

# State Governance at Local Level in Vietnam in the Trend of Developing Digital Technology Applications

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## ABSTRACT

State governance at local level in modern society - digital society, developing many digital technology applications, places high demands on transparency, accountability of government agencies and increase in people's participation in developing and implementing policies as well as management decisions of state agencies. Then, democracy and legitimate needs and interests of the people are promoted; different resources from the people to manage social development in localities are usefully employed. To achieve good state governance at local level (hereby called local governance), it is crucial for state agencies to be streamlined and efficient. In this study, the characteristics of local governance in Vietnam are analysed and innovations in building local authorities' operating mechanisms appropriate and effective to the real situations of developing many digital technology applications and development trends towards local governance in modern society are suggested.

**Keywords:** State governance, Local authorities, Vietnam.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term "locality" is used to affirm local-level territorial administrative units in Vietnam, including provincial-level administrative units, district-level administrative units and commune-level administrative units. Local authorities are organized at each level of territorial administrative units, including 63 provincial-level local authorities, 705 district-level local authorities and 10.599 commune-level local authorities (GSO, 2023).

Vietnamese local authorities are designed with two statutory agencies: the People's Council, the state power agency, established by elected voters and the People's Committee, the state administrative agency, established by the People's Council at the same level to organize the implementation of policies and laws and manage economic and social activities in the locality (VNA, 2015). The Provincial and District People's Committees consists of specialized agencies., the Commune-level People's Committee is staffed with 6 civil servant positions, which are: (1) Commander of the Commune Military Command; (2) Clerical - statistics civil servants; (3) Cadastre - construction - urban and environment civil servants (for wards and commune - level towns); Cadastre - agriculture - construction - urban and environment civil servants (for communes); (4) Finance and accounting civil servants; (5) Judicial - civil status public servants; (6) Social and cultural civil servants (VG, 2023).

According to the administrative hierarchy, the commune-level authorities are the lowest and referred as the grassroots. Commune-level authorities often directly resolve people's requests, listen to people's aspirations and needs and give support within their decentralized power, then report and advise higher-level authorities for timely policy measures. Therefore, organization and operating mechanism of commune-level authorities are necessary to be streamlined and effective so that results and effectiveness of local governance can be ensured. This is also an issue of interest in this study and commune-level authorities (state governance at the commune level) are chosen as the research objects.

## 2. Literature review of state governance

The general principle applied in countries around the world is that organizing local authorities should be compliance with political institutions, historical development of the nation, culture and society. State governance at local level is legally carried out by local government agencies with decentralization and authorization specific with certain differences in countries. In the context of modern society, local governance is required to be in line with democratic trends, accountability increase of government agencies and people's participation increase in the decision-making process of their localities. Local governance in Vietnam is also not out of this trend; Entities participating in local governance include both government agencies and the people.

From a theoretical perspective, people's participation in state governance is explained as participating in the organization of the apparatus and its activities directly or indirectly. According to a study by Trung, N.S. (2019) and other recent studies, in terms of participation in social development governance activities, people's participation do not require the use of state power or the state power is not sufficient enough to completely solve the problem (self-management activities in residential areas). Phuong, N.T. (2018) and Giao, V.C. (2019) state that people play the role of participants in state governance, have the right to give opinions, criticize and evaluate the structural organization and the operation of government agencies operate. Sharing the same view, Trang, T.T.T. (2024) further emphasizes the right of people to propose recommendations and initiatives for economic, cultural, and social development, and it is the local authorities' responsibility to consider and realize the people's initiatives with specific policies.

With reference to local governance in practice, the innovation of government agencies in a modern and effective direction will have a strong impact on changing the entire social system. This can be explained that local authorities carry out state governance tasks in each specific area within assigned decentralization and authorization and perform self-management and self-responsibility as prescribed by law; Realize state policies and laws in practice based on and specific conditions and circumstances in the locality. In the local authority system, the lowest - the grassroots are often called the commune - level authorities who are regularly and directly handle with people's requests and considered the determining factor for people's trust in the state. Therefore, in terms of innovating state governance at the local level, it is necessary to focus on state governance at the commune level as a basis for building local authorities close to the people, at the same time, capable to meet the increasing and diverse needs of the people. In addition, innovation in local governance must also ensure unity and synchronization from central to local levels and among local authority levels.

Modern and effective local governance refers to a number of contents, including the local governance responsibilities of state agencies; People's participation in the local governance activities of state agencies. Regarding to the issue of great interest in both current state governance theory and practice, this study addresses on encouraging people's participation in local governance activities of government agencies. According to Ngoc, D.B. (2013) and Trang, T.T.T. (2024), local authorities are responsible to encourage the people to actively take part in developing, promulgating and implementing local decisions and policies. In addition, on the basis of promoting resources from the people, local people have the right to proactively propose initiatives, programs and projects related to the economic, cultural and social development of their community. Only when people have the right /are encouraged to contribute to development of their local economy, culture and society, at this time, are local decisions and policies democratized, promoting interaction between the local authorities and the people for common benefits - the benefits of the state and the benefits of the people.

Encouraging people's participation in the governance activities of government agencies requires first of all that the government agencies ensure publicity and transparency in providing information to the people. In practice, there is a lot of information related to people's rights and interests that must be made public and transparent to avoid ambiguity and corruption. For example, publicizing information about social policies for the poor, on legal regulations, commune-level budget revenues and expenditures, land use plans and compensation price frames for recovered land, etc. Publicity and transparency in information provision help to increase people's awareness of participation and their trust in local authorities; hence, accountability now makes it mandatory for local authorities to create trust and support from the people; this requires public implementation in the context of digital society, implemented in the digital environment.

