

# Citizen Participation in Vietnam's Local Government: Impact on Transparency and Accountability

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## Abstract

Around the world, a growing crisis of legitimacy and complex problem solving characterize a sense of change in the state-citizen relationship. In Vietnam, the Doi Moi (renovation) process was carried out by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and the Government of Vietnam (GoV). Public institutions engaged at grassroots level by implementing a decree on “Regulation on Democracy Exercise” with the vision of a participatory society to improve the living standard of the Vietnamese people in general in order to enhance public service specifically. This article conceptualizes the concepts of Citizen Participation, Transparency, and Accountability in Vietnam. In the contested debates of the link between citizen participation and the two governance aspects, transparency and accountability, the article realizes the importance of achieving the balance from both sides of practice, as well as strengthen institutions that can reduce inefficiency and have real effectiveness. The fact that Vietnam just embarked on experimenting with policy initiatives encourages stronger citizen participation. Importantly, citizens participate in a number of elections for their delegates to local and national legislatures. One specific characteristic of public participation in Vietnam is that citizens somewhat are limited in participation by the nomination procedures and restriction in institutions. The article as a brief literature review on citizen participation and establishes the linkages between these three concepts. It reviews policy mechanisms for citizen participation and central-local power relationship. It stresses two main findings after

performing sufficient empirical evidences. First, it argues that citizen participation can be an engine of good governance in local public institutions in Vietnam. Once policy window provides the population some space for their participation, it assures a widening scale of an efficient governing system. It finds that transparency and accountability of local governments are two outcomes of citizen participation.

**Keywords:** citizen participation, transparency, accountability, governance

## 1. Introduction

Around the world, a growing crisis of legitimacy and complex problem solving characterize a sense of change in the state-citizen relationship (Commonwealth Foundation, 1999). One might witness a transition from traditional public participation towards increasingly activated policy windows for socially and politically active citizens. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), known as “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, was set by the United Nations (UN) in 2015. The SDGs include 17 goals. One among them is Goal 16, which is more ambitious than ever, promoting “peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.” (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg16>). SDGs’ Goal 16 mentioned that good governance practices such as citizen participation, transparency, accountability, etc. are strongly recommended to be integrated into political practices in countries around the world in order to make every government accountable to its people. Governments themselves should strive a new aiming for good, transparent and accountable governance. Goal 16 is the institution for public accountability in nations, implying that every country needs to improve their governance systems.

In Vietnam, the *Doi Moi* (renovation) process was carried out by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and the Government of Vietnam (GoV). Public institutions engaged at grassroots level by implementing a decree on “Regulation on Democracy Exercise” with the vision of a participatory society to improve the living standard of the Vietnamese people in general in order to enhance public service specifically (Kim *et al.*, 2005). One of the greatest improvement in Vietnam’s legitimacy for citizen participation has come to be known as the Grass-Roots Democracy (GRD), which was previously legitimized in 1998 (Decree No. 29/1998/ND-CP), followed by the amended and upgraded into an ordinance in 2007 (GRDO) by the Decree No. 79/2003/ND-CP. GRDO’s objective is to institutionalize citizen participation in local governance, especially at the village and communal levels.

The closing gap between citizen and state has been a result of two reactions from institutions (Cornwall *et al.*, 2001). A first reaction is to stress attention on the process of citizen participation. This is the way in which both have and have-not people are given equal voices through public consultation and mobilization. A second reaction is the growing attention emphasizing accountability and transparency of state institutions that enable good governance. To have a sufficient efficiency, each reaction cannot go without the other. For instance, if citizen participation is implemented without accountability and transparency, it leads to a lack of attention to politics, hence the public voices are not applied in policy implementation and

have no real influence. On the other hand, without citizen participation, governance only strengthens the status quo. Therefore, both sides of the equation, citizen participation-accountability and transparency, are linked.

It has been more than two decades since the central-planning mechanism collapsed in Vietnam. But a chorus of criticism is echoing and blocking the country on its way of renovating public affairs. Is Vietnam a society where corrupted inefficiency is accepted? Gainsborough (2010) is one of those observers who answered “Yes” by describing the length of 20 years in public reform agenda as the one that Vietnam witnessed where only few changes in terms of government’s underlying political ideology and practices took place. This means that public affairs mostly act as egoist towards values promoted by neoliberalism: transparency, accountability, participatory governance.

