Between Trust and Structure: Citizen Participation and Local Elections in Viet Nam

The series of *Policy Discussion Papers* on *Public Administration Reform and Anti-Corruption* is led and edited by Dr Sarah Dix, Policy Advisor on Public Administration Reform and Anti-Corruption at UNDP Viet Nam with substantive support from Ms Do Thanh Huyen, Policy Analyst on Public Administration Reform and Anti-Corruption at UNDP Viet Nam.

The series aims to analyze trends in Viet Nam regarding the implementation processes and options in specific public administration reform areas. In order to confront the social, economic, political and environmental challenges facing Viet Nam, policy makers need to be informed by evidence. These policy papers aim to contribute to current policy debate by providing discussion inputs on policy reforms – thereby helping to improve Viet Nam's development efforts.

Three principles guide the production of the policy discussion papers: (i) evidence-based research, (ii) academic rigour and independence of analysis, and (iii) social legitimacy and a participatory process. This involves a substantive research approach with a rigorous and systematic identification of policy options on key public administration reform and anti-corruption issues.

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Executive Summary and Policy Recommendations

As human and economic development in Viet Nam has increased over the nearly three decades of *Đổi mới* ('Renewal'), people's expectations of governance are also changing. Viet Nam's Constitution and political structure offer opportunities for citizens to participate in governance both directly (through in-person engagement at the local level) and indirectly (through voting for People's Council and National Assembly delegates). These forms of participation can be summarised in the two familiar slogans of 'People know, people discuss, people do, and people monitor', and 'Government of the people, by the people, and for the people'. Yet the implementation of legal rights to participation often lags behind the letter of the law. How can citizens be more actively involved in public decision making?

This research report is the result of collaboration between the international non-governmental organisation, Oxfam and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to examine and analyse citizen participation in policy-making processes and political life. It forms part of a series of UNDP-commissioned studies on Viet Nam's governance and public administration performance conceived on the basis of the wealth of data and information provided by the Viet Nam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI). The report employs an innovative combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis to compare citizen participation at the national level with in-depth conditions in local communities.

Research into citizen participation in governance and public administration issues is of particular importance at this time considering that in 2016, the Communist Party of Viet Nam will hold its five-year Congress and elections will be held for a new National Assembly for the period 2016-2021. With these upcoming events in mind, the report provides insights into people's understanding and perceptions of local governance and suggests potential policy responses to address matters of concern surrounding direct and indirect participation.

Vietnamese citizens participate in a wide array of mass organisations and informal social groups at the grassroots level. PAPI survey data indicates that associational membership may be increasing nationwide over the last several years. Qualitative research results offer a more nuanced picture, in which membership is strong in some locations and among some citizens whilst remaining weaker for others. Participation in associations, however, does not necessarily equate to active involvement in socio-economic development, such as land use, development planning, or budget monitoring. Meanwhile, citizen monitoring of local government performance through vertical accountability structures forms the lowest performing area of direct participation, with People's Inspection Boards (PIBs) and Community Investment Supervision Boards (CISBs) often not functioning as designed. Regardless, each of the research locations visited exemplified certain positive governance practices to be recognised and highlighted.

Regarding elections, the report notes discrepancies between the very high nationally reported turnout and PAPI data on election participation. It is argued that a large portion of this gap can be explained by the prevalence of proxy voting by family members, which is legal in village elections and overwhelmingly acts to disenfranchise women. Constitutional guarantees of election quality are realised in National Assembly and People's Council elections more than in village head elections, and more consistently in some locations than others. In addition to women who do not vote in person, youth and

migrants are under-represented in local elections, which often do not meet Viet Nam's own standards for equality and secrecy. For voters, education level and trust or confidence are the most important characteristics in choosing elected representatives, rather than policy positions.

The Viet Nam Fatherland Front, a leading socio-political organisation, is responsible for organising elections, including selecting and nominating candidates who are placed on the ballot. Although the number of candidates usually exceeds the available positions, elections are structured so that few nominated candidates actually lose. Nominations are made through a mixture of decisions from above and suggestions from the local level for which the election is held. This results in a pre-negotiated compromise between corporatist representation of various social groups and opportunities for professional cadres, many of whom hold dual appointments in the Communist Party or government administration. In this way, local elections in Viet Nam preserve both the Communist Party's legitimacy and the effectiveness of the governance system.

Beyond analysing the current situation of participation in political life, the research team asked both individual and focus group respondents their views on a set of potential electoral reforms that are either already piloted or proposed in Viet Nam. All ideas were supported by at least some respondents, though levels of acceptance varied widely among both citizens and local officials. The reforms with the highest overall support were a change in election procedures to guarantee 'one person, one vote' and a restriction on the number of dual appointments between government and elected bodies.

In conclusion, qualitative research on direct and indirect participation in local governance, combined with analysis of PAPI data, reveals a number of specific ways in which implementation of citizens' constitutional rights, laws and policies on grassroots democracy and elections can be promoted within the present Vietnamese political system. Efforts to promote substantive participation are already being made through pilot and experimental programmes of the Vietnamese government, donors, and international and domestic NGOs. These programmes should be expanded and promoted with cooperation of local authorities and mass organisations, particularly the Fatherland Front.

Specifically, the report recommends the following actions to increase direct participation in governance:

- Clarify and increase implementation of mechanisms for **citizen input to local authorities**, via the Law on Local Government, related decrees and government programmes.

- **Expand innovative and informal channels for citizen feedback** via NGOs and technology-based surveys and scorecards.

- **Merge PIBs and CISBs** to form citizen supervision committees, under the oversight of People's Councils.

- Promote the use of **ethnic minority languages**, as stipulated in the Constitution, in order to increase participation of all ethnic groups.

To improve electoral participation, several important steps can be immediately implemented before the next national elections in 2016:

- **Apply one set of common laws and procedures to all elections** for village heads, People's Councils and National Assembly.

- **End the practice of proxy voting** to ensure the direct voting rights of women, youth, and migrants, in accordance with

Constitutional requirements for 'universal, equal, direct and secret suffrage'.

- **Increase the diversity of local candidates**, reducing the practice of dual appointments.

- **Deploy domestic election monitors** to verify increased election quality, in cooperation with mass organisations and other social institutions.

In the medium term, participation can be further strengthened through policy changes and re-structuring in the medium term that will meet the interests of citizens and authorities alike, improving governance and public administration quality to sustain Viet Nam's pace of human development. Among the report's recommendations for the next five years are:

- **Standardise village elections as part of the five-year national election cycle**, with a single set of election legislation applying at all levels.

- **Increase the role of People's Councils** at all levels, ending the unsuccessful pilot to abolish councils in some jurisdictions.

- **Require that People's Council (and National Assembly) members are professional representatives** without dual appointments in the government system.

- **Balance budget allocations for quality local governance**, reducing infrastructure construction and promoting streamlining of some Party and government functions.

Such reforms to enhance citizen participation would promote effectiveness and stability in politics and society. A key feature of the *Đổi mới* period has been the responsiveness and openness of state authorities, which has spurred human and economic development. The present trends towards lower citizen involvement, as seen in lack of change or decline in PAPI scores on participation-related measures, are a sign that it is time to promote further responsive reforms. Achieving this goal will require the efforts of Vietnamese citizens and political institutions alike.

Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations

CECODES	Centre for Community Support and Development Studies
CISB	Community Investment Supervision Board
EM	Ethnic minority
FGD	Focus group discussion
GDO	Grassroots Democracy Ordinance (2007)
MARD	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
MO	Mass organisation
MONRE	Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
NA	National Assembly
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PAPI	Viet Nam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index
PIB	People's Inspection Board
PEA	Political economy analysis
PM	Prime Minister
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VAVA	Viet Nam Association of Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin
VFF	Viet Nam Fatherland Front
YU	Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union
WU	Viet Nam Women's Union

1. Introduction: Conducting research on political participation in Viet Nam

Viet Nam's political system provides numerous structured possibilities for citizens to participate in decision making at the village and commune levels. According to the 2013 Constitution, 'the people shall exercise state power through direct democracy (*dân chủ trực tiếp*) and through representative democracy (*dân chủ đại diện*) in the National Assembly, People's Councils and other state agencies' (Article 6). These channels of participation are elaborated in a series of laws and legal documents including the Ordinance on Grassroots Democracy (*Pháp lệnh thực hiện dân chủ ở xã, phường, thị trấn,* 2007), Law on Elections of People's Councils (2003), Law on Elections of National Assembly (1997, revised 2001 and 2010), Law on Law-making Procedures (2008, being revised in 2015) and related decrees (Acuña-Alfaro and Đỗ 2014).

In practice, implementation of legal rights to participation often lags behind the letter of the law – a common finding in many policy sectors in Viet Nam. In particular, the provisions of Article 6 of the Constitution are broader than many previous regulations on direct and representative participation, yet have not yet been put fully into practice. The implementation gap poses both a challenge and an opportunity for expansion of people's voices in the political system.

In light of this policy opportunity, and with a view towards the upcoming National Assembly and People's Council elections in 2016, Oxfam joined with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to conduct thematic research during the first half of 2015 to examine and analyse citizen participation in policy-making processes and political life. This focus is consistent both with the country strategy of Oxfam in Viet Nam (2015-19), which calls for expanding Vietnamese citizens' capacity to participate in and to influence decisions that shape people's lives, and with UNDP's mission to improve Viet Nam's human development through improved governance and service provision.

This policy research has two interlinked **objectives**:

1. To examine and analyze the level of citizen participation in policy-making processes and political life; and

2. To provide practical recommendations for improved governance in Viet Nam and for programming by UNDP, Oxfam, and other development partners.

The specific **research questions** are:

- What does PAPI dimension 1 data, combined with other relevant quantitative data, tell about inequality of governance outcomes within provinces, with particular focus on variation based on gender, income, and ethnicity?

- How do citizens experience public participation in governance through practices of 'direct democracy' and indirect/representative democracy? What are citizens' expectations about government? How do they view the purpose of the State?

- To what extent can Vietnamese citizens from diverse backgrounds exercise their voice and agency over public decisions, including the law-making process? How might people's participation in political life be improved?

The results of the research, along with several other related studies conducted by UNDP and Vietnamese partners during the same period, are intended to inform policy responses to improve governance quality to sustain Viet Nam's pace of development in coming years, as well as to provide practical recommendations for programming by UNDP, Oxfam, and other development partners. This evidence-based policy paper suggests policy options to improve governance and public administration reforms in general, and direct and representative participation in policy-making in particular.

1.1.   Understanding citizen participation in the Vietnamese context

Governance is understood here as a process of public decision-making carried out by governments, other formal and informal institutions, and citizens. Governance includes both 'the rules of the game' that govern political, economic and social life, plus the reality of 'how the game is played': who engages in which decisions and on what terms (Oxfam 2014a, p. 4). Good governance is representative (reflecting the voices and needs of the governed), transparent (following recognized laws and procedures), and accountable (subject to scrutiny and consent of citizens, with a strong role for civil society) (UNDP 1997, Agere 2000).

Two aspects of governance are important to note in the context of Viet Nam. First, governance is not only concerned with affairs of the state (what is typically thought of as Politics with a capital 'p' – *chính trị, chính sách*), but also the 'small-p' politics of resource allocation, access to government and international-funded programs, management and resolution of local conflicts, and many other areas (some of which are captured in Kerkvliet's concept of 'everyday politics' (2005) and Scott's theory of 'weapons of the weak' (2008), such as in forms of indirect peasant resistance or formation of informal producer groups. Indeed, much of the original impetus for Viet Nam's policies of *Đổi mới* (Renewal) is commonly seen as coming from direct local participation of farmers to support household-level production rather than the large-scale cooperative model that had been promoted previously (Fforde and de Vylder 1996, Kerkvliet 2005).

Second, good governance is achievable in principle within any political system. It is not conditioned on the presence of opposition parties or the particular institutions of liberal democracy, state-led socialism or any other political ideology. This research, like other efforts to support good governance in Viet Nam generally, is conducted within the sphere of the present-day political system, aiming to suggest and promote possible changes within the system that would increase voice (*tiếng nói*), transparency (*tính minh bạch*), and accountability (*trách nhiệm giải trình*). These concepts are, indeed, already built into Vietnamese laws, regulations and political discourse.

Similarly, the related concept of 'democracy' also appears frequently in Vietnamese politics, for instance in the Constitution and the Ordinance on Grassroots Democracy referenced above. This term, however, is often used differently in the Vietnamese context than in common international usage. The two most encountered phrases to describe democracy in Vietnamese discourse are *Dân biết, dân bàn, dân làm, dân kiểm tra* ('People know, people discuss, people do, and people monitor'), and *Nhà nước của dân, do dân, vì dân* ('government of the people, by the people, and for the people'). Both of these slogans originate in sayings of President Hồ Chí Minh during the early years after the 1945 Revolution (see, e.g., Tâm Trang 2015); the second phrase, which appears in Article 2 of the Vietnamese Constitution, was borrowed from Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

The concept of 'people know, discuss, do and monitor' is a form of **substantive** or **deliberative** democracy, as distinct from the prevalent procedural-minimalist definition based on free and fair elections. According to the political theorist Mary Kaldor, substantive democracy consists of 'a process, which has to be continually reproduced, for maximising the opportunities for all individuals to shape their own lives and to participate in and influence debates about public decisions that affect them' (Kaldor 2008, p. 35).

The second idea of democracy referenced above, 'of, by, and for the people', is more linked to representation. In the Vietnamese system, this is understood in consideration of Article 4 of the Constitution, which identifies the Communist Party as the representative of the people and the nation. Legally, the function of 'social supervision and criticism' is assigned to the Viet Nam Fatherland Front in the Constitution (Article 9) and in Politburo Decisions 217-218 (2013). People's representation in politics thus takes place through the pre-established structures of the single Party, rather than via institutions of liberal democracy. For these reasons, it is clearer particularly for an international audience to speak of direct and

representative **participation** rather than 'democracy' as it is widely understood, while recognising the specific meanings and values of *dân chủ* that are applied in Viet Nam.

International and Vietnamese scholars have made numerous efforts to understand citizen participation and concepts of democracy in the country (for instance, Tønnesson 1993, Tran 2002, Zingerli 2004, Hoang 2007, Wells-Dang 2010, Le 2013, Nguyen et al 2015). Of particular note is a 2006 study, *Deepening Democracy and Increasing Popular Participation in Viet Nam*, commissioned by UNDP and researched by a pair of specialists (McElwee and Ha 2006). Like this research, the authors of *Deepening Democracy* grouped aspects of citizen participation into direct and representative categories, considered aspects of the legal environment (such as the Grassroots Democracy Decree then under revision), and made recommendations for improvements both on the part of government agencies and international donors. The report notes that for much of Viet Nam's post-revolutionary history, 'participation' actually referred to the mass mobilisation (*dân vận*) of peasants and workers in support of the state. The mass organisations (*các đoàn thể*), led by the Viet Nam Fatherland Front (VFF) have played a key role as 'the main vehicle through which citizens gain access to the political realm' (p. 7), yet in the words of one respondent, mass organisations often 'do not contact the people before they go and represent them' (p. 9).

The *Deepening Democracy* report outlines the main forms of citizen participation in both direct and representative categories, analysing their strengths and weaknesses, and suggesting potential improvements. For example, the authors emphasise the lack of incentives and quality control mechanisms in direct participation, which often becomes superficial or formalistic (*hình thức* – a phrase that will reappear in various guises throughout this report). This key problem could be addressed by allowing flexibility and autonomy for local authorities to apply direct democracy in locally-relevant ways, while providing clear guidance on how participation will be assessed (p. 21). In this and other respects, the study forms a useful point of departure to assess what has changed in the past decade and what recommendations, if any, have been adopted by political leaders.

This UNDP-Oxfam report can be viewed in part as an update of *Deepening Democracy*, with two key advantages: the ability to conduct in-depth local and provincial level interviews with selected citizens and officials, and the availability of an unprecedented wealth of quantitative data on people's participation in the Viet Nam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI). The design of PAPI in 2009-10 took place on the basis of recommendations in the 2006 study, together with a second series of research papers contracted by UNDP in 2009. A joint effort of the VFF, UNDP, and Centre for Community Support and Development Studies (CECODES), PAPI is the first initiative to collect nationwide evidence on citizens' perceptions and experiences of governance and service provision, aiming to strengthen the transparency, accountability and responsiveness of provincial and local governments. One of the assumptions behind PAPI is that inter-provincial competition can form an incentive for improved governance, just as it has for the business and investment climate (PAPI 2010, p. 88).

PAPI's primary emphasis is on comparing provincial-level results, however its annual reports also analyze national results. Over time, PAPI has increasingly also explored variation in governance within provinces. As the 2013 report notes, 'women, the poor, ethnic minorities, and those without governance connections evaluate the quality of governance poorer, even within the same district' (p. 17). In fact, variations based on these and other individual variables may go further to explain divergent outcomes than geographical location.

The PAPI questionnaire is divided into six dimensions covering aspects of governance and public service provision (Table 1.1). While overall PAPI scores on most dimensions have not changed significantly in the four years of nationwide PAPI implementation, Participation at Local Levels has declined, with the 'civic knowledge' and 'opportunities for participation' sub-dimensions showing the steepest drops (PAPI 2014, p. xv). At the same time, there have been notable increases and decreases in provincial scores over time (ibid., p. 39). There is

also wide variation in PAPI scores within provinces, implying that some citizens experience governance differently even in the same location (p. 18). Participation at Local Levels shows the second greatest inequality in evaluation among different social groups after Control of Corruption (PAPI 2013, p. 23).

