

## Research on Vietnamese Local Governance

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### Abstract

*One of the characteristics of local governance is the interaction between government agencies and people in the process of social development governance. Accordingly, people want to participate more in government governance activities; the government mobilizes people's participation to effectively promote local resources to serve development strategies. This study analyzes the characteristics of local governance in terms of people's participation; analyzes the practice of people's participation in local governance activities in Vietnam. The author conducted a survey of 300 people from 3 localities representing 3 regions of Vietnam, including Thai Nguyen province (North), Quang Nam province (Central), Ben Tre province (South) to collect information and analyze, evaluate the practice of people's participation in social development governance activities of local government agencies. The survey results have helped the author to assess the reality and have a basis to conclude that: People participate directly and indirectly in local governance activities, but are limited in the level of direct participation. From this research result, the author discusses the research problem, which is to expand the rights of people to participate in local governance activities.*

**Keywords:** *Governance; State governance; Local governance; Vietnam.*

### Introduction

The Vietnamese local government is regulated by law to have 3 levels: provincial level (63 provincial governments), district level (705 district governments) and commune level (10,599 commune governments) (GSO, 2023). The government agencies at each level include: People's Council (a body elected by voters to establish) and People's Committee (a state administrative agency, established by the People's Council), organized in a democratic manner according to law with a term of 5 years (VNA, 2015).

Local governance activities in Vietnam demonstrate democratic nature with people's participation: People are mobilized to participate in local government governance activities in both direct and indirect forms according to the law (VNA, 2022). The civil society context tends to increase democracy; people want to participate more directly and more substantially in local governance activities to both increase supervision of government agencies and exercise democratic rights and ensure their interests. This is an issue that the author is interested in when conducting this research.

#### *Theory of local governance*

The term “governance” refers to management and operation activities in organizations, including both public and private organizations; it is what the management apparatus of an organization must do to achieve the set goals. For the state, the term “state governance” has also been formed and used flexibly with the term “state management” to both achieve the goal of social management by state power and achieve the management and operation goals of each state agency associated with specific regular/annual goals; in fact, the term “governance” applied to the management of state organizations is a new approach, from the perspective of how to carry out management activities. State governance is associated with the decentralization process in many countries around the world, thereby building a government closer to the people, creating conditions for people to participate more in government work, enhancing the responsibility of the government in issuing and implementing policies. It can also be understood that state governance implies the content focusing on the autonomy of the government and the participation of many civil subjects (social organizations, businesses, people) in social development management work. Therefore, it has similarities with state management in terms of function, but there are differences in the way management activities are carried out; not only belonging to the government apparatus but also to the community in general and the interactions between the community and government agencies.

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Giao, V.C. et al. (2017) defines governance as a set of values, policies and institutions through which a society manages its economic, political and social affairs through the relationship between government, civil society organisations and the private sector. It is the way in which society makes and implements decisions, reaches understanding, agreements and acts; including mechanisms and processes for citizens and society to achieve benefits, settle differences and exercise their legal rights and responsibilities. Following a similar approach, Cuong, N.V. (2015) and Hai, D.P. (2019) define governance as the way the state governs and operates, in which power is used to manage economic and social resources for development (an environment where citizens and state agencies can connect with each other). According to Chien, N.B. (2021), good governance is closely related to the political regime; the process of using power to manage resources for development; the government's capacity to design, plan and implement public policies and its main functions. According to the above researchers, governance is classified into central-level governance and local-level governance (collectively referred to as local governance); including 3 typical characteristics: (1) Accountability (Civil servants are responsible for reporting to the people on issues within their scope of management and administration); (2) Transparency (transparency so that people can access state activities in the easiest and least costly way; (3) People's participation in government governance activities.

Among the above characteristics of local governance, the characteristic of “People’s participation in government administration” is more prominent and prominent than that of local-level state management. Many research documents on administrative reform published by international organizations such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the World Bank (WB)... state governance and local governance are linked to activities aimed at changing the way of operating in state management to effectively use national and local resources, with special emphasis on people’s participation in government activities. Therefore, in this study, the author chooses the content of “People’s participation in government administration” when studying local governance in Vietnam.