Some quite popular cognizance like the above have asserted that the CPV goes hand in hand with its executive arm (GoV), and maintains an extensive and exclusive control on national public affair. In contrast to that, some have at least enough evidence to justify an acceptable environment for the proliferation of neoliberal values. One important reason is that: in Vietnam, the central-local public administration’s structure is reversed compared to some centralized nearby governments like Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, etc. In spite of the fact that the CPV has played a critical role in public affairs, Vietnam’s history of warzone has decentralized political power to the local authorities leading to a considerable extent of power relationship’s fragmentation (Vasavakul *et al.*, 2009).

In the contested debates of the link between citizen participation and the two governance aspects, transparency and accountability, this article realizes the importance of achieving the balance from both sides of practice, as well as strengthen institutions that can reduce inefficiency and have real effectiveness. At the end of the day, governance is only perceived to be truly effective only if the governance arrangements “are capable of solving the substantive problems that they are set to address” (Fung, 2015).

Transparency and accountability are two key concepts in contemporary democracies and two key components of governance. However, as much as they are discussed in public administration literature, these concepts mean different things to different people. According to Khan (2009, p. 15), “transparency and accountability may sometimes help if both rents and the rent seeking can be potentially legalized”, with the “rents” are policy-created benefits, and “rent seeking” is the expenditure of resources by those who want to access those benefits.

Transparency means the ability for policy recipients to easily get access to information and that information is openly provided through public media or other forms. Simply put, transparency is a large extent of public information’s disclosure and dissemination. Best (2005) characterized “transparency” as honesty, guilelessness and openness. Transparency is about knowing what public institutions and public officers are doing, as well as justification for their decisions or actions. Many scholars have showed their attention on promoting transparency in governance for higher achievement in development (Vishwanath *et al.*, 1999; Stiglitz, 2002; Kaufmann *et al.*, 2002; OECD, 2006; Anderson *et al.*, 2006), suggesting priorities for actions to improve governance when elite policy-makers influence public policy.

The second governance term, accountability itself is similarly important yet ambiguous. Having the same idea, scholars like Jabbara *et al.* (1988), Jenkins *et al.* (1999) have stated that accountability has a wide range of connotations. For instance, it can be understood as some people being “held to account”, because their acts are appropriate and they take responsibility of their behaviour which could affect a group of people or a public property. Edwards *et al.* (1996) helped understand accountability as a governance aspect that public employers or politicians are responsible in their jobs and performances, as well as in making their decisions. To hold some powerful decision-makers into account, accountability encompasses a strong potential of having many power relationship at the same time. It is agreed that an effective accountability would require all parties in an accountability contract to believe others and act accordingly. Hence, the relationship of accountability and transparency is fundamental and inseparable.

Citizen participation has proven for a long time to be a strong tool in empowering transparency and accountability. However, in Vietnam, the power of the political party is not necessarily diminished. In fact, Hannah (2007) pointed out that the CPV and the GoV hold a strong grip on civic activities and their civil associations. Furthermore, if the government appears to be genuine in facilitating citizen participation as an integral element of new mode of governance, these efforts do not necessarily empower citizens and push public affairs’ efficiency forward. Having the same argument, Beaumont *et al.*, (2008) and Blakeley (2010) pointed out that citizen participation as a new governance arrangement might leads to democratic deficit within governance through a weakening mechanism of transparency and accountability. Citizen participation in enhancing these aspects of governance is in a quest for finding its true impact. In this line of thought, this article analyzes empirically the causality between citizen participation and transparency/accountability in the Vietnam setting. This article also attempts to answer the following research questions: 1) Does citizen participation improve transparency in local governments in Vietnam? and 2) Does citizen participation improve accountability in local governments in Vietnam?

Following these research questions, we develop a conceptual framework to understand them (Figure 1).