Table 1.1 PAPI dimensions and indicators

Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI)					
D1. Participation at Local Levels	**D2.** Transparency	**D3.** Vertical Accounta-bility	**D4.** Control of Corruption	**D5.** Public Admin. Procedures	**D6.** Public Service Delivery
1.1. Civil Knowledge 1.2. Opportunities for Participation 1.3. Quality of Elections 1.4. Contributions to Local Projects	2.1. Poverty Lists 2.2. Communal Budgets 2.3. Land-Use Plan / Pricing	3.1. Interactions with Local Officials 3.2. People's Inspections Boards 3.3. Community Investment Supervision Boards	4.1. Limits on Public Sector Corruption 4.2. Limits on Corruption in Service Delivery 4.3. Equity in Employment 4.4. Willingness to Fight Corruption	5.1. Certification Procedures 5.2. Construction Permits 5.3. Land Procedures 5.4. Personal Procedures	6.1. Public Health 6.2. Primary Education 6.3. Infrastructure 6.4. Law and Order

Source: PAPI 2011, p. 5

1.2.   *Research methodology*

The research employs a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods to compare citizen participation at the national level with in-depth conditions in local communities. It combines the best available statistical data with findings from 106 respondents, mainly interviewed in focus groups.

In a recent article, sociologist Michael Woolcock notes that 'When complex places, processes, people and projects come together, they inherently yield a diverse range of outcomes. Mapping this variation with survey data and then explaining how it varies using targeted case studies can yield uniquely instructive insights for development policy and practice' (Woolcock 2015). This aptly describes the mixed approach taken in this research, beginning with PAPI data and adding qualitative interview data to explore the sources and nature of variations in perceptions and experience of governance that PAPI reveals. Survey data captures accurately what people think about the topics included in the questionnaire, but cannot on its own explain why people think what they do or why changes in their responses occur over time. In-depth qualitative research deepens and expands on the processes and mechanisms behind PAPI survey findings. Our approach is to provide context and human faces to add to the numbers and graphs of quantitative analysis, leading towards a locally relevant definition of 'good governance' in the Vietnamese context.

Once general research questions were identified, the data-gathering process began with identifying aspects of direct and representative participation that are captured in PAPI survey questions. Data on representative participation is included in the Participation at Local

Levels dimension, particularly in the sub-dimensions of Civic Knowledge, Opportunities for Participation, and Quality of Elections (Table 1.1). Direct participation is measured in the sub-dimension of Voluntary Contributions, as well as in several sub-dimensions of Transparency and Vertical Accountability. The research team analysed raw PAPI questionnaire data obtained from UNDP to explore the reasons for these variations at the level of individual questions.

Based on analysis of PAPI data, three research locations were purposively selected to include provinces with both high and low PAPI scores, and secondarily to cover the country's three main geographical regions.[1] **Hòa Bình,** a northern mountainous province, has performed well on PAPI governance indicators: in 2014, it scored highest in the Northwest region on dimensions 1 and 3 and second highest on dimension 2. The central province of **Quảng Trị** received the highest score nationally overall and on dimensions 1 and 3, and highest in the north-central region on dimension 2 (PAPI 2014, pp. 34, 46, 55). By contrast, **Ninh Thuận**, in the south-central coastal region, was the lowest performing province nationally on dimension 1 and lowest in the south-central region on dimensions 2-3. It has both low governance quality and high inequality in results among the surveyed population (PAPI 2014, p. 19).

Hòa Bình, Quảng Trị, and Ninh Thuận are among the 30 provinces engaging in reform of commune-level socio-economic development plans. Hòa Bình and Quảng Trị have succeeded at institutionalising the process of participatory socio-economic planning in all communes of the provinces (Oxfam 2014b, p. 3). All three provinces in this research are also locations where Oxfam has carried out governance or livelihood projects (see Table 1.2) and are among the 7 provinces in the Oxfam Pro-Poor Policy Monitoring project (2014-16). Quảng Trị is also a pilot area for Oxfam initiatives on citizen accountability (M-Score) and budget transparency.

In each province, two contrasting communes (*xã*), wards (*phường*), or towns (*thị trấn*)[2] were randomly selected for data gathering (using an online random number generator). This resulted in the selection of six varied research sites, allowing for comparisons based on urban/rural location and on ethnicity. No effort was made to identify, include or exclude PAPI survey locations within provinces. Research visits of one week each were made to the three provinces during March 2015 and were arranged with the cooperation of relevant provincial partner agencies (the Farmer's Union in Hòa Bình, VFF in Quảng Trị, and the provincial People's Council in Ninh Thuận).[3]

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[1] The research design did not aim to compare provinces (which is already done extensively in PAPI reports), thus there was no need to select a large number or a representative group of provinces. If provincial comparison had been the purpose, the study could have selected one high-scoring and one low-scoring province in each of three regions, to understand what explains the variance in participation. A series of provincial comparisons designed in this fashion have been researched by the Hồ Chí Minh Academy of Politics and Public Administration (for instance, see Dang et al 2013).

[2] Communes, wards, and towns are of equal rank as the lowest administrative units of government in the Vietnamese political system. For ease of reference and to preserve anonymity of certain interview respondents, they are collectively referred to in this report as 'communes' except where the distinction of urban or rural location is significant. Similarly, the term 'villages' is used to refer to both rural villages (*thôn, xóm* or *bản*) and urban/town neighbourhoods (*tổ dân phố, khóm*, and a variety of other varying regional names).

[3] The Hòa Bình Farmer's Association and Ninh Thuận Provincial People's Council are current Oxfam project partners. Oxfam also cooperates with the People's Council in Quảng Trị, but for logistical reasons this research linked to VFF, which implements PAPI and was introduced by UNDP.

Table 1.2 Field research locations

Provinces	Districts/cities	Communes/ wards/towns	Ethnic composition	Characteristic features
Hòa Bình	Hòa Bình city	Hữu Nghị ward	Kinh, Mường	Hòa Bình is a small provincial city that is beginning to industrialise, attracting labourers from within and outside the province.
	Lạc Thủy	Đồng Tâm	Kinh, Mường	In the southern part of Hòa Bình province, Lạc Thủy has average economic development, mainly in agriculture. 35% of the population is Mường, as are a similar proportion of local officials.
Quảng Trị	Dakrong	Krông Klang town	Vân Kiều, Paco, Kinh	Dakrong is considered one of the 62 poorest districts nationwide. Oxfam has a budget transparency project in Dakrong but not covering Krông Klang town.
	Triệu Phong	Triệu Hòa	Kinh	Triệu Hòa is an agricultural commune in a coastal district, not on main roads.
Ninh Thuận	Bác Ái	Phước Tân	Raglai	Bác Ái is also one of the 62 poorest districts. It was the site of an Oxfam governance project from 2009-2014. Phước Tân has a poverty rate of 38%, of which 96% are ethnic Raglai.
	Phan Rang city	Kinh Dinh ward	Kinh	Kinh Dinh is considered a 'focus ward' (*phường điểm*) in which local governance is recognised as effective.

The researchers conducted a total of 21 focus group discussions (FGDs) of 3-11 people each and 12 individual interviews, which included in-depth follow-up discussions with certain focus group respondents, as well as individual government officials at commune, district, and provincial levels. This resulted in a total of 106 respondents consulted in the three provinces. The researchers sought to the extent possible to interview a balanced sample of citizens: men and women, Kinh and ethnic minority, poor and non-poor, young and old (Table 1.3).[4] Focus groups were conducted with separate groups of citizens and local officials. Where possible, male and female citizens were interviewed separately, but this could not be arranged in all locations. Ethnic make-up of focus groups reflected the local population in each commune. Names of respondents are not presented in the report to ensure

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[4] A summary of interview details can be found in Annex A.

confidentiality, but identifying information on the location, position, gender and/or ethnicity of respondents is added where this is of clarifying value.

Table 1.3 Composition of qualitative interview sample per province

	Commune/Ward level	District level	Provincial level
Focus group discussions	Mass organisation representatives Villagers (men and women)	--	--
Individual interviews	Follow-up interviews with 2-3 participants from each FGD Commune VFF chair or vice-chair, if not included in MO FGD	VFF chair or vice-chair People's Council members (if any)	VFF chair or vice-chair People's Council members Provincial Farmer's Association (Hòa Bình only)

Interviews and FGDs were conducted on schedule according to the research plan. All selected communes and key informants agreed to meet with the research team, with responses (among both citizens and officials) ranging from direct and minimal to expansive and detailed. Considering the 'political' and potentially sensitive nature of the subject matter, this level of response met the researchers' expectations. Individual interviews were the most productive sources of information overall. A major limitation, unavoidable due to time factors and administrative practices, was that all local interview respondents were invited to participate by commune leaders and/or mass organisations, thus had some pre-existing level of connection to local authorities. As will be seen, this did not prevent many respondents from speaking their views and opinions, but it did condition who was able to respond. In one location, local authorities invited male-only groups of villagers, in spite of the researchers' request to interview both men and women. In other cases, the team asked to meet poor residents but instead was introduced to village heads and VFF members. On the occasions when we were able to engage directly with villagers, informants responded energetically on direct participation issues (particularly land issues, as noted below), but seemed uncertain about their answers on representative participation and elections.

Interviews took place in or near commune People's Committees. Most were not monitored by outsiders, however focus groups sometimes included participation of one or more members who were more senior than others (such as a commune People's Committee chair or vice-chair in a local government focus group, or a village VFF leader in a villagers' focus group). In such cases, the higher-status participant(s), typically men, tended to dominate. Researchers responded to these situations by dividing FGDs into two groups, or moving more quickly to individual interviews when practical to do so. In other cases, respondents' answers appeared to have been partially coached and prepared in advance, or described a theoretical situation rather than actual practice. These informants tended to 'speak by the law' at first, but after several initial questions, further probing on detailed contents led to freer and more specific responses.

2. Direct participation in local governance processes

As described in the Introduction, **direct participation** refers to people's substantive involvement in local governance. Participation requires that citizens, first, are aware of local governance structures and opportunities for participation. Second, people typically participate through one or more organised groups or associations, which may be officially established (such as in the case of mass organisations) or informal and unregistered (as in local clan, lineage, and most cultural groups). Through these and other structures, people contribute to local socio-economic development programmes and policies, such as land allocation, budget formation and monitoring, or poverty reduction programmes implemented by state agencies, sometimes with the involvement or funding from international lenders or NGOs. Their contributions may be monetary or in-kind, voluntary or required. Finally, people have important roles in monitoring implementation of local authorities, making formal complaints in case violations occur, and resolving disputes among citizens or between citizens and authorities.

These four roles of direct participation correspond to the commonly understood steps of 'people know, people discuss, people do, and people monitor'. Each of the below sections integrates detailed results from the national PAPI survey together with a summary of qualitative interview findings from field research.

2.1. Knowledge and awareness

Most Vietnamese citizens are aware of basic governance structures, but their awareness drops off rapidly when asked about more detailed or complex topics. Local officials interpret citizens' low levels of knowledge as evidence of apathy or poor education. This may sometimes be the case, but citizens interviewed for this research state that they are more concerned about practical impacts of governance than about the slogans and theories used by officials.

PAPI findings

PAPI data shows that citizens' knowledge and awareness of local governance is mixed. The 'Civic Knowledge' sub-dimension of Participation at Local Levels contains multiple questions about people's knowledge of local governance processes. Results from these questions are disaggregated here not by province as in the PAPI report, but rather by individual characteristics of respondents: sex, ethnicity, urban/rural location, economic situation, and connectedness to authority. As PAPI reports make clear, these variables may be more significant than provincial-level comparisons alone. For the 'economic situation' variable, respondents who answered that their situation in 2013 was 'good' or 'very good' (3 or 4 on a 4-point scale, PAPI question A011) are grouped together as having a good economic situation, while others are grouped as less good. To measure connectedness, respondents who answered that they were or had ever been cadres, civil servants at any level, Party members, or in the local leadership of a mass organisation (PAPI questions A017a/b/c) are grouped as 'connected', while all others are considered 'not connected'.[5]

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[5] It would have been preferable to include respondents who have a close family member who is connected in the 'connected' group, however the PAPI questionnaire does not ask about this.

Table 2.1. Selected national PAPI results (2013): knowledge and awareness of local governance processes

PAPI Q#	Description	Natl Avg	Sex		Ethnicity		Rural	Urban	Econ level		Connected	
			M	F	Kinh	EM			Good	Less	Y	N
101	Could correctly identify 3 main local governance positions	73%	80%	67%	73%	76%	71%	79%	73%	73%	82%	72%
102a	Aware of Grassroots Democracy Ordinance	27%	34%	21%	29%	19%	26%	32%	37%	26%	61%	25%
102b	Aware of slogan 'People know, discuss, do, monitor'	66%	74%	58%	68%	49%	64%	72%	78%	64%	92%	63%
108	Know that term of village heads is 2.5 years	10%	13%	7%	10%	6%	10%	9%	19%	8%	32%	8%

The results in Table 2.1 demonstrate that while a majority of respondents have heard of the 'People know, discuss, do, and monitor' concept, the 'connected' respondents are most likely to be aware of the GDO. Awareness of the GDO has actually declined since 2011, when it was 34% overall. These results raise important questions about the usefulness of these structures. Concerning village heads, which are the leaders closest to most citizens, extremely few respondents are aware of their correct term of office. As expected, men, members of the Kinh majority, people with good economic status, and people with connections to authority showed higher knowledge and awareness, especially on more detailed questions. Urban residents also had slightly higher rates of positive responses, but this difference was not very large.

Table 2.2. Contribution of individual variables to difference in PAPI results (Dimension 1 – Participation at Local Levels)

```
         Source |  Partial SS     df       MS              F
    ------------+------------------------------------------------
          Model |  218.122234     12   18.1768529        12.17


           Kinh |  6.46353366      1   6.46353366         4.33
           Male |  19.0133419      1   19.0133419        12.73
          Urban |  7.62102166      1   7.62102166         5.10
      Connected |  101.24654078    1   35.0483888        23.46
Education level |  63.0223585      4   15.7555896        10.55
 Economic level |  20.7554325      4   5.18885813         3.47


       Residual |  851.545271    570   1.49393907
    ------------+------------------------------------------------
          Total |  1069.6675     582   1.83791668
```

A statistical Anova analysis of PAPI data provides additional support for this finding (Table 2.2). Analysis of dimension 1 data (on Participation at Local Levels, including awareness,

elections, and voluntary contributions) finds that around 21% of the variation in PAPI scores can be explained by individual variables.[6] Connection is the most significant of these variables, accounting for nearly half of the individual variation, followed by gender and education level (a factor that was not considered in qualitative research). Ethnicity and urban/rural variables have the lowest explanation in the total variance.

Qualitative research results

Field interviews shed light on citizens' knowledge and awareness beyond the findings of PAPI. Interviewed citizens took a practical view of the effects of governance structures on their daily lives. In Quảng Trị, which scored highest on PAPI in 2014 (both on Dimension 1 and overall), respondents could tell when the latest elections happened, what the correct terms of village heads is, and who are members of the commune People's Council. In the other provinces visited, many respondents were unable to answer these questions. One group of citizens could recite the 'People know' slogan, but when it came to 'people monitor', they said they were not clear what they were expected to be able to monitor. Numerous respondents could not remember clearly how the commune People's Council is elected or who its current members are, which would make informed voting decisions difficult. A few respondents showed confusion between the People's Council (*Hội đồng Nhân dân*) and People's Committee (*Ủy ban Nhân dân*), which they only referred to collectively as 'the authorities' (*chính quyền*). In short, awareness of the 'People know' slogan or the GDO does not necessarily equate to understanding of their contents.

Individual interview respondents from VFF and other associations and state agencies frequently interpreted low levels of knowledge as apathy. 'They care little about politics. They do not even know the chairman of their commune,' said one cadre about the surrounding population. In urban and more developed areas, citizen apathy was explained on the basis that politics were not important to most residents; in rural and mountainous areas, because people are too busy working to make ends meet to have time to pay attention to public issues. If either perception is accurate, this suggests a need for re-thinking the design of any programme that aims to increase citizens' knowledge as the basis for improved governance. Local cadres are well informed about policies concerning participation, often able to explain them in legal and theoretical terms; ordinary citizens, by contrast, understand policies in terms of practical impacts, to the extent they are aware of them at all.

2.2. Participation in associations and social organisations

People participate in public life largely through groups of all kinds: formal associations, informal social gatherings, and many intermediary forms. Evidence suggests that the rate of membership, and in some cases quality of participation, is improving in recent years, as citizens obtain both social and economic benefits from joining organised groups.

Group membership is commonly seen as a key indicator of social cohesion (OECD 2014, p 84). Some surveys of associational membership rank Viet Nam highly, particularly if membership in mass organisations is included, while other surveys see participation as low to moderate (Nørlund 2006, p. 36; Wells-Dang 2014, p. 165). A discussion of associations in official Vietnamese parlance begins with the mass organisations (*các đoàn thể*), or more precisely, various 'socio-political organisations' (*các tổ chức chính trị - xã hội*): the Viet Nam Fatherland Front, Viet Nam Women's Union, Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, Viet Nam Farmers' Association, and Veterans' Association. The largest of these, the Women's Union, has over 13 million members. Many Vietnamese also participate in smaller 'social organisations' or 'socio-professional organisations' (*các hội nghề nghiệp*).

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[6] By comparison, 27% of variations are explained by geographic location (PAPI 2013, p. 18).

