Hair, J.F.; Black, W.C.; Babin, B.J.; Anderson, R.E. (2009). *Multivariate Data Analysis*, 7th Edition. Prentice Hall.
4. Cuong, N.V. (2015). *International experience on local self-governance and its applicability in Vietnam*. Judicial Publisher.
5. Le, D.T.; Trung, N.S.; Dien, B.X. (2023). "Citizens' rights to participate in state management in localities in Vietnam". *Russian Law Journal*, Vol.11, No.3, address <https://www.russianlawjournal.org/index.php/journal/article/view/955>
6. Ngoc, D.B. (2013). "The Local Governance Model of Some European Countries". *Journal of European Studies*, issue 159.
7. Phuong, N.T. (2018). *Local governance: From theory to practice*. Social Science Publisher.
8. Phuong, N.M. (2015). *Management and social development of grassroots governments in some countries around the world*. Labor - Social Publisher.
9. VNA - Vietnam National Assembly (2015). *Law on Organization of Local Government, No. 77/2015/QH13*. National Political Publisher.
10. VNA - Vietnam National Assembly (2022). *Law on the implementation of democracy at the grassroots level, No. 10/2022/QH15*.