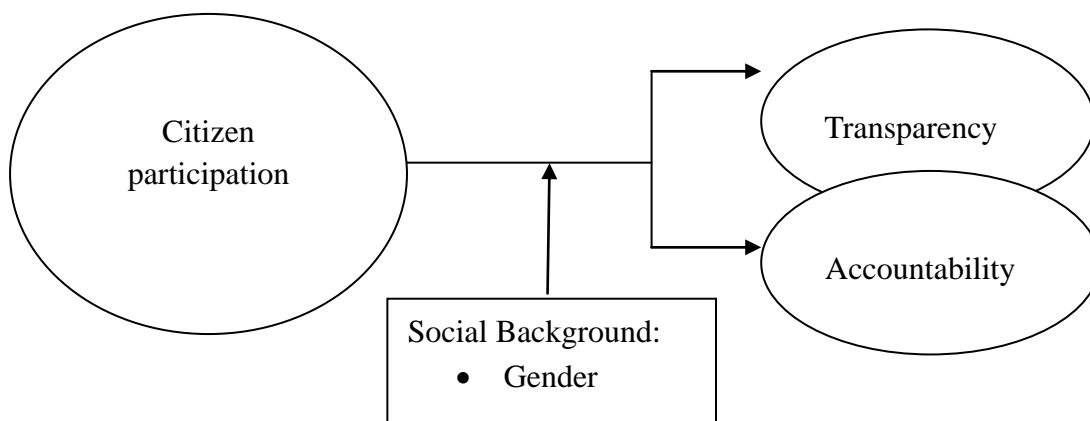


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

**Note:** Circles represent latent variables. Rectangle represents manifest variable.

This article employs the dataset of The Vietnam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI) to answer the aforementioned questions: How does citizen participation improve transparency and accountability in local governments in Vietnam? As shown in Figure 2, the dependent variables of this article are Transparency and Accountability and the explanatory variable is Citizen Participation. All of these variables are contextualized to the Vietnam context.