PAPI findings

In 2013, 49% of PAPI respondents nationwide belonged to at least one formal association. In several of the focus provinces for this study, participation is much higher (Table 2.3).

Table 2.3 Rates of participation in associations and social organisations
(PAPI question A016, 2013)

Location	Total	Sex		Ethnicity		Rural	Urban	Econ level		Connected	
		M	F	Kinh	EM			Good	Less	Y	N
National average	49%	43%	53%	49%	47%	49%	47%	57%	47%	85%	46%
Hòa Bình	84%	78%	89%	64%	89%	89%	68%	82%	84%	100%	83%
Quảng Trị	96%	96%	95%	96%	n/a	100%	81%	100%	95%	100%	95%
Ninh Thuận	47%	47%	47%	65%	39%	47%	44%	33%	48%	100%	45%

PAPI data shows the variance in participation among the several provinces visited and according to other variables. Nationwide, women are more likely to participate than men, reflecting the importance of the Women's Union. Ethnic minorities participate almost at the same level as members of the Kinh majority nationally, but much less in Ninh Thuận and more in Hòa Bình (where Mường make up 63% of residents).[7] Poor people have somewhat fewer opportunities for participation, but poor residents in Ninh Thuận (including ethnic minorities) are actually slightly more likely to be association members than the provincial average. Those who are relatively better off or have connections to authorities were much more likely to be members.

Table 2.4. Changes in associational membership, 2011-2014
(PAPI question A016)

Type of organisation	2011	2012	2013	2014
Communist Party	9%	8%	8%	9%
Mass Organisations[8]	34%	38%	40%	42%
Women's Union	17%	19%	20%	20%
Farmers' Union	6%	8%	9%	10%
Youth Union	4%	4%	3%	4%
Labour Union	4%	4%	4%	4%
Veterans Association	4%	4%	4%	4%
Other Associations[9]	8%	8%	10%	13%
Parent-Teacher Assoc.	1%	1%	2%	3%
Sports Clubs	1%	1%	2%	3%
Community-Based Orgs.	3%	3%	2%	3%
Religious Groups	1%	1%	2%	2%
Charities	1%	1%	1%	2%

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[7] No EM data are available for Quảng Trị. Nationally, Quảng Trị's reported membership of 96% is the highest among 63 provinces; the lowest is Lai Châu at 17%. Most Mekong Delta and Southeastern provinces have lower than 50% membership, while most northern and central provinces are higher (see Annex B).
[8] Totals do not add up precisely from sub-categories due to rounding. Some individuals may be part of more than one association.
[9] The total includes the five sub-categories listed in the table plus others (professional, public interest, consumer, and business associations) which all have less than 1% reported membership.

Over four years of complete PAPI data (2011-14), rates of associational membership nationwide have risen significantly (Table 2.4). 20% of PAPI respondents were members of the Women's Union in 2013 and 2014, up from 17% in 2011; the Women's Union alone accounts for nearly half of the total membership in mass organisations. In percentage terms, membership in the Farmer's Union rose the most quickly, from 6% to 10%.[10] The same pattern was recorded across the board for other types of social organisations, such as parent-teacher associations, sports clubs, religious groups, and charities: reported participation in all of these forms of association more than doubled between 2011 and 2014.

Qualitative research results

Field interview respondents mentioned a wide array of social groups they take part in. In addition to all the mass organisations, other formal social organisations included the Elderly Association, Red Cross, Education Promotion Association, and Association of Victims of Agent Orange (VAVA). Economic and producers' groups, such as cooperatives and farmers' collectives (*tổ hợp tác*) comprise a second important type of social group. Credit and savings groups are common throughout the country, some organised by mass organisations, others set up by neighbours, family lineages, or religious groups. Temples, churches, family clans, and migrants' home village associations (*Hội Đồng hương*) are important in many communities. Among the informal groups mentioned by respondents are festival organising committees, work exchange groups, an Association of Exemplary Farmers (*Hội người nông dân sản xuất giỏi*), charitable funds (*Qũy tình thương*), and ad hoc groups that form for particular events and holidays such as International Women's Day and Tet. Ethnic minority groups have culturally-specific groups for organising rituals and festivals, among other purposes. Finally, cultural and recreational groups are widespread, organising singing, dancing, and sporting events.

Some communes visited have local customary laws or village charters (*hương ước*) which guide and structure group participation. In one village in Hòa Bình, for instance,

> The village charter is as important as a law. People participate in developing and implementing the charter, which guides funerals, weddings, and environmental protection. Everyone follows the charter, sometimes even more than decisions of the commune leaders. People contribute to the charter; village heads draft it, the commune passes it, and then it is posted at village cultural centres (*nhà văn hóa thôn*).

The highest levels of participation were observed in Quảng Trị, particularly in the lowland commune visited (Triệu Hòa) where all local people reportedly participate in at least one organisation or group. Local leaders are typically members of at least two or three formal associations as well as leading informal groups outside of their official responsibilities. Participation in mass organisations occurs within a corporatist structure: youth in Triệu Hòa join the Youth Union, men the Farmers' Union, and up to 80% of older residents are members of the Elderly Association. War veterans and people affected by the war participate most actively in community and mass activities.

When asked about reasons for participating, respondents emphasised practical activities that are beneficial to their members, including information and knowledge provision, access to credit funds, health support, and business development advice, among other topics. Increased participation in recent years may be interpreted as an indicator that the quality and perceived value of these activities is rising. Mass organisations are the primary means for

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[10] Notably, state funding to the Farmers' Union more than doubled during the period 2011-14, while subsidies to the other mass organisations remained close to constant (personal communication, Viet Nam Institute for Economic and Policy Research, April 2015). This could be a cause, or an effect, of the increase in reported membership.

members to learn about local issues, plans and policies and to contribute their opinions, forming an important 'safety valve' to identify issues of public concern. There is also a clear social element, as most other neighbours and villagers also participate. The high level of participation is facilitated by trust: for instance, three YU members in Triệu Hòa organised a fundraising activity for which they took their land use right certificates as collateral for a small loan to purchase electronic equipment, then organised music performances which local people attended and contributed funds.

Many of these elements were also present in other communes, but to a less complete extent. In Đồng Tâm commune, Hòa Bình, participation in the Farmers' Union and Veterans' Association is high, but the Youth Union has difficulty in attracting members because most young people have gone to other provinces to study and work. Mass organisations' activities are primarily focussed on their own issues and mandates: the Farmers' Union supports farmers who have lost their land to switch to non-agricultural work, and the Veterans' Association carries out state policies to benefit veterans.

The Fatherland Front, as the umbrella organisation for other mass and social organisations, is particularly close to state structures: for instance, in Kinh Dinh ward, Phan Rang city (Ninh Thuận), the VFF heads in each of the ward's neighbourhoods (tổ dân phố) are also the local Communist Party leaders. The activities of the VFF, however, are primarily charity for poor people and organising festivals. Local participation in Phan Rang is high for older residents but lower for youth, who are reportedly less interested in organised social activities. In poorer communes, membership fees were said to be a limiting factor for some residents to participate, but lack of interest was the primary reason identified overall.

Box 2.1   Increasing ethnic and women's participation in Hòa Bình

One notable research finding is the strong and increasing participation in associations and social organisations noted among ethnic Mường respondents in Hòa Bình. In urban Hữu Nghị ward, Mường informants agreed that 'participation now is better...we try to talk more in communal meetings' and highlighted the benefits of participation including 'solidarity, community cohesion, learning and livelihood improvement'. In Đồng Tâm commune, people report enthusiastically about their participation in formulating, implementing and monitoring the village charter. Mường residents have increased their representation in commune and district governments, where they make up 22% and 34% of staff respectively (although fewer are present at the provincial level). According to one mass organisation leader, 'ethnic minorities will participate more if we enable a good environment for them'. Participation in associations could be both a cause and effect of a strong ethnic presence in local leadership. Increased ethnic participation is likely a contributing factor to the overall rise in associational membership noted in PAPI.

According to most informants, women's participation has also increased in recent years. Women make up 30% of staff at city mass associations and 15% of city government employees. The number of women commune chairs is higher than previously, although a leader in Lạc Thủy district noted that women still face envy and opposition from some male colleagues in spite of strong work performance.

Some respondents in both Hòa Bình and Ninh Thuận suggested that mass organisation meetings were mainly for the purpose of informing members about state policies and plans without discussing them. In these cases, mass organisations have more a mobilising (*phong trào*) function than a participatory or consultative one. Some MO representatives interviewed showed little understanding of local policies on socio-economic planning, budget, and land issues. In these cases, associational membership is not necessarily linked to contribution to local governance plans and policies, to which the analysis now turns.

2.3.   *Participation in socio-economic development and state programmes*

Whilst participation in associations involves charity, public events, and social activities, the category of 'socio-economic participation' covers land issues, budget monitoring, and

voluntary contributions to local development (which is usually interpreted to mean infrastructure construction.) Overall, participation in socio-economic issues is consistently lower than participation in associations, likely because citizens see less direct benefit from their involvement. The level of participation is relatively higher on issues which affect people's livelihoods most directly. Those citizens with strong connections to mass organisations or local authorities are more likely to engage actively in socio-economic issues.

There is no clear pattern of change over time in citizen participation in socio-economic issues. Research on social capital in Viet Nam shows a drop in involvement over time (OECD 2014, p. 85). The 2006 *Deepening Democracy* authors point out that the common practice of 'community participation' in an NGO or donor project does not necessarily lead to participation in citizenship (McElwee and Ha 2006, p. 2).

The primary format for citizen participation in socio-economic development is the **village meeting** (*họp dân* or *họp thôn*). The Grassroots Democracy Ordinance and other legislation stipulate that village meetings should occur, but do not specify how meetings should be organised, how often, or with what specific contents. Much participation in meetings is seen as superficial and nominal. Although opportunities for engagement are present, they may not equate to real influence on governance (OECD 2014, p 24).

PAPI findings

In PAPI, participation in land and budget planning/monitoring is included in dimension 2 (Transparency), and voluntary contributions are a sub-dimension of Participation at Local Levels. For purposes of this analysis, all are seen as related aspects of direct participation. National PAPI results on these sub-dimensions, however, have not changed since 2011.

Table 2.5. Voluntary contributions, budget and land use participation (PAPI 2013 data)

PAPI Q#	Description	Natl Avg	Sex		Ethnicity		Rural	Urban	Econ level		Connected	
			M	F	Kinh	EM			Good	Less	Y	N
109ba	Contributed voluntarily to public works (past yr)	19%	20%	17%	17%	30%	17%	26%	14%	19%	17%	19%
203	Commune/ward budget publicised	37%	38%	37%	39%	29%	37%	40%	46%	36%	70%	35%
203b	Confident in accuracy of publicised budget	74%	77%	72%	75%	71%	72%	81%	81%	73%	84%	73%
204	Aware of commune/ ward land use plan	21%	24%	18%	22%	14%	20%	24%	26%	20%	42%	19%

PAPI data in Table 2.5 shows that socio-economic participation is relatively low overall, with awareness of local budgets somewhat higher than voluntary contributions or knowledge of land-use plans. In the 2014 survey, the Transparency dimension was scored higher than in previous years, except for awareness of land use planning which dropped to 16% nationwide (PAPI 2014, p. 17). Citizen awareness of budgets is rising, but the percentage who has actually read budgets declined from 37% in 2011 to 33% in 2014 (p. 50). Only 8% of PAPI respondents nationwide know about, have read, and trust the accuracy of commune budgets and expenditures (p. 52).

Differences based on sex, ethnicity, location, and economic status are present but not significant, except for the finding that ethnic minority citizens are more likely to report having made voluntary contributions. (In Hòa Bình, this response is nearly 50%.) Poor citizens and ethnic minorities are nearly as likely to participate as the better off; the reasons for this remain unclear. The only group with significantly higher than average participation is those with connections to authority, who are particularly more likely to be more aware of budgets and land-use plans.

Qualitative research results

Citizen interviews demonstrated a relatively high level of interest and concern about land issues, compared with lower attention to budgets and socio-economic development planning. Levels and attitudes towards participation vary according to gender, ethnicity, and age, with migrant workers participating the least. The major mechanism for citizen feedback is the village meeting. In research locations, citizens stated that village meetings take place either quarterly or semi-annually (if the latter, to coincide with semi-annual meetings of the commune People's Council[11]). In some places, meetings were reported more often or on an as-needed basis, organised by village heads in collaboration with mass organisation leaders.

According to one focus group participant in Hòa Bình, the level of personal involvement has improved over time: 'Participation is better now, when I go to meetings I speak up a little more… and try a little harder' (see also Box 2.1). In Phước Tân commune, Ninh Thuận for instance, 38% of households are poor (and 96% ethnic Raglai), yet participation in socio-economic activities is no lower than in urban areas. Attendance at village meetings is reportedly high, and meetings combine discussion on local land use, farming and social issues with reports on commune and district plans. These plans, however, are not open for discussion. In one location in Quảng Trị, the local budget is discussed semi-annually and the commune socio-economic development plan once annually. Respondents emphasised that village meetings are the most effective channel for local people to discuss socio-economic issues and raise their concerns for discussion with local authorities. An estimated 70-80% of households have representatives attending meetings.

In other locations, citizens stated (and local officials complained) that participation is frequently superficial or 'in name only' (*hình thức*).[12] In one Hòa Bình commune, meetings are said to be mainly held for the purpose of informing local people about policies and plans already decided by authorities. Often, perhaps as a result of the lack of substantive discussion, attendance is low. As a result, citizens do not receive enough information about policies and are rarely able to affect their implementation. Some local authorities viewed the 'low educational level' of citizens as an explanation for weak participation; low knowledge and awareness could also be seen as a <u>result</u> of limited opportunities to contribute. Even when people come to events and meetings, they are not substantially involved in decision making and are often unaware of final decisions made. Of course, as respondents in Phan Rang, Ninh Thuận stated, this low level of involvement could be interpreted as general satisfaction with local conditions, rather than the opposite.

Whilst all members of a household have opportunities to participate in relevant associations, usually only one person per household attends meetings on land, budget, or infrastructure issues – typically, though not always, the male 'household head'. A Quảng Trị respondent stated that 'unmarried people usually do not attend village meetings, because they do not care much and their parents do not encourage them to attend.' Another respondent in the same location noted that participation is higher among people living along the main road, even though the most remote areas also now have road access.

Among the components of socio-economic involvement, **land use planning** stands out as the highest topic of public concern. This finding is common to urban and rural residents in qualitative research (and differs in emphasis from PAPI data). In several locations in Hòa Bình and Ninh Thuận, respondents cited Oxfam-sponsored land governance projects as useful in providing information on land issues. Some focus group participants in these provinces have lost agricultural land to urbanisation and industrialisation policies. Before, during and after resettlement, they attended numerous community meetings to discuss about the land change purposes, relocation and compensation plans, implementation and

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[11] The role of People's Councils, a representative institution, is discussed in section 3.
[12] See section 1.1, p. 3.

outcomes. The only social issue that attracts nearly as much community concern is environmental pollution, an issue that emerged in several research locations that are near factories or garbage dumps.

According to a respondent in Hòa Bình,

> Local people, including ethnic minorities, care a lot about land issues. They participate in many community meetings on land management plans and contribute opinions, since land closely relates to their life. Only when most local people agree with one land management plan, it can then be approved and implemented by the People's Committee. Some plans have to be discussed and negotiated several times before they are approved.

In Ninh Thuận, the level of concern is also high, but participation is different in quality: 'First, the state develops the plan, then has meetings with people to communicate it. Before these meetings, people don't know anything about the plan at all. Then [the leaders] put up the map.' In this case, leaders 'report to people so that people know', but people do not consistently discuss, do, or monitor.

According to the GDO (Article 8), land use plans are to be posted at People's Committee and People's Council offices in each commune; socio-economic development plans and other information must be publicised through local meetings or via loudspeakers. The research team saw evidence of each of these mechanisms, but found they are insufficient. In one location, the land use map posted at the People's Committee office was illegible and out of focus; local mass organisation representatives confided that even they could not understand the map. Loudspeakers are common in all locations, but have not yet been shown to be effective at conveying information, even assuming that many local residents listen to the broadcasts and (if their native language is not Vietnamese) can understand them. Meetings have more potential to be interactive, but often are just another form of one-way communication in which leaders 'announce' (*công bố*) changes in the land use plan to residents. As a respondent stated in Quảng Trị, 'local people do not know much about the land management plan, because all land measurement and planning activities are done by land management officials in the commune People's Committee and not engaged with local people.' Representatives from mass organisations are reportedly also not invited to participate, as the plan is the task of the People's Committee officials.

In fact, much land use planning is driven by decisions taken at the district level or higher, a recentralising trend supported in the 2013 revised Land Law (Oxfam and Landa 2014). The commune/ward level has responsibility for implementing land use decisions but cannot change them. For instance, land use in Krông Klang town (the district administrative centre in Dakrong, Quảng Trị) has been greatly affected by the expansion of district government buildings and agencies, a situation that is entirely outside of town authorities' control. This might explain the finding that in spite of high levels of public concern, land use planning consistently receives the lowest score among the Transparency sub-dimensions in PAPI (2014 report, p. 45).

In comparison to land use, **budget issues** and **socio-economic development planning** attract comparatively little interest among citizens in the research locations. As one local leader states in Hòa Bình,

> On local budget transparency, it is difficult to invite all people to participate. Local people do not care much about local budget since they are busy with their daily life. Local authorities also find it difficult to gather people's opinions on budget when they do not have the authority to decide how big the budget is. Hòa Bình is a poor province and still relies on the state budget. So local authorities do not have much freedom in deciding the local budget. Direct participation of people depends on if there is an inviting environment for the participation, even in ethnic minority communities.