In theory and practice, people's participation in government administration is expressed in the form of direct participation and indirect participation. According to Phuong, N.T. (2018) and Trang, T.T.T (2024), the form of direct participation (DP) of people in Vietnam is expressed in the following aspects: People are directly discussed and decide on policies and levels of contributions to build infrastructure and public welfare works within the commune and village levels with people's contributions (DP1); People are directly involved in giving opinions on programs and projects related to local socio-economic development announced and implemented by the government (DP2); People are encouraged by the government to proactively propose initiatives, programs and projects for economic, cultural and social development for the government to study and implement (DP3). In the form indirect participation (IP), Trang, T.T.T (2024) emphasized three contents: People are reflected on their aspirations and give opinions to elected representatives periodically every year through voter contact conferences before and after the People's Council session (IP1); People are answered about their reflections and aspirations through voter contact conferences before and after the People's Council session periodically every year (IP2); People are reflected and answered about their reflections and aspirations through the monitoring mechanism of the local People's Inspection Committee (IP3).

The author inherits and develops the research contents of Phuong, N.T. (2018) and Trang, T.T.T (2024) to build a theoretical framework for research and survey to achieve this research objective. The theoretical framework includes 6 contents of people's participation in local governance activities, which the author designed into 6 questions in the survey complaint form and measured by a 5-level Likert scale: 1 - Strongly disagree; 2 - Disagree; 3 - No opinion; 4 - Agree; 5 - Strongly agree (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Theoretical framework for research on people's participation in local governance activities

No	Scales	Code	5-level Likert scale				
			1	2	3	4	5
<b>I</b>	<b>People directly participating in local governance activities</b>	<b>DP</b>					
1	People are directly discussed and decide on policies and levels of contributions to build infrastructure and public	DP1					

	welfare works within the commune and village levels with people's contributions.						
2	People are directly involved in giving opinions on programs and projects related to local socio-economic development announced and implemented by the government.	DP2					
3	People are encouraged by the government to proactively propose initiatives, programs and projects for economic, cultural and social development for the government to study and implement.	DP3					
<b>II</b>	<b>People indirectly participating in local governance activities</b>	<b>IP</b>					
4	People are reflected on their aspirations and give opinions to elected representatives periodically every year through voter contact conferences before and after the People's Council session.	IP1					
5	People are answered about their reflections and aspirations through voter contact conferences before and after the People's Council session periodically every year.	IP2					
6	People are reflected and answered about their reflections and aspirations through the monitoring mechanism of the local People's Inspection Committee.	IP3					

Source: Synthesized through literature review

Active and substantive participation of the people will contribute to improving the quality of planning and implementation of local plans, because participants have an understanding of the specific conditions of the locality, making the plan highly adaptable to reality, with a greater chance of success; creating a basis for encouraging financial resources from the community, encouraging material and labor contributions. At the same time, such participation will minimize barriers between the government and the people, receive useful feedback from users of public services, and avoid negative consequences due to not consulting with service beneficiaries. Regular and active participation of the people will form a partnership in local governance; form common initiatives between the government and the people, and create opportunities for this partnership to develop through a monitoring mechanism to prevent manipulation by interest groups. Through this relationship, trust for local actors is established and developed sustainably, breaking down many barriers for the government in local development governance.

On the other hand, local governance will be effective if the actors are trained to develop their governance capacity and have political commitment and support, which becomes a political culture in local governance. When people believe that local officials and leaders are willing to provide information, listen and negotiate together, they will be encouraged to actively participate in local affairs; at the same time, based on the responsibility of the parties to ensure that beneficiaries contribute to the effectiveness of governance. With active cooperation, participation will increase in a form of effect, the private sector will be able to invest from a good social image and the ability to support workers. Government agencies will gain the trust of the people and benefit from the social mobilization for public goods such as health, education and the expansion of services into other areas. Collaboration will promote voluntary civic effort and responsibility, creating consensus in local policy implementation.