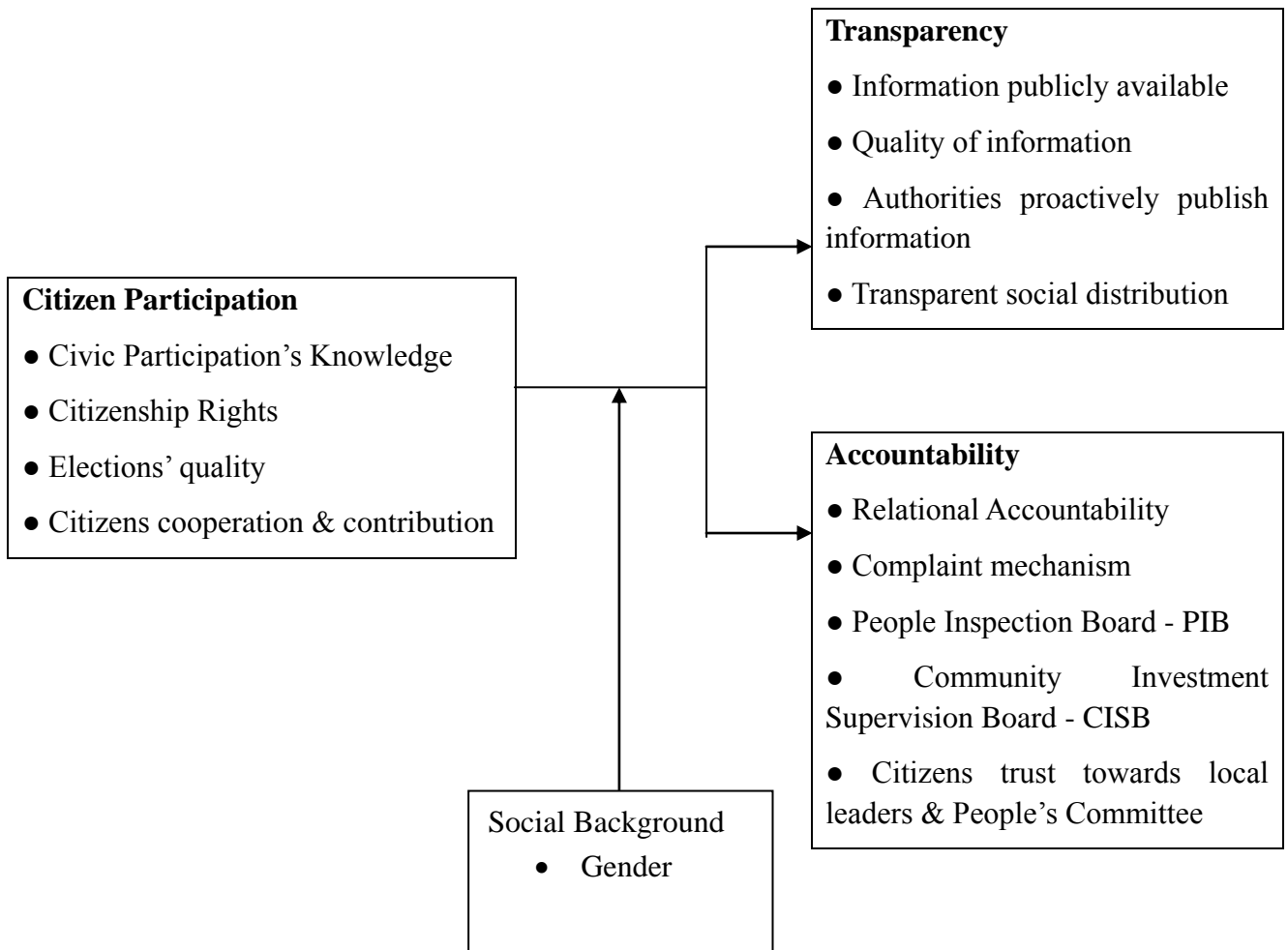


Figure 2. Analytical Framework

## 2. Conceptualizing Citizen Participation, Transparency, and Accountability in Vietnam

The fact that Vietnam just embarked on experimenting with policy initiatives encourages stronger citizen participation. Importantly, citizens participate in a number of elections for their delegates to local and national legislatures. One specific characteristic of public participation in Vietnam is that citizens somewhat are limited in participation by the nomination procedures and restriction in institutions. However, the cornerstone of GRDO is the local elections, where villagers are able to elect their village heads. One of the most important legal institutions for public participation in Vietnam is the GRDO. As such, citizen

participation is a fundamental aspect of governance in Vietnam (CECODES *et al.*, 2016).

Governance in Vietnam often is subjected to a lack of transparency. Gainsborough *et al.* (2009, p. 382) discussed reform agenda in Vietnam suggesting a “Transparency roadmap”. While Transparency should be fully taken place in every sector, a designated guideline should be discussed for pilot implementation.

Reducing poverty is arguably the main challenge for developing nations and the globe as a whole. The World Bank revised the Poverty Line, considering a person in extreme poverty if that person lives on or under 1.9 international dollars per day (in terms of purchasing power parity - PPP). In Vietnam, the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) defined 360,000 VND per person per month (12,000 VND per day, about 0.53 U.S. dollars in IMF exchange rates in May 2017) as acute poverty threshold.

Poverty list is an important recognition of acute poverty of households. This list can enable families and individuals to gain access to social security and a range of social benefits, e.g. free medical insurance, children tuition waivers, etc. The process for a local government to set up a poverty list is multi-staged. This list is subjected to be defined by the head of the village and public agreement by votes in village meetings. After that, the poverty list is publicly posted in village’s announcement boards and further stays under scrutiny. Hence, the accuracy and quality of the poverty list is well-related to transparency of local governance.

Fölscher *et al.* (2012) stated that public participation in budgeting is to have information access and an independent chance for stakeholders to intervene in the budgeting process. According to a UN-HABITAT publication (2004), this participatory form allows direct democracy to flourish at local levels, involving participatory deliberation (Sintomer *et al.*, 2012). Despite its advantages, public participation in budgeting and its impacts are among scholars and practitioners’ concerns due to implementing restriction at local levels.

In Vietnam, the GRDO placed a great emphasis on participatory budgeting issues, which is expressed in the right to know of citizens. Publicized commune budget’s plan affects local governance positively when citizens enjoy transparent sources of information and use that information in their community involvement.

Under Vietnam context, Transparency in local governance was proved in a study to be the most potentially corrupted in sectors related to rent seeking. To explain Transparency, the authors of this article select land sector according to a study by Vasavakul *et al.* (2009). In their research, land management was found to be the most vulnerable to corruption due to lack of information. Another research conducted by an independent research organization – Development and Policies Research Center (DEPOCEN) (2010) reviewed the central government regulated free flow of land information. The government regulations are embedded in Anti-Corruption Law 2005, the IT Law 2006, the Ordinance on Grassroots Democracy 2007, Project 30, most specifically the Land Law, later elaborated by Decree 84 (2007) and Decree 69 (2009), etc. The DEPOCEN research found that the implementation of these acts vary by local levels and lead to uneven transparency.

A tailored discussion about accountability needs to consider Vietnam’s specific political



characteristics and the nature of its one-party system. Same as transparency, governance in Vietnam often is subjected to a lack of accountability. However, positive signals were observed by qualitative evidence, such as a study by Malesky *et al.* (2011), which found out that Vietnamese members of Parliament have shown a growing concern of accountability by not casting their votes or even displaying disapproval towards certain disqualified cabinet candidates.

For Mason (2008), the core of accountability is the notion of responsibility. Biermann *et al.* (2011) also state that the responsibility of accounted individual or group can be achieved through four main dimensions: (1) *normative* - standard of behavior defined with sufficient precision; (2) *relational* – accountability relationship between those who have the right to hold to account; (3) *decisional* – the decisions of whether the expected standard of behavior is met or not; and (4) *behavioral* – how to sanction the unethical or deviant behavior of those who hold responsibility for accountability.

In Vietnam, relational accountability is especially worth to notice due to one of the main slogans of Vietnamese public officers *cán bộ* translated summarily as “public officers are servants who always stay close with citizens”, which is contrasted to being “distant to the public” (*xa rời quần chúng*). The relationship from where accountability is pursuit from citizens to public officers is very critical in accountability strategy at local levels.