Similar descriptions were heard in other locations. The universal explanation for this lack of interest is that citizens are more likely to contribute opinions to revising land management plans because this directly affects their lives and livelihoods, whilst other issues are perceived as less relevant. Budget and planning issues, as focus group members in Hòa Bình put it, are considered as the job of village heads and commune officials only. In Ninh Thuận, even when commune/ward budgets and social-economic development plans are publicised, local people pay little attention: in rural areas, this was reportedly due to poverty and a preoccupation with making ends meet (lack of time to participate), while in Phan Rang city, many residents feel that socio-economic development issues are not relevant to them (lack of interest to participate). Some cadres feel that citizens merely care about their own problems such as land issues, but are not interested in general community issues. As one mass organisation leader said, 'people go to meetings if they know they can get 20,000 dong. Otherwise they don't attend or don't care what the meeting is about.'

At least in some locations, apparent citizen apathy is accompanied by low trust in local authorities' budget figures. In the PAPI national survey, 74% of those who had seen local budgets said they believed the figures were accurate, but in Hòa Bình, the rate was only 48%. A citizen in Hòa Bình asked, 'How can we believe those figures when we see that local authorities keep complaining about not having a few million dong for public works, while they always have hundreds of millions of dong for their private works?!' Another explanation for budget distrust is that unlike published plans, the budget can be changed later.

Responses on **voluntary contributions** show the same mixture of active participation and passive unconcern. Focus group interviewees in Hòa Bình, which has high rates of contributions, stated that they involve in supervising the construction of public works in their village because local people contribute a big part of the works' investment. This contrasts with their lack of attention to the commune budget and social-economic development plan. Similarly, in Phan Rang city, citizens participate in multiple meetings before, during and after construction projects, which are paid for by between 40-60% local contributions. In the upland research location in Dakrong district, Quảng Trị, respondents cited poverty as a reason for the low level of contributions.

Respondents in Bác Ái, Ninh Thuận cited a recent Oxfam governance project as having improved the quality of local monitoring of public construction works, as people take more ownership of these projects rather than considering them solely a government responsibility. Citizens have made use of public supervision boards in each commune, which existed previously but were not widely used (see section 2.4). In Phan Rang, the ward community supervision board is organised and operated by the Fatherland Front, with little participation of citizens who are not Front members. There is little budget for the boards' operation, which seriously weakens their effectiveness in all locations.

Citizens contribute money annually to nine or more different types of local funds. These include, for instance, the Security and National Defence Fund (20,000 dong/year), a poverty fund, and a Gratitude and Responsibility Fund (*Qũy đền ơn đáp nghĩa*, 30,000 dong/year). These contributions are voluntary in theory but often viewed as compulsory in practice, except for certain families who are exempt. Poor families do not contribute to the poverty fund, but may contribute to other funds depending on their ability. The regulations are, however, unclear: some informants complained that according to policy, the poor and 'near poor' are exempt from certain fees, but still have to pay them in practice. The exact descriptions and amounts collected vary somewhat by location, with lower contribution amounts in poorer districts. Contributions are generally viewed as transparent, with public records kept of who gives what. However, little information is provided back to citizens about how the funds are used, which is related to the low overall interest in budget monitoring: 'The ward's budget is a very far away issue,' said one focus group respondent.

A common finding across interview locations is that **youth** participate at a lower rate than older residents. Many young people leave home to study and work in other provinces and

cities, some of them permanently. Out-migration of youth is a significant factor in all research locations except for Phan Rang city. In rural locations, as many as half of all families have one or members working away from their home province (as many as 700 youth from one commune in Quảng Trị, and 40% of the population in a Hòa Bình commune), including a small number working as export labourers in other Asian and Middle Eastern countries. With few active local youth, the Youth Union plays a limited role, concentrating mainly on charitable events and feasible local projects such as on sanitation and road safety.

Migrants are obviously not able to participate in socio-economic issues in their villages of origin, and are probably also unlikely to participate actively in migration destinations. The qualitative research locations for this study do not receive many in-migrants, but those that have arrived (such as 50 ethnic minority households relocated from a hydropower dam site to a resettlement area in Hòa Bình) do not appear to be well integrated into social and political life in their new locations, and are viewed by at least some officials as an administrative burden rather than an asset.

Ethnic minorities, as noted above, have somewhat fewer opportunities to participate in socio-economic issues than Kinh citizens overall, but are at least as likely to make voluntary contributions for public works. Levels of participation for specific ethnic groups in specific locations may vary widely, as qualitative research showed with Raglai in Ninh Thuận, Vân Kiều and Paco in Quảng Trị, and Mường and Thái in Hòa Bình. In Dakrong district, Quảng Trị, the quality of local governance was demonstrably less than in the Kinh lowlands,[13] but this effect was not noticeable in the other provinces. One factor is constant in all ethnic minority areas: printed information, such as budgets and land-use maps, is available only in Vietnamese and not in any ethnic languages. Even when explanations are given in local languages during village meetings (which tends to happen in areas where one ethnic group forms a strong local majority), the style of discussion with many abstract terms such as 'socio-economic development planning' may not encourage active participation.

Gender differences in socio-economic participation are present but vary in intensity. In one location in Hòa Bình, women are said to participate in public works as much or more than men, a trend attributable to training opportunities, enlightened local leadership, and individual factors. In other locations, women's participation was viewed as more limited due to their assigned household responsibilities, time factors and travel distances. For instance, women in one location participated in savings and credit loans but not in village and commune meetings. Differences in educational attainment were cited as another contributing factor. Despite this, the research team found some good examples of active women's participation in all three provinces visited (see Box 2.1, previous section).

As one focus group respondent in Ninh Thuận stated, 'participation means helping each other' (*Tham gia có nghĩa là giúp nhau*). This phrase sums up both the potential and limitations of socio-economic participation: citizens are motivated to take part by common interests and the desire to support other members of the community, yet the quality of their participation often remains at the horizontal level of 'helping each other', rather than engaging and contributing to governance processes at higher levels. Depending on one's position, citizens' low levels of interest in budget and planning processes can be interpreted as a combination of apathy and a consequence of top-down decision making. When citizens have increased opportunities to participate, as in the Oxfam governance project in Ninh Thuận, local interest increases, although capacities of villagers and officials still remain an issue.

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[13] By chance, no upland district is included in the 'probability proportional to size' PAPI sample for Quảng Trị, unlike the other provinces visited (and most other provinces with ethnic minority populations). If Dakrong district had been selected, overall results for Quảng Trị would likely be different, which challenges the assertion in the 2014 PAPI report that the PPS method is 'the best strategy to reduce bias and ensure representativeness' (p. 21).

2.4.   Accountability and dispute resolution

This section examines aspects of citizens' **direct contact with authorities**, which PAPI describes as Vertical Accountability. Accountability structures, enshrined in the GDO, Law on Complaints and Denunciations, and other Party and state policies, provide for citizens' supervision of local authorities (the 'people monitor' part of the grassroots democracy slogan) as well as resolution of local disputes. PAPI results on vertical accountability have not changed much since the survey was inaugurated, however numerous respondents in qualitative research locations suggested that 'people monitor' is the weakest part of direct participation.

PAPI findings

Nationwide, a relatively small percentage of citizens surveyed in PAPI made a complaint or reported a problem to village and/or commune leaders in 2013. (Some respondents may have answered yes to both parts of the question.) Men, Kinh, urbanites and the better off and connected are more likely to engage with local authorities, but not by dramatic margins. There is a consistent preference for contacting village heads before commune leaders among all social groups. Among the research locations in this study, results for Quảng Trị were close to the national average, Hòa Bình slightly above average, and Ninh Thuận virtually zero (0.2% and 0.7% had contacted village and commune leaders, respectively).

PAPI questions in vertical accountability centre on Community Investment Supervision Boards (*Ban Giám sát Đầu tư Cộng đồng,* CISBs) and People's Inspection Boards (*Ban Thanh tra Nhân dân,* PIBs). PIBs are required to be established in every locality (GDO Article 24), but only 37% of PAPI respondents nationally are aware that their commune or ward has one (Table 2.6). This figure remained low in the 2014 PAPI report at 36%. (A similar question not included in Table 2.6 asks about knowledge of CISBs, with even lower results: only 17% of respondents were aware that their commune had a CISB in 2013.) Only about half of residents who are aware of PIBs believe they are operating effectively: when combining the main question (303) and sub-question (303b), fewer than 20% of all citizens perceive that PIBs are effective. In Ninh Thuận, this figure is 4%. These results show that in a majority of locations, these participatory structures exist only on paper and are hidden from the view of many or most citizens.

Table 2.6   Selected PAPI results on vertical accountability (2013)

PAPI Q#	Description	Natl Avg	Sex		Ethnicity		Rural	Urban	Econ level		Connected	
			M	F	Kinh	EM			Good	Less	Y	N
301	Contacted village head to address a problem	14%	15%	13%	15%	10%	13%	16%	18%	13%	24%	13%
301	Contacted commune leader about a problem	9%	10%	8%	9%	6%	9%	9%	11%	8%	14%	8%
303	Knows that commune/ward has a People's Inspection Board	37%	41%	33%	38%	26%	36%	38%	44%	36%	67%	34%
303b	PIB operates effectively	50%	52%	45%	51%	42%	49%	51%	60%	48%	73%	45%

Qualitative research results

Field interviews revealed significant gaps in citizen monitoring, yet also pointed to innovations carried out by some local authorities. Small-scale social problems within the village are typically addressed through meetings led by village heads. In locations with relatively low levels of conflict, such as Triệu Hòa commune, Quảng Trị, many issues can be resolved at this level since local leaders are trusted and respected, citizens are accustomed to the meeting format, and there is a high degree of social cohesion and homogeneity with no major outside sources of conflict. In cases that cannot be solved at the village level, citizens may then turn to the Fatherland Front or the commune People's Committee, which has a 'citizen reception office' (*Phòng tiếp dân*). For instance, in one location in Hòa Bình, the commune land management officer has played an active role in addressing village land disputes. Villages and some communes have anonymous comment boxes (as stipulated in GDO Article 20), but the research team heard no evidence that these boxes are regularly used. The commune People's Council was also not reported to be a frequent channel for complaint or dispute resolution.

The effectiveness of accountability mechanisms is stretched more severely in areas with significant local conflict, such as land disputes concerning state farms and forest enterprises. In such cases, citizens tend to 'jump levels', presenting village problems directly to the commune or district, or even to higher levels. Land conflicts were a significant feature in three of the six communes/wards visited. In one Hòa Bình commune, for instance, respondents mentioned a complex land conflict prior to 2013, but stated that this had been handled in a 'responsive and responsible' fashion that did not skip to higher levels ('*phức tạp nhưng không có kiện tụng vượt cấp, đã có phản hồi có trách nhiệm*'). In another reported case, commune authorities were unable (or unwilling) to resolve the issue locally, and villagers made a complaint to the district level. Although villagers have the closest ties to village heads, rather than commune leaders, a respondent in this location stated that 'local people do not rely much on village heads for solving their problems. In many cases, they go straight to commune, district and provincial offices because they believe that their problems could be solved more quickly there.'

Some serious issues cannot be solved by authorities at any level. In one research location, a sugar plant and a paper mill have caused serious water, noise and air pollution to the surrounding community for over 10 years. Even after local authorities and citizens conducted many meetings and discussions with city and provincial authorities, the factories have not been moved and proper waste solution measures have not been deployed. In another province, expansion of a polluting foreign-invested factory has led to citizen protest after many unsuccessful appeals to local authorities. Such dissatisfaction may fester at the local level for years, but if unaddressed, it can lead to organised citizen protest such as the demonstration blocking National Highway 1 in Bình Thuận province in April 2015 (Viet Nam News Service 2015). In qualitative interviews, respondents in urban Phan Rang, Ninh Thuận stated that they had, in fact, contacted local authorities about local environmental issues, while respondents in upland Bác Ái district stated they were unlikely to do so.

The primary reasons given by commune-level respondents for the weak operations of PIBs and CISBs are a lack of capacity, budget and information. In Ninh Thuận, the annual budget for each board is around 1 million dong only; in some communes of Bác Ái district, even this small amount was not spent as the boards had no activities, even though citizens in the same locations are reportedly contributing to community monitoring more than in the past. In other words, the monitoring that does occur takes place outside the PIB-CISB structures.

In Quảng Trị, the reported annual budget for CISBs was somewhat higher at 4 million dong, still too low to have much impact. Respondents stated that community supervision over public work is still not very efficient because local people have limited knowledge, while the province has little budget for training them. Unclear and inconsistent instructions from provincial leaders also pose an implementation challenge. Each CISB includes 7-9 members

who are commune officials, mass organisation representatives, and village heads, all serving for terms of 2-3 years with frequent changes in personnel. In one location visited, the vice-president of the commune Fatherland Front serves as chair of the PIB. As all the board members are seconded village and commune officials (*kiêm nhiệm*), the boards can hardly function as independent monitoring units.

District and provincial respondents in Hòa Bình and Quảng Trị stated that some communes combine the two boards into one, a practice that is also mentioned in the 2014 PAPI report (p. 60, see also Bui et al 2013). In Hòa Bình, members of the combined boards receive salary supplements of 2 million dong/year. In places where Fatherland Front and other local cadres do not have monitoring capacity for construction projects, local authorities in Hòa Bình stated that retired engineers have been invited to join the monitoring boards.

Quảng Trị province operates Grassroots Democracy Steering Boards (*Ban chỉ đạo Dân chủ Cơ sở*), a name that sounds oxymoronic but is actually a significant innovation in the Vietnamese context. The steering boards, which to the research team's knowledge are unique to Quảng Trị, draw on Politburo Circular 30 (1998) which gives provincial and city People's Councils the possibility to develop locally relevant structures and policies to promote grassroots democracy. At each level of government, the board consists of four people, one of whom is a permanent representative (*thường trực*). The budget at the provincial level is 150 million dong per year. However, this structure faces some of the same limitations as CISBs and PIBs: the steering boards are led at the commune level by a vice-chair of the Fatherland Front, who receives a salary supplement of only one million dong/year.

A second innovation comes from Bác Ái district, Ninh Thuận, where village leaders meet commune authorities every Monday morning and bring complaints and problems from their villages to the commune level. Party cell leaders, village heads, and vice-heads all take part in the meeting from each village. According to a district-level respondent, this practice reduces the number of disputes that are escalated to the district.

3. Indirect participation in representative political institutions

Indirect or representative participation, as described in the Introduction, refers to the election of village heads, delegates to People's Councils (at commune/ward, district, and provincial levels), and delegates to the National Assembly. Like other single-party states around the world, Viet Nam uses elections to confirm the legitimacy of the ruling party, give citizens a partial voice in selection of candidates for certain leadership positions, and provide a check on accountability and effectiveness of political leaders at the local level.[14] According to the 2013 Constitution, 'The elections of deputies to the National Assembly and People's Councils must be conducted on the principle of universal, equal, direct and secret suffrage' (Article 7). Further legal requirements for elections are set out in the Law on People's Council Elections (2003), Law on National Assembly Elections (2010), and the Grassroots Democracy Ordinance (for village head elections).

The analysis in this section focuses on election of village heads and commune People's Councils. These elections are conducted separately: village heads (and neighbourhood block leaders in urban areas) are elected for terms of 2.5 years, while commune and ward People's Council elections take place every five years together with national elections for district/provincial People's Council and the NA. We first examine **election processes** for both village head and People's Council elections by comparing PAPI survey results and qualitative interview data with legal provisions of how elections should be run, paying particular attention to who does and does not cast ballots directly. The discussion then turns to the important questions of **candidate nomination and selection** for village and commune offices: whose names appear on the ballot, and what qualities do voters look for in electing local representatives? Answers to these questions relate not only to technical questions of election administration, but also illuminate a balance between central control and lower-level responsiveness in local political structures.

Since 2009, People's Councils in rural districts and urban wards have been abolished in ten provinces in a pilot initiative designed in part as a controlled experiment (Malesky et al 2014). Of the provinces visited in this research, Quảng Trị is part of this pilot. Respondents in all research locations expressed clear opinions on whether these councils should be retained or abolished nationwide; these arguments are presented in section 3.3 together with views on other possible **election reforms**, such as direct election of commune People's Committee chairs.

3.1.   *Participation in local elections*

PAPI findings

Official turnout in Vietnamese elections is extremely high by global standards. The most recent national election, in 2011, achieved a stated turnout of 99.51% nationwide; in several northern provinces, among them Hòa Bình, the reported turnout reached 99.99% (VNExpress 2011). PAPI survey results have consistently shown different results: the percentage of surveyed citizens who said that they voted in person in the last national election was 66% in 2011 and has declined every year since (in 2014, the national figure was 42%). For village head elections, which are held more frequently, PAPI findings have remained between 66-73%, with the highest reported participation recorded in 2012 (PAPI 2014, p. 37).

What explains the significant difference between national reported turnout and PAPI data on election participation? This discrepancy is one of the most notable findings of PAPI overall and also explains almost all of the decrease in PAPI dimension 1 (Participation at Local

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[14] These explanations are similar to some of the general reasons offered by Geddes (2006) and Malesky et al (2012) for why single-party regimes hold elections.