#### *Practice of people's participation in local governance in Vietnam and research discussion issues*

Local governance is linked to local affairs and the interests of local people, because local governments are established by local people and depend on their choices. That is the basis for true local democracy, independent of the government. At the same time, this is a way for people to participate in local political life voluntarily without needing to be mobilized. Therefore, local governments must respect and truly care about the people in a substantive and responsible manner. And so, the governance process needs to be

based on local characteristics, resources and the needs of local people to build strategic plans for the locality. Local governance practices in Vietnam show that attracting people's participation in government management activities is often carried out in both direct and indirect forms, in accordance with the political, cultural and ethnic characteristics of the country and localities. People's participation in government activities is regulated by law, specifically:

- Form of direct participation. Vietnamese law (VNA, 2013) stipulates that people have the right to directly participate in discussing and deciding on the self-management tasks of the residential community. That is, directly discussing and deciding on policies and levels of contributions to build infrastructure and public welfare works within the commune and village levels, funded by people's contributions. The meetings and decisions are conducted under the supervision of the government; if more than 50% of the total number of voters or voters representing households in the village or in the entire commune agree, the discussion content is decided and has enforceable value. The meetings and decisions are conducted under the supervision of the government; if more than 50% of the total number of voters or voters representing households in the village or in the entire commune agree, the discussion content is decided and has enforceable value. Along with these powers, the law also allows people to directly contribute their opinions on programs and projects related to the socio-economic development of the locality; this is announced and implemented by the government. Programs and projects include: Socio-economic development plan of the commune; plan to implement programs and projects in the commune; project to establish new, merge, divide commune administrative units, adjust commune administrative boundaries; planning, land use plan of the commune.

Although people are allowed to participate in deciding local issues, the content of people's self-determination is limited, limited to self-determination of infrastructure, public welfare works funded by people themselves; self-determination of village conventions and regulations and village self-management apparatus. People are allowed to contribute opinions on programs and projects developed by government agencies; self-development of programs and projects related to local socio-economic development and proposals for government research and implementation have not been clearly demonstrated. In reality, in the community, there are many other issues that need to be discussed and decided directly by people, such as: Production and business activities associated with community connection and indigenous culture of local people. These issues are directly related to the economic, cultural and social life of local communities.

- Indirect participation. People indirectly participate in local state administrative management activities through recommendations and feedback to government agencies through voter contact conferences. With the form of voter contact conferences, commune-level authorities organize annual voter contact conferences (before and after the People's Council session), People's Council delegates listen to people's feedback and synthesize, research, and report to the People's Council; the subsequent implementation is the responsibility of the state administrative agency - the People's Committee (VNA, 2015; VNA, 2022).

It can be seen that the practice of local governance in Vietnam shows both advantages and limitations in terms of local people's participation in government activities. Although people are directly involved in local government management activities; direct democracy and interaction between the government and the people are demonstrated, which are meaningful contents for building a rule-of-law state. However, people are allowed to decide on local development management tasks on a narrow scale: Self-determination on infrastructure construction, public welfare works contributed by themselves; self-development of programs, projects and proposals for government research and implementation have not been clearly demonstrated. This is also an issue that needs to be further researched and innovated to promote deep and wide participation of people in local activities; helping local governments mobilize more local resources for socio-economic development.

The author's survey results with the responses of 300 people also show specific values, which are statistically summarized in Table 2 below.