The revised 2007 GRDO released by the GoV gave birth to the two following Community-Based Organizations (CBOs): The People’s Inspection Board (PIB), and the Community Investment Supervision Board (CISB). PIB was actually first introduced in 2004 in the Law on Inspection No. 2/2004/QH11 (Article 11) as a grassroots level accountability mechanism. Later in 2007, this mission was expanded with the introduction of CISB as another grassroots level’s governance tool. Two of these CBOs will deliver corruption detections with active involvement from citizens. This is where vertical accountability is achieved in low and lower local level in Vietnam governance.

The Centre for Community Support and Development studies (CECODES), United Nations Development Programs and the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF), an umbrella group of pro-government of mass political movements had a common voice (2011) on their perception of these two CBOs. They view them as the most institutionalized with relatively full legal support and most wide-reaching vertical accountability mechanisms in Vietnam local governance.

The PIB mandate is for citizens to supervise the implementation of all laws, regulations and policies by the communal People’s Committees – one of the important public authority agencies at local governments. In 2007, PIB’s mandate was expanded to become an anti-corruption tool to oversee the implementation of the Anti-corruption Law at the commune and local level, especially in public agencies, public owned businesses, and public officers’ acts. The GRDO regulations allow those who serve on PIB’s board of directors to have the right of supervision over public budget, public plans (e.g. most well-known are the Poverty List and Land use Plans), other social policies and social benefits. On the other hand, the CISB allows citizens’ supervision of investment projects and programs, regardless of the

capital's origin (e.g. investor can be local level government, or national programs from central government to be locally implemented, district-level government, etc). That will directly affect the community's financial and economics status in communes. It monitors various financial and managerial aspects of investment project, such as effectiveness, efficiency and capital waste, technical and ethical compliance to regulations and regulated processes, procurement, etc.

The PIB and CISB can be established at different governance levels by the joint action of commune level governance authorities and higher level in government. In nowadays common practice, PIB gradually overshadows the CISB in many tasks during those earliest implementation, which is why PAPI uses only indicators of CISB in 2011 not 2016. In 2016, PAPI replaced the CISB indicators by a single indicator that measures citizens' perceptions towards effectiveness of the District People's Committee.

Citizens' satisfaction is also a component of accountability and is based on the common sense assumptions that through interactions with authority leaders, their accountable acts will make citizens feel satisfied.

### **3. A Brief Literature Review on Citizen Participation, Transparency and Accountability**

The current stream of public administration theory enlightens the legitimacy crisis of governments and attempts to "bring the citizen back" to the center of the discussion (Fung, 2015; Thomas, 2013; Nabatchi, 2012). Citizen participation has an important implication on governance. As a governing interaction, governance seeks to share power in decision-making process and provide citizens some autonomy and independence for developing the common good through their civic engagement (Jun, 2002). Policymakers usually consider a menu of designated options for citizen participation by enacting and legalizing participatory institutions.

Over the past decade the concept of citizen participation has grown significantly in policy-making process in Vietnam. Broadly saying, citizen participation has been defined as "a process in which individuals take part in decision making in the institutions, programs and environments that affect them" (Heller *et al.*, 1984; Florin *et al.*, 1990). With citizen participation, formulated policies might be more realistically grounded in citizen preferences, the public might become more sympathetic evaluators of the tough decisions that government administrators have to make, and the improved support from the public might create a less divisive, combative populace to govern and regulate (Irvin *et al.*, 2004).

In contemporary Vietnam, citizen participation is conditioned by some changes in state's relationship with its citizenry (Gainsborough, 2010), which allows public officers to consult citizen's opinions. The study of Bingham and the associates (Bingham *et al.*, 2005) called for governments to engage citizen participation into new governance. However, the impact of citizen participation to public governance is unclear. It is influenced by a much more extensive appreciation of public opinion that does not entail a greater capacity for disciplining political elites. Taking two important dimensions of governance that are "transparency" and "accountability", policy decisions are subjected to an increased scrutiny



and a requirement to be accompanied by rational explanations. However, accountability involves a relationship between citizens and state departments and agencies, but not one that is mediated by a concept of representation connecting citizens to political actors (Rodan *et al.*, 2007).

Citizen participation is the basic right of Vietnamese citizens. It is enshrined in the country's Grass-roots Democracy Ordinance and other legislation. As such, citizen participation is a fundamental aspect of governance in Viet Nam (CECODES *et al.*, 2016). In authors' observation, most literature on citizen participation in the native language is united in one idea: citizen participation is proved to be increasingly powerful in public service. Some international scholars have different perspectives than domestic scholars. Based on this controversy, the authors of this article raise the question whether or not citizen participation is powerful in changing public governance issues. Can citizen participation make change in a very politicized dimension of public affairs? Or to be put in another way, is Vietnam's citizen participation a quality one?