Levels) over time. The PAPI report attributes much of the decrease in reported participation to 'electoral timing and faulty memories (2014 report, p. 7), which surely plays a role; another possible reason is that the younger generation (who becomes a greater part of the PAPI sample over time) are less likely to participate, and some young people interviewed in 2014 may not have been old enough to be eligible to vote in 2011. It could also be that many citizens pay less attention to national elections than village ones, and thus are less likely to remember them. Our research offers a different explanation: the lower turnout numbers that appear in PAPI may be the consequence of **proxy voting**, in which one person (usually the 'household head') casts votes for everyone in the household. Although expressly disallowed in Article 49 of the Law on People's Council Elections, proxy voting is believed to be common in village elections in many locations, and PAPI questionnaire data that is not included in the published reports provides clues to its prevalence.

PAPI's sub-dimension of 'election quality' contains a series of questions that can be considered as a checklist or working definition of a **high quality election** in the Vietnamese context. These six criteria, building on the Constitutional principles of 'universal, equal, direct and secret suffrage', are the presence of more than one candidate; high voter turnout; direct voting according to the principle of 'one person, one vote'; secret ballots; public counting of ballots; and no suggesting or influencing of voters. PAPI results for each of these questions are shown in Table 3.1 with reference to the most recent election for village head.

Table 3.1 PAPI results: quality of village elections (2013)

PAPI Q#	Description	Natl Avg	Sex		Ethnicity		Rural	Urban	Econ level		Connected	
			M	F	Kinh	EM			Good	Less	Y	N
105	More than one candidate for village head in recent election	54%	63%	46%	55%	45%	55%	49%	54%	54%	75%	52%
107	Participated directly in village election	71%	81%	60%	71%	73%	71%	73%	70%	72%	84%	70%
106a	Someone else went to vote in place of respondent (proxy)	28%	19%	40%	29%	27%	29%	27%	29%	28%	16%	30%
107a	Election for village head conducted by secret ballot	90%	92%	86%	90%	88%	92%	80%	93%	89%	87%	90%
107b	Local authorities did not recommend a vote for any particular candidate	91%	91%	90%	92%	84%	91%	89%	89%	91%	91%	91%
107d	Public counting of ballots	66%	64%	70%	65%	72%	67%	65%	69%	66%	78%	65%

PAPI results show that most village head elections satisfy the criteria of secret ballots and no influencing of voters' selections, while the criteria of public counting of results is met about two-thirds of the time. However, only slightly more than half of PAPI respondents said that at least two candidates were nominated for village head. (In the provinces visited in this study, over 70% of village elections were competitive in Hòa Bình and Quảng Trị, while for Ninh Thuận this figure was 47%, and only 36% for ethnic minority respondents.)

Three other important findings stand out from Table 3.1. The first is that reported proxy voting in village elections, at 28%, when added to those who voted directly, equals 98% or almost the officially reported election turnout. In other words, the self-identified practice of proxy voting explains nearly all of the discrepancy noted above between official figures and PAPI data. Second, in keeping with findings in previous sections, respondents with state connections were much more likely to vote in person than other citizens, with only 16% reporting proxy voting. Third, voting patterns have a strong gender dimension: women were more than twice as likely as men to report that someone else voted on their behalf. While some women also apparently voted as proxies for men, the overwhelming effect of proxy voting is to disenfranchise women in village elections, calling principles of universal and equal suffrage into question.

This view was also stated, though not elaborated with evidence, in the 2006 *Deepening Democracy* study, which found that proxy voting is 'widespread in rural Viet Nam' and 'can have the effect of disenfranchising women if they do not have the chance to discuss their votes with their husbands before the election' (McElwee and Ha 2006, p. 30). PAPI data, however, suggests that proxy voting is nearly as common in urban areas as in the countryside. Among the three focus provinces visited in this research, few significant differences appear in PAPI findings on election quality, except for one: proxy voting in Hòa Bình is much higher than the national average, especially for women. 47% of all PAPI respondents in Hòa Bình reported village proxy voting, including 67% of ethnic minority women, and only 36% of women surveyed voted in person.[15] Nationwide, ethnic minorities are only slightly more likely to report proxies than Kinh voters, but in some provinces, large majorities of EM women reported that someone had voted in their place: 74% in Dắk Nông, 75% in Quảng Ninh, 77% in Yên Bái, 91% in Thái Nguyên, and 100% in Gia Lai (see Annex B).

Qualitative research results

Interview respondents added nuance and detail to the PAPI data. In all research locations, **national elections** (for People's Councils and NA) were described as 'like a community festival': citizens put on their best clothes, and 'everyone is told to stop working and go to vote'. Almost 100% of local people participate in the festival, said focus group interviewees in Ninh Thuận. Village and commune officials invite everyone to vote, and 'after having been invited, we have to go!' (Box 3.1). The only people who do not come to vote, in this perhaps idealised picture, are those too elderly, ill or disabled to come to the polling station – and in these cases, election officers bring ballots directly to them at their houses, consistent with Article 50 of the Law on People's Council Elections.

Elections for village head are viewed differently, consistent across locations. Conducted on a sliding schedule set by local authorities, not all at the same time, village elections are less formal – even though PAPI data finds that citizens are more likely to have a memory of participating in these elections. One interview respondent explained that 'for authorities, electing the People's Council is more important than electing village heads, but for citizens, electing the village head is more important.' Respondents in Ninh Thuận stated that they care much about village head elections since these people directly interact with local people on village issues. They did not remember how many candidates stood for the commune People's Council or how they made decisions on these positions.

Box 3.1   Citizen interest in local elections

Local officials express more interest in People's Council and National Assembly elections than village elections. For citizens, the reverse is true. In Krông Klang (Quảng Trị) and Phước Tân (Ninh Thuận), some ethnic minority residents (Vân Kiều, Paco, and Raglai) understand the differences between these two types of election as follows:

'For national elections, everyone has to go. There are more guards and policemen, and people wear nice clothes. For village head elections, any clothes will do' – *Raglai man, Ninh Thuận*

'We pay little attention to People's Council deputies. We saw their CV and achievements…oh! All have high degrees but we were not clear it was true...sometime I recalled a woman deputy who was speaking gently and voted for her, that's all' – *Vân Kiều woman, Quảng Trị*

Source: Focus group discussion notes

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[15] Hòa Bình's reported proxy voting is the second-highest nationally, behind only Ca Mau (47.3%). Other provinces with more than 40% of survey respondents reporting proxy voting are Cao Bằng, Đà Nẵng, Hà Tĩnh, Ninh Bình and Quảng Ninh. The lowest rate nationwide is in Vĩnh Long (7.7%). Scores for Quảng Trị and Ninh Thuận are 27% and 24%, slightly under the national average. There is no perceptible geographic pattern to these findings.

Focus groups in Ninh Thuận and Hòa Bình said that typically each household sends only one member to vote at village elections (much as they normally do for village meetings on socio-economic issues). In some places, voting is conducted by secret ballot, in other cases by raising of hands by whoever is present at a village meeting, or just by representatives of selected households (*cử tri đại diện hộ gia đình*), all of which are permissible according to the GDO (Article 14). In one location visited in Hòa Bình, for instance, a village election had recently been held in a room that is only big enough to hold about 100 people, which could be understood as an infrastructure-driven barrier to election quality. In another location, local ethnic minority residents preferred an election by secret ballot, 'but the chair proposed hand raising… and so the vote went!'

For both types of elections, pictures and CVs of candidates are introduced by village heads at village meetings before the elections and are also posted on village information boards. Some respondents complained that community meetings to prepare for elections are merely procedural, rather than helping local people make better informed decisions. Ethnic minority respondents pointed out that as with other information, candidate profiles are written only in Vietnamese, so can be read only by those who are literate in Vietnamese. In upland districts visited in Quảng Trị and Ninh Thuận, a significant fraction of residents cannot read Vietnamese and have to rely on assistance of their neighbours and/or Fatherland Front staff to vote. This potentially affects the secrecy of their ballots. In the view of a commune officer in Hòa Bình, 'because the local education level is low, local people need to have strong direction and instructions in elections, particularly on candidate [selection] issues.'

In the (much smaller) sample of qualitative interviews in three provinces, several instances were noted of elections by hand-raising rather than secret ballots and of authorities' suggestions of preferred candidates, but no cases of a single candidate or discrepancies in ballot counting. Elections appear to be well-organised, with no evidence of outright fraud. While there is room for improvement in these election quality criteria, most do not pose major barriers to meaningful elections. In fact, some local authorities stated that they would like to control voters' selections more than at present, but they are unable to do so, as 'local people are very independent in decision-making' and 'are very much affected by opinions of their neighbours to make their voting decision, rather than reading candidates CVs.'

When asked about the prevalence of **proxy voting** in their communities, respondents gave a variety of answers. Some, particularly local officials but also including some ordinary citizens, asserted simply that proxy voting does not happen in their localities, though it could happen in other places. Some focus group respondents who stated there was no proxy voting had only vague memories of the previous election, however. In Quảng Trị, respondents stated that the incidence of proxy voting was low due to the 'strict' management of elections. Immediately after making a statement to this effect, one (male) interviewee stated that proxy voting is acceptable if husbands and wives agree, but in case that they disagree, it is better to have separate voting. Another respondent held that the practice is undesirable in principle, but in practice some exceptions should be made. In upland Dakrong district, proxy voting appeared likely more prevalent than in coastal districts, possibly differentiated by ethnicity. An official stated, with repeated head shaking, 'Proxy voting is common here, but it is very difficult to control it.'

Individual interview respondents stated that proxy voting is common in their localities on behalf of the elderly and youth who are, respectively, too weak and too busy or apathetic to vote on their own. In Ninh Thuận, proxy voting reportedly occurs mainly in cases of long-time absence from the village or ward. An official in Hòa Bình explained that proxy voting happens because of 'bad weather, difficult landscape, and business reasons...We cannot manage elections everywhere in the province.' Hòa Bình respondents were more likely than others to confirm the frequency of proxy voting, even as they lamented the practice, sometimes blaming local people who 'have little information of candidates' and 'do not care much about elections'.

Voter apathy is surely one factor contributing to proxy voting; PAPI data suggests that gender relations are another. Yet it is disingenuous to shift the responsibility to voters. Elections are organised and carried out by local authorities, especially the Fatherland Front and Party committees. If election boards wished to prevent proxy voting, they could – and indeed some local authorities, such as in lowland Quảng Trị, appear to control it effectively. Instead, the key to allowing proxy voting is the pressure placed on authorities at all levels to deliver nearly 100% voter turnouts. Many citizens who allow a household member to vote on their behalf might otherwise not go to the polls at all. In this case, turnouts would be only around 70% or less, which would not meet the Communist Party's desire to show nearly unanimous legitimacy. Rather than accept lower election participation (which would still exceed turnouts in most industrial democracies!), local officials permit proxy voting to go ahead.

A final consideration, noted previously in section 2.3, is the prevalence of **migration** in most areas of Viet Nam, which affects voting patterns. By law, migrants who are granted temporary residence status (*tạm trú*) in their new locations are then eligible to vote. Interview data suggests that many migrants in fact do not register, or register but choose not to participate in local elections in their new location. Authorities also may not invite or welcome them because it would potentially add work and complications for them. Some migrants remain on voter lists in their place of origin, in which case they are very likely to be proxied by another family member. Voter lists are created and maintained by commune/ward police: in one location visited in Quảng Trị, authorities stated that the list is updated to exclude people going to work in other provinces for a long time, however this may not be done frequently in all locations. It is also possible that some migrants are more likely to participate in NA elections than village ones, whether out of interest in national politics or a feeling that it is obligatory.

These hypotheses fit with recent research findings (Nguyen et al 2015) that public participation in cities is harder than in rural areas, and harder in large cities than small ones, in particular for a group of 'unofficial poor' who are near-poor or low income, but do not qualify for official poverty reduction programmes. Such migrants and marginal citizens make up a significant portion of the population, and their electoral participation deserves further study.

Box 3.2   Language and 'localism' in elections

Elections, like all official public events in Viet Nam, are conducted in the language of the Kinh majority. In Phước Tân commune, Ninh Thuận, many elderly Raglai don't understand Kinh (Vietnamese) language well. This poses a problem for ethnic minorities during the election process. Although Phước Tân is 96% Raglai, many candidates for election are Kinh. Some officials complained that citizens don't read information about the candidates, thus worsening the quality of the election. Raglai people report that they do pay attention, but orally: 'most of us learn about the candidates via friends and neighbours', one man said.

Lineage is another factor that is frequently cited by both cadres and villagers. The Raglai are matrilineal with three main lines of lineage (Ka towrr, Chamalea, Pinang). Raglai communities prefer their village head to be Raglai. However, this is a concern for a Kinh official: 'overall it is important to have ethnic minorities in the structure (*cơ cấu*). However, this region is heavily Raglai (*quá đông*), so if we let them vote freely, the election quality will be affected by lineage and localism (*dòng họ, cục bộ*)'.

The perceived problem of 'localism' also applies in Kinh majority areas. Officials explained that 'in the future, the district Party secretary and District People's Committee Chair will not be local cadres in order to avoid localism'. In this context, *cục bộ* refers to networks and connections among leaders themselves: 'in some regions, localism is serious! One man [a district leader] is promoted to the province, and another man [of the same network] arrives'.

3.2. Nomination of candidates in local elections

Much of the work of preparing any election lies in **identifying and nominating candidates** for office. Before voters make their choices at the ballot box, political parties and election boards select and vet the people who stand for the election. In the Vietnamese political system, the role of organising elections is given to the Fatherland Front, with its tasks to 'represent and protect the rights…of the People; rally and uphold the strength of the great national unity, exercise democracy and promote social consensus' (2013 Constitution, Article 9). The Front selects a 'suitable' (*phù hợp*) number of candidates on behalf of the people and acts as an electoral board to check that candidates meet the desired standards, including both qualifications written in the law as well as locally relevant criteria for leadership. The local Communist Party, including the commune Party secretary and the chair of the People's Committee stand behind the process ensuring that it fulfils the Communist Party's requirements. As one interview respondent described, the result is 'democracy within a decided framework'.

PAPI points out that almost all citizens who took part in the previous village election report having voted for the winner – this figure reached 93% in 2014. This is interpreted in the PAPI report as evidence that Vietnamese elections are not competitive (p. 42). In fact, this statistic illustrates something else: local elections are structured so there are hardly any losers. Exact numbers vary among the provinces visited in this study, but typically six or seven candidates appear on the ballot for the commune People's Council, of which the top five vote-getters are elected. For village head elections, four or five candidates are nominated. The winner becomes village head, the second-place candidate vice-village head, and the third-place candidate becomes village secretary. With odds like these, almost everyone on the ballot will be elected to something. Occasionally a favoured candidate will not be elected, but the system is configured to minimise the chances of this. What matters most is getting on the ballot in the first place.

In Quảng Trị, where governance procedures are followed faithfully, the commune Fatherland Front introduces candidates for elections for village head and commune People's Council through discussions at village meetings. Local authorities are closely involved to offer guidance and instruction for the elections, including in promoting their preferred candidates. If local citizens propose additional candidates, the Front negotiates to reach agreement on a set of qualified candidates. In one location, the VFF proposes three candidates and villagers propose three others. Village meetings on nominations must have at least 50% of households in attendance: if a majority is not reached, the meeting must be organised a second time. As in other electoral systems, incumbency is an advantage: in recent village head elections, an estimated 80% of office-holders were re-elected. Self-nomination is allowed by law, but discouraged: in particular, as a Quảng Trị respondent stated, any Party members who promote themselves to be candidates would be reprimanded.

In this consensus-building process (*hiệp thuong*), the authorities and VFF clearly have the leading roles. However, their preferences are not always adopted. In several cases reported during fieldwork, as well as other examples known to the research team from other provinces, villagers have successfully promoted their own selected candidate over the candidate preferred by commune leaders. The same process applies at higher levels for selection of People's Council candidates, where the district Party Committee proposes candidates that may or not be accepted at the commune level.

The most important criteria for nomination, according to respondents in all research locations, are **education level** (*trình độ*) and **trust of local people** (*uy tín*), sometimes also stated as 'morality' (*đạo đức*). For local authorities, education comes first; for voters, trust or

confidence is key (Box 3.3).[16] The law also places requirements on age and health of candidates. It is not required to be a Party member to stand for village head or commune People's Council, but Party members are given some degree of priority, and all candidates must follow the Communist Party's leadership. In one location, village heads are usually military veterans. Although some reference is made to loyalty to the Party, the most important qualifications for office are viewed as an individual's positive character traits.

Box 3.3   Citizens' definitions of trust

Trust or confidence (*uy tín*) is the most important factor for citizens in selecting candidates to vote for. Asked to define what makes a candidate trustworthy, citizens offered a set of explanations:

'Hardworking and successful in their family business, happy in their family and active in the commune' – *Kinh man, Quảng Trị*

'Stable family, no negative social behaviour, takes part in activities like festivals' – *Vân Kiều man, Quảng Trị*

'Confidence means good morality, carrying out the Party's instructions… has a strong voice and can speak convincingly' – *Kinh man (local official), Ninh Thuận*

'Trust means living properly (*sống tốt*), not saying dirty words, knowing how to behave with the old and the young, and having experience in life' – *Raglai woman, Ninh Thuận*

'A primary school education is fine provided that the village head can earn a living for the family, can speak into the ears of poor people (*nói lọt tai bà con nghèo*), and follows the village charter (*hương ước*). If we hear of someone having those qualities, we want to go to see their face' – *Raglai man, Ninh Thuận*

In Hòa Bình city, by contrast, Mường residents said that the most important qualification of a People's Council deputy is 'not only talking but also concrete actions for citizens'. Neighbourhood leaders without these qualities were considered as 'puppets' (*bù nhìn*). This lower level of trust may reflect the effects of serial migration, land conflicts, and environmental problems.