In addition, the application of inventions, the latest achievements of science, technology (digital technology), and the 4th industrial revolution in social development management of local authorities is considered as an influencing factor to the effectiveness of local governance and encouragement of people's participation in local governance activities. These technologies bring great value in supporting to develop qualified, realistic and highly effective strategies, policies and legal systems in local governance. According to Chien, N.B. (2021), with a great support from digital technology, local authorities can make timely governance decisions, issue policies, fully and promptly provide essential, basic public services to the people, create satisfaction and trust from the people and encourage people to actively participate in local governance activities to bring about values, benefits, trust and high consensus in society.

### **3. Local governance in practice in Vietnam and recommendations**

Local governance in Vietnam is fundamentally characterized by the participation of different entities, including: local authorities, citizens, businesses, and social organizations (collectively referred to as local authorities and people). Local authorities are responsible not only to implement the governance and management of local economic, cultural and social issues, but also to encourage people to take part in

local governance activities for local development. The participation is carried out in direct and indirect forms.

- The direct form of participation allows people to directly discuss and decide on self-governance tasks of the residential community, specifically: (1) people have right to directly discuss and decide on policies and contribution levels to the construction expenditure of infrastructure and public welfare works funded by people within their commune and village; (2) people have right to directly discuss and decide on village regulations and conventions; elect, dismiss, and remove the Village Head; elect and dismiss members of the People's Inspection Board and the Community Investment Supervision Board; (3) the issues are discussed under local authorities' supervision; if the issue receive support from more than 50% of the total number of voters or voters representing households in the village or in the entire commune, the decision can be made and valid for implementation (VNA, 2022).

- The indirect form of participation allows people to give their comments, reflections and recommendations (through People's Council delegates) on local issues that need to be addressed to the local authorities in voter contact conferences annually organized (held before and after the meeting of the People's Council - a body established by voters). People's Council delegates listen, synthesize people's feedback, then report and explain at the People's Council session. The subsequent implementation belongs to the responsibility of local authorities, mainly the People's Committee - an agency established by the People's Council (VNA, 2015; VNA, 2022).

In terms of local people's participation in government activities, the practice shows that there have been strengths and weaknesses in local governance in Vietnam. In general, people can directly participate in local authorities' governance activities through direct discussions and decisions on the self-governance tasks of the residential community. In this case, the nature of direct democracy and the interaction between local authorities and the people are demonstrated. This is also considered the basic characteristics of local governance, which is significant to building a rule of law state. In particular, people are allowed to decide for themselves on local development management activities in a narrow scope: They can make decisions on infrastructure construction and public welfare works with their own contributions; There are no regulations on people's rights to develop their own programs and projects related to local issues and propose local authorities for consideration and approval. This shortage requires further researches and innovations to encourage active and in-depth participation from the people in local governance activities. In practice, there are still other local issues that can be under people's autonomy and people need to be empowered to discuss and directly decide such as: production and economic activities associated with community connection and indigenous culture of local people. Thanks to this, different resources from the people can be mobilize to support local authorities to realize local governance activities.

Towards the development trend of modern society, local governance is inseparable from the goal of bringing satisfaction to the people, improving the effectiveness and efficiency of local governance to meet the requirements of national construction and development. The diversity of participants and acceptance of non-state participants in the social development governance process have gradually been allowed. Therefore, the institutional conditions for a multi-participant governance system, cooperation and joint action towards common values are matters of further researches and innovations. The practice of local governance in Vietnam suggests innovation, which is: Building a mechanism to encourage people's active and in - depth participation in local governance activities of economic, cultural and social development.

For further explanation, this study emphasizes the need to establish an incentive/empowerment mechanism for people to research and propose initiatives, programs, and projects for local development and suggest to put more pressure on local authorities for their consideration so that people's initiatives, programs, and projects could be suitably and effectively implemented for the common interests - the interests of the state and the people. The mechanism is aimed to build local authorities close to the people and better serve the people: People's democracy and participation in local activities can be highly promoted in depth to meet people's legitimate aspirations and needs to solve problems that arise in practice; Material resources and creative intellectual resources from the people could be much employed to serve local authorities' governance process of local economic, cultural and social activities.

When people participate substantially and in depth in local governance activities, they will pay more attention to the issue of economic, cultural and social development governance and give more supports to local authorities to develop and implement local development goals. As a result, harmony in the rights and responsibilities of relevant parties can be ensured, the manifestations of personal and group interests can be minimized; Grassroots democracy issues are promoted; Local authorities can mobilize different resources for development; People are satisfied when their rights and interests are guaranteed. This also means people's spirit and sense of respect for the law can be raised; Groundbreaking initiatives and ideas for the local development can be utilized.

The mechanism to actively and in-depth encourage people's participation in local economic, cultural and social development governance activities can be effectively implemented with the following requirements: It is necessary to develop and implement mandatory standards of local authorities' performance evaluation at all levels; Publicity and accountability in local authorities' activities should be promoted, ensuring the public duty performance to be based on the rule - of - law principle. This means it is crucial for local authorities to increase transparency in the process of developing and implementing local development policies and decisions; Technical means and technology are advised to be optimally applied to provide information accurately and promptly to the beneficiaries and ensure timely and completely update of information before policy promulgation. That transparency is seriously taken will minimize people's enquiries, frustrations, and complaints; Build people's trust; Create harmony and consensus people and local authorities at grassroot level; At the same time, verify the effectiveness of local policies issued in relation to ensuring the rights and interests of the people.

In practice, effectiveness and efficiency of local governance is measured with not only the achievement of local development targets, but also social efficiency and people's satisfaction. Therefore, it is significant that issued local policies must receive the consensus of the community and meet the increasing needs of the people, which poses a requirement for local authorities to make adaptive and appropriate changes in their governance activities and attitude toward serving the people.

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