The concept of citizen participation is ubiquitous yet extremely ambiguous. Citizen participation is a contested concept (Rowe *et al.*, 2004). Existing literature has a wide range of definitions. In various situations, it means different things to different people and organizations (Kim *et al.*, 2011). Due to the complexity in trying to define the concept, the authors believe it is important to list out some similar terms.

Firstly, carrying almost similar meaning to citizen participation, public participation is often used interchangeably and those are considered synonyms. However, in this article, the term citizen participation is used strictly because in some context, public participation includes not only citizens as individuals but also organized interests, interest groups and private sector actors.

Secondly, many scholars generally use the word "involvement" in replacement of "participation" or in citizen participation definition. Wang *et al.* (2007) defines citizen's political participation, as one of the crucial activity of citizen participation. It means "public involvement in expressing preferences for a broad spectrum of important national, regional, or local policies, mainly during the process of selecting political representatives, campaigning, and voting". As defined by Yang *et al.* (2011), citizen participation is citizen involvement in administrative decision making and management processes. According to them, citizen participation's function is to get citizens involved in issuing regulation, share a responsibility in delivering public goods, and accomplish managerial tasks, etc.

Thirdly, very widely used, "citizen engagement" sometimes carries the same meaning as citizen participation. However, this term particularly implies an intensive level of citizen participation in regular interactions in public administration and political dialogues. But the term does not imply a one-way exchange of idea neither from citizen to government or vice versa. Citizen engagement as a higher level of participation aims for political efforts to revitalize state's democracy. A work of Đurman (2015) contributed to summarize several different dimensions and typology of citizen participation.

Arnstein (1969) published an article, probably the most well-known and popularly cited in this field, entitled “A ladder of citizen participation” in which she broadly defined citizen participation as a process that brings out citizen’s power. Citizen participation ranges from manipulated participation to full citizen control. Moynihan’s work (2006) also tried to differentiate types of citizen participation, identifying three types: pseudo, partial and full participation.

From the perspective of deliberative democracy, the value of citizen participation can be found through both its normative and instrumental meanings (Goodin *et al.*, 2006; Hendriks, 2005). Simply put, citizen participation should be understood at the same time as a normative, essential element of life (Moore, 1995; Putnam, 1995); and as a governing tool in order to achieve policy targets (Fung, 2006).

The decisive measurement from a participatory viewpoint and political will of governments is their performance in empowering the population to play an active role in public sphere. This is a daunting task due to some issues of implementation which have emerged consistently in the literature.

Before the modernization plan of 1998 in Vietnam, state was the main employer. In the 1970s and first half of the 1980s most people were employed by the state, either in collective agriculture, in the bureaucracy, or for state-owned enterprises. There was also food rationing. There was tight restriction on people’s movement both within the country and outside. What media people were permitted to read or listen to was also tightly controlled, and generally the tentacles of the security apparatus were far-reaching (Long *et al.*, 1981; Canh, 1985).

In terms of the state's relationship with its citizenry, there are signs of both continuity and change. Tight state control over Vietnam's citizen participation, including invasive day-to-day surveillance by the security apparatus, is much less in evidence today. The party-controlled mass organization structure still persists. The party also continues to argue that it operates effectively both as a channel of communication between the state and the society as a source of valued development and citizen participation activity. However, the mass organizations are creaking at the seams, primarily because they appear rather out of date in the context of the rapid social change that has accompanied the reform era. For example, Vietnam's population is not easily categorized as farmers, workers or intellectuals, which is the terminology referred to in the country's constitution (Constitution of Vietnam, 1995). Equally, it is doubtful that all youth, women and business people feel adequately represented by party-regulated groups such as the Youth Union, the Women's Union or the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The proliferation of a wide variety of non-governmental organizations albeit under an uncertain legal framework, further suggests that there is an increasing number of individuals and groups which fall outside party-sanctioned organizational structures (Kerkvliet B. , 2003). All of those factors have facilitated the increasing involvement of citizen participation in public affairs.

Local governments nowadays face a great challenge in providing transparent and accountable services to their citizens and in responding to the complex demands of social and economic development of their local communities. The purpose of this article is to discuss the

transparency and accountability of local governments by analyzing citizen participation across Vietnam's municipalities and cities. Besides assessing the level of transparency and accountability, the analysis will serve as an empirical process to forecast an indicator of transparency and accountability of local governments.