The vast majority of elected **village heads** are men. In Phước Tân commune, Ninh Thuận, two villages have female heads, perhaps a consequence of matrilineal Raglai culture. In Quảng Trị, by contrast, only two village heads are female in all of Triệu Phong district. In Triệu Hòa commune, a woman has never served as village head (although some commune officers are female). The reason provided (by an all-male focus group) is that 'leadership' is seen as a male responsibility, while women can assume mass organisation roles that are more 'social' in nature. Moreover, the village head is expected to act as the ritual and religious leader of the village (*cúng làng*) as well, and that position is restricted to men due to patriarchal clan traditions. In Bác Ái district, Ninh Thuận, like many ethnic minority areas, traditional and administrative leadership positions are kept separate, which has the side effect of creating opportunities for women and young people. However, in such cases the traditional leaders may have more real authority than the village head.

Village head positions are not always fiercely competed over. In some locations, notably Hòa Bình, 'many people don't want to be village head'. With a stipend as low as 1 million dong/year, the position may be viewed as much as a burden than an honour. Village heads have to carry out many tasks on behalf of the state, but they are not considered government cadres and have limited opportunities for benefits or perquisites that might be open to higher

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[16] The importance of trust in citizens' engagement with elected officials and public institutions has been identified as a key variable in governance in other regions of the world as well (see Brixi et al 2015, p.2).

level officials. Social pressure and prestige are the main factors influencing some village heads interviewed in this research: as one said, 'Like it? I don't really like it, but the people elected me so I have to take the responsibility.'

In cases in which a village head does not perform up to expectations, the possibility exists (at least theoretically) of removal via a no-confidence vote at the commune level. In Quảng Trị, confidence votes are carried out every year at all levels of governance, as stipulated in the GDO (Article 26); office holders need to receive at least 50% support to stay in office. In fact, no incumbent has ever been removed this way in the research locations. Seen from another angle, the entire local election process is itself not much different from a confidence vote to see if people agree with the candidate selections made by the VFF and Party.

People's Council elections proceed along a similar trajectory, with a few procedural differences. In addition to the personal characteristics defined above for village heads, council members are expected to understand laws and local socio-economic conditions and to meet requirements from the Communist Party and government. People's Councils are expected to meet with citizens, report their concerns and opinions to relevant government offices, and follow up if action is taken in response. Yet compared to village heads, People's Council elections attract lower attention from most citizens. In the case of one focus group in Ninh Thuận, for instance, participants stated they rarely meet council members; they remember clearly when and how the last village head election was held, but could not recall anything about election of the local People's Council.

Council members at all levels, like NA delegates, meet their constituents at regular, highly scripted 'voter meetings' (*tiếp xúc cử tri*). At the commune level, voter meetings are typically organised quarterly. Despite their name, these events are not open to the public but only to invited representatives of the voters who can fill the room where the event is held. Some respondents suggested that households with particular problems to raise were sometimes kept from attending, as space is limited and priority given to invited participants. As a result, respondents say that the quality of discussion is often low, and significant local issues (such as land disputes) do not appear on the agenda.

Overt campaigning for election or re-election is rare, in keeping with the Communist Party-mandated restriction on self-promotion. A Raglai man in Ninh Thuận said, 'Some people dare to nominate themselves as village head, but nobody dares to self-nominate as a People's Council deputy…we never thought about it'. Although the Law on People's Council Elections (Article 46) allows campaigning, the research team did not hear any example of a candidate mobilising votes or advertising, as is common practice in electoral systems internationally. Such campaigning might be ineffective in the Vietnamese context at present: as one respondent said, 'If someone asked for my vote and I didn't know or trust them, I wouldn't vote for them anyhow.'

VFF representatives explain that People's Councils at all levels should be representative of geographic diversity, ethnic groups and religions in the area. This is achieved through a corporatist arrangement in which a number of seats are set aside for certain key constituencies to ensure that their voices are represented in the governance structure under Party leadership. In political lingo, this is referred to as 'the Structure' (*Cơ cấu*). Respondents emphasise that there is no fixed quota system for who is selected; instead, a locally-appropriate structure is chosen at each level in each location. In some communes, districts, and provinces, ethnicity may be structurally prioritised, while elsewhere clans and family lineages are considered, mass organisations such as women and war veterans, private business owners, certain villages recognised for their historical contributions, and other important constituencies. The structural conditions are set at the next-higher level: for instance, district People's Councils, where they exist, set the structure for commune councils, while provincial councils determine the district level. Party committees are involved, as they have an interest in rotating key cadres and testing and training potential successors through various posts at different levels.

The Structure is not a feature at village level, since as previously noted, village heads are not formal state personnel and as such subject to less scrutiny. It increases in importance at district, provincial and national levels along with the prestige and power of representative bodies. For instance, provincial People's Councils have set structures about what percentage of members are local from each district in the province and how many seats are allocated to officials at the provincial level. At the commune level, all council members are residents of the commune; no candidates are brought in from outside.

Respondents in Ninh Thuận stated that there are actually two aspects: a 'hard structure' (*cơ cấu cứng*) and a 'soft structure' (*cơ cầu mềm*). The 'hard' aspect refers to a fixed idea that a certain number of People's Council members should be included from different groups, though this requirement does not appear in any legal documents. 'We need to have all the parts represented.' The 'soft' structure is flexible by local context: if it is not feasible to bring in all elements, other candidates are selected in their place. The key dilemma facing election managers is how to balance 'structure' and 'quality', or in other terms, corporatism versus meritocracy. In an extreme meritocracy, perhaps, all elected officials would be university graduates, and disproportionately Kinh and male: cadres who are loyal to the Communist Party, capable and hardworking, and understand laws and policies. Yet authorities also believe that some form of representation of diverse social groups, via the Structure, is essential to effective governance. The political meaning of local elections in Viet Nam, therefore, is as a negotiation between corporatist representation and top-down control, seeking a balance that preserves both the Communist Party's legitimacy and the effectiveness of the governance system.[17]

Even with the Structure, election results are not guaranteed. Some space is left for voters to decide. For instance, the Communist Party has set a target of 30% women members of People's Councils at all levels, but this target has not been achieved in electoral results. Lower targets also exist for the National Assembly (where the percentage of women delegates has fallen gradually over recent sessions) and for Party membership itself. Officials explain this shortfall by saying that although local elections are organised in accordance with laws and receive good participation from citizens, 'many local people do not really understand information on candidates and elections'. Changing the 'quality of the voters' cannot happen overnight, as this requires improvements in knowledge and social customs that cannot be achieved through policy or government programmes alone.

This is not an official position, only a privately expressed opinion of certain thoughtful officials whose intent is to improve election quality (Box 3.4). The sample of this research is not broad enough to ascertain whether such a view is widespread or only infrequently held. Regardless of intentions, however, this stance of disdain and blame towards citizens demonstrates a sense of frustration about limitations of the electoral system. Like the examples cited in the previous section about proxy voting, it shows a fundamental lack of confidence in the people, who cannot be trusted to exercise their constitutional rights on their own without the state's guidance.

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[17] This finding is related to, but distinct from the view in neo-institutional comparative politics that legislatures in non-democratic systems act as 'a forum for contained exchange' between the leadership and potential opposition (Malesky et al 2012, p. 1). For a description of corporatism in Viet Nam, see Jeong (1997).

A final important phenomenon in the nomination system is the concept of **dual appointments** (*kiêm nhiệm*). This refers to the ubiquitous practice of a single person holding multiple positions in the state apparatus. For instance, a commune vice-chair might be simultaneously a member of the People's Council, president of the Education Promotion Association, and director of the Centre for Continuing Education, to cite one example encountered during field research. Each of these positions carries a small salary or stipend, but only the primary one (vice-chair of the People's Committee) has full benefits. In Quảng Trị, commune People's Council members receive a derisory stipend of 400,000 dong/year, hardly enough to cover petrol costs to and from meetings. Meanwhile, the number of local posts that need to be filled continues to increase. The Kinh Dinh ward People's Committee in Phan Rang, Ninh Thuận has 15 steering committees that must be funded from the commune budget. As soon as one committee is disbanded, another forms. However, the allocated number of commune staff is decided at higher levels and is kept constant. Given these conditions, local officials see no alternative but to spread the work out among existing staff. The advantage of this arrangement, cited by respondents in several provinces, is that People's Council members who are also holding other positions can bring wider knowledge and experience to contribute to the Council, resulting in a net efficiency gain.

Most members of the People's Council, therefore, play two or three different additional roles: in mass organisations, as commune staff, and in steering committees for government programmes such as poverty reduction, health, infrastructure construction, and so on. Of five commune council members, three are considered full-time, but two of these are dual appointments, leaving only one permanent member (*thường trực*). Council members state that they accept extra appointments for a variety of reasons: to have more opportunities and benefits, for a higher total salary, and because many people find it difficult to say no to professional requests. Yet one person, no matter how capable, can only do so much.

Respondents interviewed at all levels agree that this system places increasing demands on local cadres while leaving People's Councils in such a weak position as to be nearly ineffective. In one pithy formulation, councils have 'rights but no power' (*có quyền nhưng không có lực,* a play on the Vietnamese term *quyền lực,* 'power'). Their role is unclear, as the council (like its members) overlaps with other local institutions: the People's Committee,

Party Committee, and Fatherland Front. Unlike these structures, the commune People's Council meets formally only twice per year for one day at a time. Inevitably, most important decisions are made elsewhere and in advance, and the council often plays only a limited approval role. As an official described, 'the commune People's Council is the highest organ in theory, like the National Assembly at the central level, but its members need to vote following the direction (*chỉ đạo*) of the Communist Party'.

In the words of a district council member:

> People's Councils at district and commune levels are operating nominally (*hình thức*) because they do not have sufficient professional members or proper power. Thirty-two out of 34 members of the district Council are holding positions in other offices, which is an awkward arrangement making them unable to conduct their supervision role properly. Two professional members, who are not holding any other positions, cannot complete all the work of the Council because they are overloaded. The People's Council has no power to ask governmental offices in the district to follow their requests. Besides, some members are arranged to be in the Council just to have enough representation of all social groups while they do not have sufficient knowledge and capacity.

> Consequently, the Council's operation is mainly about two Council meetings per year and meetings with local people once every 3 months. Only one member who is also a member of the district Party Committee can make some influence on governmental offices through his role in the Party Committee. Commune People's Councils are even in worse situation. Their operation is very nominal and weak. It is necessary to increase the number of professional members who must be developed for this role for several years before they are elected…The Council's budget is also very small, just enough for a few meetings per year and no funding for inviting experts to participate in their work.

Several proposals for reform (or abolition) of People's Councils are evaluated in the next section. Respondents' views of dual appointments are based on whether or not they see conflicts of interest in these roles or not. The argument that there is a conflict was summed up in several interviews as 'today, I supervise you; tomorrow, you will supervise me.' On paper, a Ninh Thuận interviewee noted, the People's Council elects the People's Committee chair and approves the budget, but as long as the majority of council members are also holding positions in government offices, they cannot be objective in criticising them.

Interestingly, there is one set of dual appointments that never happens at the commune level: that is the chair of the People's Committee and chair of the Fatherland Front. Respondents stated that these roles have to be kept separate in order for the Front to fulfil its monitoring mandate, and because both positions are demanding full-time roles. Yet both the People's Committee chair and VFF chair are usually members of the People's Council. Concerning the Communist Party, some provinces are experimenting with combining the Party secretary and commune (People's Committee) chair positions into a single individual. As with dual People's Council appointments, proponents see this as more efficient, while sceptics fear conflicts of interest. Importantly, these risks are seen as personal not systemic in nature. In Viet Nam's single-party structure, there is no constitutional principle of separation of powers. The significance of local elections should also be interpreted in this light.

3.3. Innovation in electoral processes

Beyond analysing the current situation of indirect/representative participation in political life, the research team asked both individual and focus group respondents their views on a set of potential **electoral reforms** (Table 3.2). The list was put together by the research team based on ideas that have already been publicly proposed in Viet Nam, have actually been piloted in some locations, and/or are common practice in comparable neighbouring political systems (namely China or the Lao People's Democratic Republic). Interview respondents

discussed these possible innovations openly. All ideas were supported by at least some respondents, though levels of acceptance varied widely among both citizens and local officials (including VFF and mass organisation leaders). The colour-coded evaluations in Table 3.2 should be seen as illustrative, not final or representative verdicts, as they are based on a modest sample of interviewees in the three focus research provinces.

Table 3.2. Responses to possible electoral innovations among surveyed citizens and local officials

Innovation	Overall evaluation: citizens	Overall evaluation: local officials	Explanation
Encourage self-nomination for local offices (without pre-approval by VFF)	A majority of respondents favoured this idea, especially at village level	A minority of respondents supported this idea	National laws allow self-nomination. Some respondents favoured more people putting their names forward. Others thought introduction by the VFF produces 'higher quality' candidates.
Require that 50% of candidates put forward be women	A minority of respondents supported this idea	A minority of respondents supported this idea	Respondents favoured increased participation of women in politics but felt a 50% quota is unrealistic.
Require National Assembly delegates to be residents of the province they represent	A minority of respondents supported this idea	A minority of respondents supported this idea	Most respondents favoured the current system of mixed local-national structures, since delegates should have national views, not local priorities.
Carry out direct elections for chair of commune People's Committees	A majority of respondents favoured this idea	A minority of respondents supported this idea	Ordinary citizens tended to support this idea, while officials feared capture by local interests.
Carry out direct elections for chair of district and provincial People's Committees	A minority of respondents supported this idea	Few respondents supported this idea	Most respondents felt citizens lacked information on who to vote for at district and higher levels.
Restrict the number of NA and People's Council members who hold dual appointments as government officials (*kiêm nhiệm*)	Most respondents in favour	Most respondents in favour	Most respondents felt that a higher number of full-time representatives would improve effectiveness of elected bodies.
Require principle of 'one person, one vote' for all elections	Most respondents in favour	Most respondents in favour	This principle is already provided by law; it simply needs to be implemented better.
Abolish all district-level People's Councils	Few respondents supported this idea	A minority of respondents supported this idea	A strong majority in all provinces favour retaining councils at all levels.

Innovation	Overall evaluation: citizens	Overall evaluation: local officials	Explanation
Combine positions of People's Committee chair and Party Secretary at commune level	Opinions divided	A majority of respondents favoured this idea	Question was not asked of all respondents. Those who were asked are open to considering the idea. Reform is currently being piloted in some communes.

The reasons provided by interview respondents for their support or opposition to a particular reform are in many ways of greater interest than the spread of opinions in themselves. A summary of responses for selected questions is provided below:

- **Promotion of women candidates**. Local officials pointed out that targets for election of women candidates in People's Councils and the National Assembly already exist as part of the Structure (see section 3.2). Over time, participation of women in local People's Councils has increased. Some respondents, particularly women government officials, supported the idea of a higher quota to encourage greater participation of women. Yet even these supporters felt that a 50% target is too high (in one case due to 'women's family responsibilities'), and 30%-40% would be more realistic.

  Others disagreed with the idea of any target at all on the basis that 'knowledge and capacity are more important than gender'. The implicit assumption is that male candidates are more likely to be capable and knowledgeable. Government officials lamented the difficulty in recruiting women for state positions of all types and interpreted the obstacles as cultural and educational rather than structural or political. Several respondents volunteered the idea that in case of a choice between 'equally qualified' men and women candidates, preference should be given to the woman.

- **National Assembly representation**. Following the principles of the Structure, NA candidates are a mixture of provincially selected representatives and candidates sent down from the central level. (Government officials with dual appointment appear from both provincial and central levels.) This leads to a situation in which many NA delegates live in Hanoi and travel to the provinces they represent only for voter meetings several times a year. The same pattern exists in provincial People's Councils, in which a number of nominations are reserved for provincial-level candidates who do not live in the districts they represent, although the travel distances involved in this case are usually much less.

  Those in favour of reducing or ending the practice of candidates 'sent down' from higher levels believe this would increase representation of constituents' views rather than representation for the sake of appearances (*hình thức*). Provincially-based deputies would, in this view, understand local concerns and issues better. This is precisely the problem, say respondents who favour preserving the current system: NA deputies work on national issues, so they need to have a broader view than only local interests. Some shared a concern that local delegates might be subject to pressures from their families or relatives. Citizens interviewed were primarily concerned about whether elected representatives work to promote the people's interests, regardless of where they are based. A Hòa Bình focus group reasoned, 'as long as the delegates do their jobs well, it doesn't matter if they live in the area or not'.

- **Direct election of People's Committee chairs**. Those in favour of direct election at commune level reasoned that the position of commune chair is very important to the lives of local residents and thus citizens should have a direct voice in selecting him or her. This would increase accountability and provision of public services. Those opposed expressed concern about the actual implementation of elections and potential domination of the largest family clans, ethnic or religious groups in each commune,

promoting 'localism' (*tính cục bộ*). Officials felt that democratic principles need to be balanced with the state's interests in promoting the best qualified (and loyal) officials. As a VFF representative argued, 'too much respect to people's rights may lead to distortions in election results and votes for poor-quality people.' This may be interpreted as a variant of the corporatist structure/meritocracy debate introduced in section 3.2. The Structure, in this view, can be kept for the relatively less important People's Council but not adopted for other positions.[18]

Most respondents felt that direct voting for People's Committee chairs would only be possible at commune level where citizens have understanding and information about the candidates. Elections at higher levels would not work, since voters do not have sufficient knowledge to elect qualified persons. (This raises the question of how the same voters can nevertheless elect National Assembly and provincial and district People's Councils.)