**Table 2.** Statistics of people's opinions on local governance participation in Vietnam

Scales	Observed variables	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. People directly participating in local governance activities (DP)	DP1	300	2	5	4.08	.643
	DP2	300	2	5	3.82	.642
	DP3	300	1	5	3.31	.678
2. People indirectly participating in local governance activities (IP)	IP1	300	2	5	4.38	.601
	IP2	300	2	5	4.33	.593
	IP3	300	2	5	3.86	.578
Valid N (listwise)		300				

Source: Authors' survey results

Data in Table 2 shows that observations on the scale "People directly participating in local governance activities" (DP), "People indirectly participating in local governance activities" (IP) are both rated at an average level of Mean > 3.31, statistically significant according to the determined Likert scale (1-5). However, the observed variables of the scale "People directly participate in local governance activities" (DP) are rated at a lower level than the scale "People indirectly participating in local governance activities" (IP): Mean (DP1) = 4.08, Mean (DP2) = 3.82, Mean (DP3) = 3.31, indicating that people are less directly involved in local governance activities. In which, the lowest is Mean (DP3) = 3.31, affirming that the government rarely encourages people to proactively propose initiatives, programs, and projects for economic, cultural, and social development for the government to research and implement.

The above statistical and summary data (Table 2) contribute to reflecting the current situation of people's participation in local governance activities in Vietnam. This survey result is also similar to the rights of people as prescribed by law when participating in local governance activities. Accordingly, people have limited rights to directly participate in the management activities of local government agencies; people's interaction with government agencies is mostly carried out indirectly, through elected representatives at voter contact conferences.

In fact, there are many other community development issues that need to be discussed and decided directly by the people, because these are issues directly related to their rights and interests and if implemented well, they will benefit both the people and the local government. These are production and business activities associated with community connection and indigenous culture (community tourism, traditional handicraft products, etc.). From that research practice, the author discusses the content related to promoting people's mastery: Expanding people's rights to participate in local governance activities. This discussion issue is explained as follows:

- Firstly, in terms of theory, the interaction between the government and the people in local governance activities is a basic condition for building self-governing government, as mentioned by many researchers (Cuong, N.V., 2015). Expanding the rights of people to participate in local governance activities will both promote the people's mastery and help government agencies mobilize more resources to serve the strategies and plans for local economic, cultural and social development.

- Second, from a legal perspective, the interaction between the government and the people in local governance activities is an issue related to the political system established by the Vietnamese Constitution (VNA, 2013). Accordingly, citizens have the right to participate in government management activities and government agencies are responsible for ensuring citizens' rights: "The State ensures and promotes the people's right to mastery; recognizes, respects, protects and ensures human rights and civil rights; realizes the goal of a rich people, a strong country, democracy, fairness, civilization, everyone has a prosperous, free, happy life, and has conditions for comprehensive development".



- Third, in terms of practical implementation, the expansion of people's rights to participate in local governance activities should be directed towards establishing a mechanism to encourage people to propose to the government initiatives, programs, and local development projects. At the same time, establish a mechanism on the right to propose or put pressure on local governments to research and implement in order to serve the common interest; establish a regime of responsibility for research and accountability of local governments in receiving and implementing initiatives, programs, and local development projects proposed by people.

The issues discussed above are very meaningful, because when people are encouraged to participate in local governance activities in a deep and substantial way, they will pay more attention to the management activities of the government; they will proactively and actively contribute to the government to develop the locality. That helps the government mobilize many resources for development. And the regular interaction between people and the government will be the condition for building a government close to the people, serving the people, creating the ability to effectively use resources and supporting local socio-economic development. Because local socio-economic development is the activities carried out by local governance entities, including local governments and civil entities (social organizations, businesses, people, etc.) to eliminate legal barriers and transaction costs for local civil entities; increase competitiveness, create development advantages for the locality. When planning socio-economic development, local authorities often rely on a number of basic bases such as: functions, tasks, powers, and regulations on authority and scope of activities; requirements from local practices; based on socio-economic forecast results to determine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges of the locality; based on the resources of the government and social entities in the locality. When these issues are resolved, it will have a positive impact on local socio-economic development. The participation of people as subjects of local governance will encourage the spirit of voluntary participation and implementation of local socio-economic development plans; is an important basis for promoting the combined strength of local authorities, thereby contributing to enhancing the prestige and image of the locality.

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