In the realm of central governance and local governance, citizen participation, transparency and accountability are three main pillars of concern and important phenomena. Transparency and accountability are promoted as the core ingredients of good governance by many international and supranational organizations to determine if a country is qualified for economic cooperation, financial aid or membership in certain organizations (Kim *et al.*, 2005). The UNDP defines good governance as a process that includes nine principles: participation, rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, consensus orientation, equity, effectiveness and efficiency, accountability and strategic vision (Kettani *et al.*, 2008). Strengthening public governance remains a critical priority in policy agendas. And in doing so, transparency and accountability become guiding principles for governments (OECD/OAS, 2002, p. 37). As context varied, the terms transparency and accountability are both quite elastic to a certain extent. At the core of governance agenda is the battle against corruption, which is related to transparency and accountability. Hence, they are used differently to different context and do not have a precise definition. However, transparency and accountability are identified by Kondo S. (2002, p. 7) in the following manner: "Transparency meaning that reliable, relevant and timely information about the activities of government is available to the public", and "Accountability meaning that it is possible to identify and hold public officials to account for their actions".

Transparency is a two-way communication between government and its social actors which is approached in this article as citizens and citizenships. Simply put, transparency is the information flows between governed and governing actors, and the quality of this information flows. Following the thoughts of Kaufmann *et al.* (2002, p. 4), Aikins V. (2013, p. 20) further elaborated this term, transparency is not just about giving any information. Transparency should provide the public with empowering information which later support citizens to hold the government accountable. Similarly, the report titled *Public sector Accountability and Transparency* (OECD/OAS, 2002) advised governments to provide solid legal provisions to enhance transparency through public scrutiny and information access.

If the quality of information is not available or not accessible, transparency turns out to be overrated and losing its values. Etzioni (2010, p. 389) argues that, based upon current research, "transparency cannot fulfill the functions its advocates assign to it, although it can play a limited role in their service". He challenges the notion that "more details means more honesty", emphasizing the problem of the quality of information, usability of information and the competence of intermediary actors which are expected to 'translate' the information for the general public (e.g. the media) but are often not regulated themselves. Hence, it is important to mention the underlying meanings of transparency which according to Best (2005) and Kim *et al.* (2005, p. 649), includes honesty, guilelessness and openness.

Transparency itself has a lot of promises. Government transparency allows citizens to

monitor its activities and decisions and to hold the government accountable. It helps to develop a more effective government by infusing information to government activities and thus rendering them more responsive, limiting corruption, other negative practices in public administration, and promoting integrity and ethics in government.

According to Best (2005) and Kim *et al.* (2005, p. 650) the issue that transparency is not the answer to all governance problems. Even though with the existence of transparency, uncertainties in governance are impossible to be totally eliminated. In addition, political events are vaguely monitored. Along this line, this article seeks to explore one more important and critical dimension of governance, which is accountability. Not by coincidence, accountability together with the term transparency, are watchwords of governance reform around the world.

Accountability has a more malleable meaning as compared to transparency. As a composite concept, it has a range of connotations (Jabbra *et al.*, 1988; Jenkins *et al.*, 1999). It holds the meaning of some party being “held to account”. In the context of effective governance, Jalal (1999) and Edwards *et al.* (1996) referred to accountability as holding public servants to be responsible for their performance and the results of their behavior. Strengthening accountability requires a systematic reform of the state governance. The accountability mechanisms imply both at vertical accountability and horizontal accountability (Santiso, 2001).

While vertical accountability means the accountability between the governed and the governing, horizontal accountability relates to the relationship between different branches of government. Both forms of accountability require the decentralization and de-politicization of public administration. Accountability is thought to be produced in various policy options (Blair, 1998), like local elections, strong and active opposition parties, media, public meetings and formal redress procedures.

#### **4. The Linkages between Citizen Participation, Transparency, and Accountability**

There have been conflicted evidences that link citizen participation to both greater and lower quality of governance. First of all, citizen participation definition cannot be a conceptual straitjacket across varied nations’ contexts. However, its normative theoretical perception is that the populations will be able to keep an eye on the governance regimes and contribute to enhance their efficiency and oust corruption. This will tend to make the quality of governance higher in the long term.

Many qualitative studies observed that governance involves people and the process they participate (Bingham *et al.*, 2005) and through this process, governance quality is strengthen (Macedo *et al.*, 2004; Dryzek *et al.*, 2003; Gutmann *et al.*, 1996; Macedo, S. (Ed.), 1999; Polletta, 2012; Cooper *et al.*, 1984; Pateman, 1970). Backing up this idea, Goetzmann (2000) observed that the cost of lack of institutions for citizen participation can raise government’s cost. His study showed that in financial crisis, there is a dictatorship where the ordinary citizens have no voice and are financially hurt. As a consequence, without institutions of transparency, the citizens could not fully aware of the risk they were facing or held public

servants accountable. More recently, Aikins V. (2013) found evidences in the budget process in Ghana to prove that through the media, citizen participation improves transparency and accountability in the long run.