Several interviewees believed that direct voting should be tried first at the ward level in urban areas, where voters have a higher educational level, greater access to information, and there is no majority clan or lineage in the local population. This contrasts with the perception of the research team that rural residents are actually more likely to be well informed and pay attention to who their commune leaders are, while ward politics has less direct relevance to the lives of city dwellers.

Yet other respondents pointed out that the position of commune chair should not be equated with membership in the People's Council: the chair needs more qualifications. (This despite the fact that many council members are concurrently commune officers.) What were notably absent from most explanations of this issue were concepts of separation of powers (People's Councils are legislative, thus directly elected, while People's Committees are administrative positions that make sense to be appointed) or statements that the Communist Party needs to maintain control of personnel appointments in People's Committees.

- **District People's Councils**. Respondents in Quảng Trị, which has piloted abolishing district-level councils since 2008, expressed strong sentiments that the pilot has not succeeded and instead added to the workload of the district Fatherland Front (as a partial substitute for the roles of the council) and the provincial People's Council (which no longer has district-level counterparts to provide information and input). 'It would be better to keep the council,' said a district official, 'since the replacements for it are not fully effective, for instance at resolving complaints and dealing with land conflicts.' The cost savings involved were viewed as minor compared to the overall state budget.

    Views in provinces which have retained district councils were mixed. In Hòa Bình, respondents see district councils as largely ineffective. Some felt that their absence would hardly be noticed, but a majority still favoured keeping the councils, since if they were abolished, 'governance would become even harder'. Replacing the councils with an increased VFF role was not a realistic possibility, since the Front is seen as weaker than the council (which at least has some authority over budget decisions and can play a stronger monitoring role).

These results contrast with the findings of a quantitative study in 2014 that abolishing district councils produces an efficiency gain and improved service delivery (Malesky et al 2014). The article's conclusion is based on a questionable assumption that removing councils is part of a process of 'recentralisation' that 'shifts administrative and fiscal authority to local

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[18] Another possible reform would be to increase the role (and salary) of village heads, making them government employees (which status they do not presently have). This question was not asked by researchers, nor did it come up in any interviews. With over 100,000 villages nationally, a change in the status of village heads would have enormous financial and administrative implications.

governments'; in fact, local governments already had most of this authority in the first place. A more convincing analysis is presented in the Hồ Chí Minh National Political Academy's comparative study of Quảng Nam and Phú Yên provinces, which finds that retaining district councils is one of the reasons that Quảng Nam has better governance performance, and that Phú Yên's removal of the councils made no difference to participation at local levels (Dang et al 2013).

If councils are retained, respondents made strong cases for **increases in staff and budgets** so elected bodies can fulfil their legal roles and responsibilities. Over time, the 'hard' state budget for infrastructure development has risen greatly, but the 'soft' budget for capacity development has not. Voter meetings should be increased in quality and frequency (which also relates to the proposal on delegates' place of residence). Most importantly, the number of **full-time council representatives** should be increased, and dual appointments reduced or eliminated. Respondents felt this would improve the operations of People's Councils. Some proposed fixed quotas of 30% or 50% permanent, professional members, while the remaining 50% 'represent all social groups' through the corporatist structure. This reform would have state budget consequences, but again these were considered to be small overall and could be offset elsewhere – such as potentially by combining certain Party and People's Committee roles. In a June 2015 floor debate, National Assembly members offered similar arguments: a deputy from Phú Thọ province, for instance, called for higher qualifications and standards for People's Council delegates, to ensure that ideas of 'structure' and 'representation' do not lower the 'quality' of councils (Ha Phong 2015).

In conclusion, research questions about electoral innovations revealed further insight into the thinking of a sample of Vietnamese citizens and officials about democracy and representation. For some participants, especially in local focus groups, this appeared to have been the first time they thought through questions of how to improve people's participation. Some instinctively sought ways to justify current arrangements, while others either expressed general satisfaction with the system as it is or did not see any clear benefits to reform.

The widespread concern that direct elections would result in rule by parochial interests is surprising in so far that People's Councils and the National Assembly are already elected directly. Is 'local capture' by majority clans or ethnic groups at the commune level a greater worry than factionalism or elite capture at higher levels? As a prominent national commentator recently said to one member of the research team, 'there are now relationships in politics much closer than those among relatives' (interview, Hanoi, 22 April 2015).

Moreover, the Communist Party (via the Fatherland Front) already maintains a strong, usually decisive voice in electoral outcomes through the nomination process. If citizens were given a choice of commune leaders while maintaining the nomination system, the risks of what some perceive as 'excessive democracy' (*dân chủ quá chớn*) would appear to be minor. In the words of one local official, 'we need to put the people's interests first and awaken potential in the community. The election process doesn't need to change, but it needs to improve in quality and change the way of working to be integrated with village meetings.' A Fatherland Front representative in another province agreed: the most important step to improve elections, said one, would be to increase meetings between candidates and voters and between elected representatives and local constituents, so that delegates 'better understand the local situation and act to improve it'. Such procedural improvements would potentially have greater impact on representative participation if combined with one or more of the substantial reforms discussed above.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

By combining in-depth qualitative analysis of citizens' experiences with national and provincial PAPI findings, this study breaks new ground in understanding of direct and indirect participation in Vietnamese political life. While each research location demonstrates examples of certain positive governance practices, overall quality of governance was clearly strongest in Quảng Trị (particularly lowland Triệu Phong district) and lowest in Ninh Thuận. Hòa Bình performed well on some indicators of transparency and vertical accountability, but less strongly on proxy voting and effectiveness of elected institutions. In all locations, some enthusiastic and voluntary participation is taking place, alongside a greater prevalence of pro-forma (*hình thức*) participation within a framework already decided at higher levels.

Moving beyond the provincial dimension and sub-dimension scores presented in PAPI reports, this research took a question-by-question approach to dig deeper into the meaning of quantitative survey findings. In addition to comparing geographical locations, the research team considered individual variables of sex, ethnicity, urban/rural surroundings, economic status, and level of connection to authorities as potential explanations of difference in PAPI results. Qualitative analysis deepens and nuances the PAPI finding that men, Kinh and richer people participate more and are happier about the public administrative system than women, ethnic minority and poor people (2013 report, p. 24). In particular, citizens with connections to governance institutions, including mass organisations and commune/village networks, participate most strongly; connection is a more important factor than gender, ethnicity, or economic status alone.

Considering the significance of levels of connection to local authorities, a productive design for future research would be to more explicitly compare experiences of connected and non-connected citizens in a variety of locations. The methodology used in this study, which depended on cooperation of local authorities and mass organisations to arrange interviews, precluded a comparison of this nature. Gender and education variables could also be given more emphasis in this research (which considered gender to an extent but not education). In addition, the importance of understanding youth and migrants' experiences emerged as a key refrain in several research locations. Except for Youth Union participants in mass organisation focus groups, youth perceptions were not included in this study, nor were the views of migrants who are by definition not present to be interviewed in their source locations. Subsequent research should explore these factors of citizen participation further.

4.1. Good practices at the local level

As noted in the above sections, each of the research locations visited exemplified certain positive governance practices that should be recognised and highlighted. Some features were present in all locations: a strong effort was clearly underway, for instance, to promote younger people in elected office and other leadership positions, both men and women. Accompanying this is a perception that women have relatively more equal status than before, although some distance from full parity with men. Some of the reason for the shift in gender attitudes may be attributed to women's efforts to advance their capacity, participation and careers, and to projects by international and Vietnamese NGOs who stress the importance of gender equality.

The vast majority of interview respondents showed awareness of the need for representation of all social groups in politics. The corporatist 'Structure' of electoral nominations is intended in large part to satisfy the desire for full representation. In ethnic minority-populated areas, non-Kinh ethnic groups were at least represented among local officials and sometimes formed the majority. Officials (including elected People's Council members) in these areas were making clear efforts to mobilise ethnic minorities to participate directly and indirectly, including some spoken use of local languages in village meetings and other events. However, as terms and

structures of the political system are set from above, mobilisation in ethnic areas occurred mostly in the system's terms, with little opportunity for local innovation or variation.

Implementation of the Grassroots Democracy Ordinance showed mixed results across the research sites. No location could be said to be in full compliance with the ordinance, although Quảng Trị, with its 'Grassroots Democracy Steering Committees', came closest. If instead the GDO is viewed as a toolbox of approaches to more participatory governance that can be selected to fit local contexts, then all localities are using the ordinance to some extent – and it is reasonable to presume that some tools, such as frequent village meetings, are more applicable in some locations than others.

Local officials in all areas visited also showed awareness of PAPI, and in some cases experience in using survey data to understand and improve local governance. This was particularly visible in Quảng Trị, which has not only issued a provincial decision to promote and improve PAPI results (Decision 1339/QĐ-UBND, 4 July 2014) but also a detailed report after six months showing what progress has been made (Report 21/BC-UBND, 12 February 2015). Although nearly 20 provinces throughout the country have produced an official document responding to PAPI, the progress report is the first of its kind to date.[19] It is probably no coincidence that Quảng Trị achieved the highest provincial scoring in the 2014 PAPI report. (This achievement should, however, be tempered by the fact that raw scores on citizen participation dimensions of PAPI are not particularly high in any province, and that Quảng Trị's scores measure lowland districts only, not upland areas like Dakrong that may have differing experiences of governance.)

When asked to identify reasons for their province's strong performance, local officials and citizens in Quảng Trị mentioned the province's history as a revolutionary heartland and battle zone leading to strong community solidarity. The importance of festivals, family and clan events (including in ethnic minority areas), and religious observances in temples and churches also featured in responses. Cadres interviewed at district and provincial levels also noted that the province had been involved in early grassroots democracy pilots dating from the early 1990s. As an official described,

> After a long time of hard lives due to the war and poverty, local people now enjoy an improved living standard under the Party's leadership. So they really support and follow the Party. Through actual participation, they see that their opinions are listened to and changes result. Then they are more and more active in direct participation.

This picture of active participation shows the potential of a 'virtuous circle': as citizens see that participation brings results, they have incentives to participate more. Evidence of similar enthusiasm could be found in other places, such as active associational membership of Raglai people in Bác Ái, Ninh Thuận; frequent village and neighbourhood meetings in Phan Rang and Hòa Bình; and efforts at local dispute resolution in Ninh Thuận. These positive initiatives occur at the grassroots where people experience direct links between their participation and specific changes, and between their citizenship rights and the accountability of authorities. When dealing with more complex issues such as land disputes and environmental consequences of big businesses, or with higher levels in the political hierarchy, local initiatives are limited to a certain extent by countervailing forces: apathy, prejudice, corruption, rigidity and fear of change. More controversially, economic growth and increases of market opportunities might pose a challenge to maintaining social cohesion and community participation in some locations. Communes facing pressure for land conversion to industrial or agribusiness use, for instance, are likely to have greater incidences of land

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[19] Quảng Trị is also piloting mobile phone scorecards (M-Score), an initiative of Oxfam for citizens to score performance of public servants via phone calls and text messages immediately after they complete a public administration service. See http://danchamdiem.vn/.

disputes and other forms of social conflict, as a number of citizens benefit from investment projects while others are left worse off (see, for instance, Oxfam 2012).

Rural, lowland Quảng Trị and similar locations in central Viet Nam appear to have lower levels of such social tensions in recent years than either peri-urban areas around major cities or mountainous regions of the country. This configuration could help to explain why many central provinces score well on PAPI but less strongly on the Provincial Competitiveness Index of the business environment. Finally, it is also possible that PAPI results are based on other reasons based on local or historical characteristics that are not easily transferable to other locations.

4.2.   Areas where improved performance is feasible within the political system

Qualitative research on direct and indirect participation, combined with analysis of PAPI data, reveals a number of specific ways in which implementation of citizens' constitutional rights, laws and policies on grassroots democracy and elections falls short of their potential within the present Vietnamese political system. The below recommendations were suggested by one or more interview respondents in the three provinces visited in this study and supported by background documents, including PAPI findings. They also relate to current discussions in the National Assembly and other venues on amendments to election laws, drafting of a Law on Access to Information, and strengthened or accountable mechanisms for vertical accountability in citizen-government interactions (such as PIBs and CISBs).

An adequate **legal structure for direct participation** already exists. Many citizens already participate actively in associations, informal social organisations, and other local groups. The key is increasing the substantive content of participation in socio-economic development, monitoring, and dispute resolution. Efforts to promote substantive participation are already being made through pilot and experimental programmes of the Vietnamese government, donors, and international and domestic NGOs. These programmes should be expanded and promoted with cooperation of local authorities and mass organisations, particularly the Fatherland Front. It is worth noting in this context that the revised draft of the Law on Local Government does not contain mechanisms for **citizen feedback to local government**, which is reserved as a legal role of the Fatherland Front. Decree 90/2013 on accountability requires leaders to explain about policy implementation but not gather feedback (Acuña-Alfaro and Đỗ 2014).

If citizens are meaningfully consulted and given a chance to propose ways to improve participation, ideas will emerge, and some of them will garner majority support. Popular apathy towards politics is both a cause and result of institutional unclarity. Participation of ethnic minorities for whom Vietnamese is not a first language would be enhanced by the increased use of **ethnic languages** in both their spoken and (where relevant) written forms (see Box 3.2). The right to use ethnic languages alongside Vietnamese is guaranteed in Article 5 of the 2013 Constitution.

Regarding indirect (electoral) participation, several important steps can be immediately implemented between now and the next national elections scheduled for 2016. These steps would improve election quality, increase people's interest and involvement in the electoral process, and consequently lead to a higher degree of confidence and legitimacy in outcomes, which serves the interests of citizens, the Communist Party, and government.

- **One set of election laws and procedures** should apply for all elections, for village heads, People's Councils and National Assembly. All elections should follow the principles of 'universal, equal, direct and secret suffrage' stated in the Constitution, summarised in the phrase 'one person, one vote.' All elections, including at the village level, should be conducted by secret ballot with multiple candidates for each position. These Constitutional rights can be ensured through stricter implementation of existing laws. When feasible, the Law on National Assembly Elections, Law on People's Council Elections, and election-related sections of the Grassroots Democracy Ordinance should be combined into a single law with enforcement provisions and sanctions for non-compliance.

- The voting rights of women, the elderly, and youth should be safeguarded through ending the common practice of **proxy voting** (see section 3.2). Over time, this will lead to more representative election results. In the short run, a consequence could well be lower election turnout rates in areas where proxy voting has been prevalent. However, interview data suggests that most citizens will come to vote when invited or when they feel they have an interest to do so. Local election boards should not cut legal corners in order to report prescribed turnout rates; instead, turnout should be achieved through strong campaigning and messaging by candidates and local officials (including the Fatherland Front) who have a responsibility to organise elections in accordance with the Constitution and law. Relevant sections of the Grassroots Democracy Ordinance should be amended to require that all voters cast ballots directly.

- The Fatherland Front and Communist Party committees should promote increased **diversity of local candidates**, reducing the 'hard structure' and practice of dual appointments (Section 3.1). Increased electoral competition would increase the relevance of the political system to people's lives.

- A further step towards higher electoral participation would be to **clarify and promote voting rights of migrants** in their destination locations. This recommendation also applies to direct participation (Sections 2.3 and 3.1).

- To verify increased election quality, domestic **election monitors** could be deployed to polling stations nationwide for the 2016 elections. Monitors could comprise mass organisation representatives, other social associations, and/or university students, such as those involved as PAPI enumerators at provincial level. To avoid duplication of roles, monitors should not have any other election-related responsibilities (logistics, organisation, or counting of ballots).

4.3. Prospects for institutional change to promote citizen participation

A major finding of this research on citizen participation in Vietnamese political life is that in certain respects (and in certain locations), the institutions enabling direct and indirect participation are working largely as they are intended. In such communes, for instance in lowland Quảng Trị, citizens participate almost universally in mass organisations, take part in frequent village meetings, use the citizen reception office of the commune, and in turn receive good quality leadership with support from higher levels of government. These locations, in as far as this study is able to demonstrate, are likely to be primarily agricultural, Kinh majority areas with high social cohesion and limited effects of rapid economic change. Further research would be necessary to understand the multiple reasons behind this correlation.

At one point in Viet Nam's ongoing journey of Renewal (*Đổi mới*), such 'traditional' communes presumably made up the preponderance of local governance units across the country. The locations where governance structures appear to be working the most effectively may ironically be those that have changed the least since the post-revolutionary period. Increasingly, as Viet Nam becomes a middle-income country with higher rates of urbanisation and industrialisation, the existing structures of citizen participation no longer appear adequate to keep up with the pace of change. The slogan 'People know, people discuss, people do, and people monitor' is still widely known and theoretically valued but inconsistently implemented across locations. The same pattern applies for the Grassroots Democracy Ordinance, which is implemented with differing levels of effectiveness depending much on the local leadership's decisions and power. Variance in PAPI results by geographic location and individual characteristics of respondents provides clear evidence of the inconsistency in citizen participation across the country.

Over time, the workload and demands made on local representatives and officials has risen significantly, but the number of cadres or government personnel (*biên chế*) has remained constant. The adjustments required have produced many tired and overworked officials. Laws and sub-law documents accumulate, new centres and structures are built, and the

state budget is allocated to an increasing number of activities and roles. For many tasks related to governance and participation, staff and activity funds are allocated but very low operational funds. Each locality tries to adapt to this situation a bit differently, which is another likely factor behind the divergent outcomes visible in PAPI.