However, another group of scholars found out that a combination between citizen participation and governance capacity is hard to create. A curvilinear causal relationship is found between administrative performance (which one dimension among them is transparency) and public inclusion policy-making process (Bäck *et al.*, 2008). That study helps to explain other researchers' observations of a global tendency toward a growing gap between the two concepts. Interestingly, transparent quality of governments in some strong authoritarian states is found to be higher than in the states that are relatively partially democratized. In a more classical research using traditional perception of participation, Morrell (1999) also found that a distinctive difference among participation conditions in policy decision-making leads to no difference of citizenry's trust in governments' legitimacy. Gangl (2000) supported Morrell (1999) in her independent research on different subject of procedural justice. She stated that the "people have voice" process produced no significance in perceived legitimacy, meaning no accountability was found to be related. In an extensive social experiment conducted by Hibbing *et al.* (2002), the findings are in the same side of the argument. They found that there is no significant patterns proving that voice of citizens standing alone make a difference in subjects' perceptions of fairness of the decision maker. Only little evidence is found to prove the opposite pattern of a positive impact when extra conditions appeared in the experiment.

Even though the cases above do not fully captivate the whole picture of citizen participation and its impact on good governance, nonetheless these evidences give us the idea that the combination of citizen participation and good governance depend on the context and are influenced by the participatory institutions. This variation affects the participatory process and decides who participates, how is the connection to the decision makers, the governing rulers, substantive outcomes, etc. This is well-recorded in an article of Fung A. (2015) where the author mentions again that circumstances differentiate citizen participation in governance.

### **5. Policy Mechanism for Citizen Participation and Central – Local Power Relationship in Vietnam**

The GRDO is the government response to a call for better governance practices at the local level. This legal expression allows grassroots democratization to spread at the commune level to improve the laws that facilitate citizens' complaints and denunciations of corrupt local officials. The GRDO functions to achieve four main objectives.

First, to enhance budget transparency and allocation;

Second, to increase citizen participation in decision-making;

Third, to increase the role of the public in guarding and managing local government via complaints and denunciation provisions; and

Fourth, to designate the village level as the basic unit to achieve its objectives.



The GRDO is also considered as an empowerment strategy of central government to “kill two birds with one stone”. Those goals are to democratize local level through policy education for the ordinary citizens. They help gain better control over local government and influence the behavior of corrupted public officials.

Policy windows for positive change may start from citizens’ complaints. Mechanisms for the complaining process are completed when GRDO allows citizens’ complaints and denunciations to be heard by public servants at local villages and communes. According to Burall *et al.* (2005), good governance is underpinned when the effective complaints and redress processes support public accountability principles. Furthermore, effectiveness of the complaining process should be in place so that citizens are treated not only as consumers in the ideology of consumerism, but also as advocates to ensure public sector accountability and achieve good governance (Brewer, 2007).

## **6. Conclusion - Research Contributions and Policy Implications**

In this article the authors have repeatedly stressed the importance of the impact of citizen participation on governance and on transparency and accountability. Citizen plays several roles in the governance structure that are aimed at improving good governance. Hence, it is significant to specify the existence of whether or not the impact is inherent in the context of Vietnam.

After examining the relevant literature, the article has stressed two main findings. First, the authors have argued that citizen participation can be an engine of good governance in local public institutions in Vietnam. Once policy window provides the population with some space for their participations, it assures a widening scale of an efficient governing system. Undoubtedly, active citizen participation brings many benefits that will reflect some shifting characteristics of the whole social structure. The second finding, based also on an analysis of the literature, found that transparency and accountability of local governments are two outcomes of citizen participation.

The article has also made a contribution to the study of participatory governance and democracy in developing countries. Its findings can be used to argue that even under rigid political structure, citizen participation, when practiced in local commune or at the village level, would shed lights on democratic governance. It is a case study that identifies the factors contributing to participatory governance in Vietnam.

The article is based on an assumption that governance in a nation-state is dynamic in different administrative levels. Clearly, it is better to focus our current vision to the local level when it comes to discussing governance. However, central government is still the crucial actor when thinking about governance in a conventional way. Hence, central government should be the next level for evaluating governance which is undeniably dynamic. Without discarding the importance of states, the authors recommend that future research be directed to governance at the national level.



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