In this context, some of the institutions established in the GDO, such as CISBs and PIBs, should be evaluated and reconsidered – a recommendation that also appears in the 2014 PAPI report (p. xvii) along with the suggestion of **increased roles for NGOs and other social organisations** in gathering and presenting local feedback, so that the responsibilities of monitoring local governance can be spread out or 'socialised' among multiple sectors of society. Another promising innovation is the use of mobile phone scorecards and e-mailboxes at local level to provide **alternative channels for citizen feedback**. These provisions apply to review and revision of the Grassroots Democracy Ordinance, as well as the proposed Law on Access to Information and Law on Associations.

The value and quality of village head elections would be improved by **standardising village elections as part of the five-year national election cycle**. This would reduce the costs and effort of holding separate village ballots and ensure that village head elections are conducted according to the same standards as National Assembly and People's Council elections. There should not be different criteria for quality elections for different offices. Village heads (and other elected representatives) who fail to perform satisfactorily could still be removed by votes of no confidence or other administrative procedures. As recommended above, existing laws on NA and People's Council elections should be combined with village election legislation in the GDO to form a cohesive set of election policies that apply at all levels.

Future revisions of the GDO and laws on local governance should also consider **ending the practice of dual appointments for People's Council members**, which poses a significant conflict of interest in the Councils' roles. An understanding of the need for clarification and separation of local institutional roles already exists between the People's Committee and Fatherland Front. This should be included in revision of laws governing People's Council elections and organisation. Citizens should have the right to select among an expanded pool of candidates, directly elect additional local leaders, and increase their roles in policy monitoring and implementation. As these changes will take time to become institutionalised, they should first be piloted in places that are ready for them.

Stronger roles of People's Councils, especially at commune level, will also heighten voters' awareness and interest in indirect participation (Section 3.2). The efforts of Quảng Trị and other provinces to clarify (*đổi mới*) People's Council responsibilities should be recognised and promoted (see, for instance, Quảng Trị's Decision 1339/2014 on the use of PAPI to promote improved local governance). Although there is a common recognition in many locations that People's Councils are not working very well at present, they have democratic potential as elected bodies that can add substantial value through monitoring, supervising and at times checking the power of other local institutions.

Rather than abolish district and ward-level councils, their roles and responsibilities should be increased through reducing the practice of dual appointments, taking steps to open the nomination process, and encouraging locally-based candidates (Section 3.3). This does not require adding members to People's Councils, only amending nomination and election procedures. Wherever People's Committees operate, there should be People's Councils to supervise them. Although the Fatherland Front and other social organisations are increasing their monitoring roles, they cannot replace the authoritative supervision of People's Councils. The budget allocated to People's Councils should increase proportionally through a re-balancing of infrastructure construction expenditures to focus on human capital, and possibly offset through combining other roles and positions in local authority structures.

PIBs and CISBs should be merged to become citizen supervision committees, under the oversight of People's Councils. The supervision committees should be made up of citizens who are not state employees. This re-structuring would require amendment of the

Grassroots Democracy Ordinance. Innovations could be piloted first in communities that wish to adopt them, before being expanded through formal, legal channels.

Many of these suggestions are not new. They have been made by thoughtful, neutral observers of the Vietnamese political system both inside and outside the Communist Party. The 2006 *Deepening Democracy* report recommended a series of amendments and modifications to practices of citizen participation (McElwee and Ha 2006, pp. 29-30). Yet few of these recommendations have been put into practice. In Viet Nam's consensus-based political system, the time required to consider even incremental reforms is measured in years. For instance, the pilot to abolish People's Councils at certain levels was discussed for years before the experimental implementation began in 2008. Now, seven years later, it is past time to conclude that the experiment has not produced positive results, yet as no national consensus exists on this view, the experiment continues without a clear end point.

The duplication and overlap among many state agencies is both an obvious problem needing attention and at the same time a main factor impeding institutional change. The pilot abolition of certain People's Councils may be understood as a well-intentioned effort to reduce, ever so slightly, the accumulation of agencies at local levels that each makes demands on personnel and the state budget. So is the merging of commune chair and Party secretary positions in some locations (a reform that research respondents evaluated more positively than abolishing People's Councils). In fact, the potential efficiency gains and savings from limiting parallel Party and Government structures may be larger than the overlap and costs of People's Councils. And at present, People's Councils and the National Assembly are the only representative institutions elected by all citizens. As such, there is a normative value in preserving, indeed in increasing, the roles of these elected bodies.

The Introduction to this report presented an overview of Vietnamese approaches to understanding democracy. Qualitative evidence presented here shows that local citizens and officials view governance in ways that are distinct from global understandings of liberal democracy. However, most of the reasons given for their thinking are not ideologically grounded, but rather practical: extension of elections to other public offices might lead to domination of parochial interests, for instance, or be beyond the knowledge or interest of voters. Some of the explanations provided do not add up logically, and others might be interpreted as an instinctive defence of the status quo. Yet on other potential electoral reforms, some of the same respondents were open to considering new approaches and structures. No one speaks against democracy in theory: instead there is an underlying fear of majoritarianism and at times distrust of local people's (presumably ill-informed) political opinions.

Given the Communist Party's established leadership role in the political system, reforms to promote greater citizen participation would arguably increase its legitimacy and effectiveness. With multiple mechanisms in place to ensure Party oversight of direct and indirect participation, increased public involvement and interest in local governance would bring greater stability. The present trends towards lower involvement, as seen in lack of change or decline in PAPI scores on participation-related measures, are a sign that it is time to shift course and promote responsive reforms.

Local participation in Viet Nam can be best understood as a means to achieve a stable balance between administrative effectiveness and representation of all social groups in decision making. There is thus both an instrumental and a value-based commitment to inclusion built into the political system. If well implemented, this principle could result in a creative form of substantive democracy that is different from liberal or procedural conceptions of democracy. Achieving this goal will require increased efforts from both Vietnamese citizens and political institutions alike.

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Annexes

Annex A. Summary of interviews conducted

Interview Type	# men	# women	Total persons
Focus group	**66**	**28**	**94**
Individual	**7**	**5**	**12**
			106

Quảng Trị

Date	Location	Type of interview	Position	# men	# women	Total	Ethnicity
9/3/15	Triệu Hòa, Triệu Phong district	Focus group	Commune officials and mass org. representatives	8	3	11	Kinh
9/3	Triệu Hòa	In-depth interview	Commune WU		1	1	Kinh
9/3	Triệu Hòa	In-depth interview	Commune YU	1		1	Kinh
9/3	Triệu Hòa	Focus group	Citizens	8		8	Kinh
10/3	Triệu Phong district	In-depth interview	District VFF		1	1	Kinh
11/3	Krông Klang town, Đakrong district	Focus group	Commune officials	2	2	4	Vân Kiều, Kinh
11/3	Krông Klang	Focus group	Commune officials	3	1	4	Vân Kiều, Paco, Kinh
11/3	Krông Klang	In-depth interview	Commune official	1		1	Kinh
11/3	Krông Klang	Focus group	Citizens	7		7	Paco, Vân Kiều, Kinh
11/3	Krông Klang	In-depth interview	Citizen	1		1	Vân Kiều
11/3	Krông Klang	In-depth interview	Citizen	1		1	Vân Kiều
12/3	Đakrong district	In-depth interview	District VFF		1	1	Kinh
13/3	Đông Hà	Focus group	Provincial VFF and People's Council	4		4	Kinh
				36	9	45	TOTAL

Ninh Thuận

Date	Location	Type of interview	Position	# men	# women	Total	Ethnicity
16/3	Phước Tân, Bắc Ái district	Focus group	Commune officials	2	3	5	Raglai
16/3	Phước Tân	Focus group	Citizens	1	2	3	Raglai
16/3	Phước Tân	Focus group	Citizens	2	2	4	Raglai
18/3	Kinh Dinh ward, Phan Rang city	Focus group	Ward officials	3		3	Kinh
18/3	Kinh Dinh	Focus group	Ward officials	3	1	4	Kinh
18/3	Kinh Dinh	Focus group	Citizens (elderly)	2	2	4	Kinh
18/3	Kinh Dinh	Focus group	Citizens	2	2	4	Kinh
19/3	Phan Rang	Focus group	People's Council of Phan Rang City and Bắc Ái district	2		2	Kinh
19/3	Phan Rang	In-depth interview	Provincial People's Council	1		1	Kinh
				18	12	30	TOTAL

Hòa Bình

Date	Location	Type of interview	Position	# men	# women	Total	Ethnicity
23/3	Đồng Tâm, Lạc Thủy district	Focus group	Citizens	3		3	Mường
23/3	Đồng Tâm	Focus group	Commune officials	3	1	4	Mường, Kinh
23/3	Đồng Tâm	Focus group	Commune officials	4	3	7	Mường, Kinh
24/3	Lạc Thủy district	In-depth interview	District People's Council	1		1	Kinh
25/3	Hữu Nghị ward, Hòa Bình city	Focus group	Citizens	3	3	6	Mường, Kinh
25/3	Hữu Nghị	Focus group	Ward mass org. officers	2	1	3	Mường, Kinh
25/3	Hữu Nghị	Focus group	Ward officials	2	2	4	Mường, Kinh
25/3	Hòa Bình city	In-depth interview	City People's Council	1		1	Kinh
26/3	Hòa Bình city	In-depth interview	Provincial VFF		1	1	Kinh
26/3	Hòa Bình city	In-depth interview	Provincial Farmers' Union		1	1	Kinh
				19	12	31	TOTAL

Annex B. Statistical Appendix

Percentage of people who participate in the Communist Party, mass organisation(s), social-professional organisation(s), or sports, cultural or social groups (such as a football team or temple association)

PAPI question A016, 2013 data

Province name	Ethnic minorities	Kinh	Total
An Giang	29.1	19.4	21.6
Ba Ria Vung Tau	2.5	56.1	56.1
Bac Giang	100.0	24.3	24.3
Bac Kan	68.4	74.9	70.4
Bac Lieu	10.3	31.9	25.4
Bac Ninh	100.0	59.3	59.3
Ben Tre	50.0	54.6	54.6
Binh Dinh	0.0	61.4	61.2
Binh Duong	0.0	38.9	38.4
Binh Phuoc	44.0	66.6	65.2
Binh Thuan	100.0	52.8	53.3
Ca Mau	0.0	47.3	47.3
Can Tho	0.0	31.5	31.4
Cao Bang	85.8	87.7	85.8
Da Nang		72.5	72.5
Dak Lak	57.5	67.3	60.5
Dak Nong	33.5	81.5	81.1
Dien Bien	26.0	57.7	33.5
Dong Nai	22.5	34.9	33.7
Dong Thap		33.7	33.7
Gia Lai	47.2	82.5	78.9
Ha Giang	76.5	96.0	78.9
Ha Nam		75.6	75.6
Ha Noi	64.5	50.3	50.8
Ha Tinh		93.1	93.1
Hai Duong		69.6	69.6
Hai Phong	100.0	35.9	36.0
Hau Giang	66.7	47.0	47.1
Hoa Binh	88.6	64.0	84.1
Hung Yen		57.6	57.6
Khanh Hoa	60.1	52.5	54.9
Kien Giang	34.2	38.1	37.4
Kon Tum	55.3	55.9	55.7
Lai Chau	13.9	77.8	17.1
Lam Dong	57.9	50.8	53.7
Lang Son	78.6	73.7	76.7

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Province name	Ethnic minorities	Kinh	Total
Lao Cai	60.2	48.5	59.1
Long An		47.0	47.0
Nam Dinh	100.0	61.4	62.5
Nghe An	92.1	69.0	77.2
Ninh Binh		66.1	66.1
Ninh Thuan	38.5	65.2	46.8
Phu Tho	84.8	70.7	74.0
Phu Yen		47.7	47.7
Quang Binh		93.3	93.3
Quang Nam	83.3	60.2	62.3
Quang Ngai	48.1	52.8	50.8
Quang Ninh	25.6	62.2	40.7
Quang Tri		95.6	95.6
Soc Trang	30.4	42.6	41.2
Son La	91.0	71.3	88.9
TP. Ho Chi Minh	29.2	36.7	36.6
Tay Ninh	0.0	22.2	21.8
Thai Binh		80.3	80.3
Thai Nguyen	66.2	64.0	64.6
Thanh Hoa	64.0	55.0	58.1
Thua Thien Hue		82.2	82.2
Tien Giang	25.0	47.7	47.7
Tra Vinh	23.1	28.0	23.4
Tuyen Quang	66.6	75.6	69.8
Vinh Long	0.0	45.2	44.8
Vinh Phuc		75.4	75.4
Yen Bai	73.3	66.0	66.5
Total	**46.5**	**48.9**	**48.5**

Percentage of people who report that someone else voted in their place (within or outside the family)

PAPI question D106a, 2013 data

Province	MALE			FEMALE		
	Ethnic minorities	Kinh	Total	Ethnic minorities	Kinh	Total
An Giang	9.1	7.0	7.5	31.4	46.4	44.5
Ba Ria Vung Tau	0.0	29.8	29.6		40.3	40.3
Bac Giang	0.0	29.7	29.6		44.1	44.1
Bac Kan	27.5	34.1	29.9	29.9	13.6	26.1
Bac Lieu	18.4	6.1	9.3	69.7	61.6	63.7
Bac Ninh		34.5	34.5		35.3	35.3
Ben Tre	0.0	26.2	26.1		22.9	22.9
Binh Dinh		9.4	9.4		27.4	27.4
Binh Duong		4.6	4.6	0.0	22.8	22.6
Binh Phuoc		3.0	3.0	50.0	36.2	37.6
Binh Thuan		7.7	7.7		42.3	42.3
Ca Mau	100.0	34.1	34.1		60.2	60.2
Can Tho		11.8	11.8		28.0	28.0
Cao Bang	27.3	39.3	27.6	67.4	9.3	66.2
Da Nang		34.9	34.9		48.0	48.0
Dak Lak	0.0	9.0	3.7	13.4	62.1	36.5
Dak Nong	0.0	24.4	23.8	73.9	28.9	29.3
Dien Bien	18.0	32.1	25.5	29.1	15.2	25.1
Dong Nai	0.0	25.7	24.7	100.0	47.1	49.5
Dong Thap		12.5	12.5		52.3	52.3
Gia Lai	24.9	4.6	5.3	100.0	36.3	42.2
Ha Giang	15.5	0.3	15.3	40.8	97.0	51.6
Ha Nam		37.7	37.7		27.0	27.0
Ha Noi	46.9	25.0	25.5	89.7	45.9	46.5
Ha Tinh		16.9	16.9		54.0	54.0
Hai Duong		6.6	6.6		36.6	36.6
Hai Phong		24.4	24.4		43.0	43.0
Hau Giang	50.0	31.6	31.6		44.9	44.9
Hoa Binh	29.5	32.8	29.9	66.5	53.3	63.6
Hung Yen		6.4	6.4		35.3	35.3
Khanh Hoa	4.3	12.7	10.6	39.9	60.3	51.5
Kien Giang	0.0	17.7	16.7	100.0	51.4	64.2
Kon Tum	0.0	7.3	4.4	19.9	23.0	21.9
Lai Chau	17.0	22.3	17.9	39.9	17.7	30.5
Lam Dong	10.6	3.4	6.8	17.4	31.8	25.4
Lang Son	20.6	3.5	13.4	41.2	17.9	30.9

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	MALE			FEMALE		
Province	Ethnic minorities	Kinh	Total	Ethnic minorities	Kinh	Total
Lao Cai	26.6	23.5	26.3	35.4	2.4	29.4
Long An		13.1	13.1		43.2	43.2
Nam Dinh	0.0	42.1	38.1	100.0	27.9	28.1
Nghe An	22.1	29.4	26.2	39.3	52.4	48.6
Ninh Binh		38.2	38.2		46.8	46.8
Ninh Thuan	20.2	26.7	23.1	21.8	25.8	23.8
Phu Tho	52.1	27.6	34.5	23.3	34.4	32.4
Phu Yen		15.4	15.4		74.8	74.8
Quang Binh		22.9	22.9		45.8	45.8
Quang Nam	0.0	19.5	18.6	21.4	34.0	32.5
Quang Ngai	3.8	12.9	11.5	54.7	26.0	36.7
Quang Ninh	25.4	25.7	25.5	75.2	43.5	57.6
Quang Tri		25.6	25.6		29.2	29.2
Soc Trang	0.0	22.1	20.6	28.7	42.9	41.2
Son La	22.6	39.3	24.0	20.5	15.5	19.8
TP. Ho Chi Minh	78.8	7.6	7.7	0.0	22.1	21.7
Tay Ninh		19.7	19.7	100.0	48.8	48.8
Thai Binh		29.1	29.1		43.6	43.6
Thai Nguyen	7.7	32.3	26.1	91.2	26.5	41.2
Thanh Hoa	11.6	33.5	26.0	14.2	43.4	35.7
Thua Thien Hue		15.7	15.7		38.7	38.7
Tien Giang	0.0	26.4	26.4	0.0	6.4	6.4
Tra Vinh	0.9	24.9	3.4	19.1	70.3	21.7
Tuyen Quang	6.9	22.3	11.0	50.5	39.7	45.9
Vinh Long	0.0	2.0	2.0	0.0	22.1	21.3
Vinh Phuc		32.4	32.4		50.9	50.9
Yen Bai	0.0	28.2	27.9	76.6	14.4	22.9
Total	**14.5**	**19.2**	**18.7**	**40.6**	**39.5**	**39.6**