

# Grassroots Democracy and Ethnic Minority Communities

Presentation by Pamela McElwee  
Yale University &  
Arizona State University

- This presentation is an introduction to an ongoing UNDP research project, conducted with Ha Hoa Ly, NAPA and Peter Taylor and Andrea Cornwall, Institute for Development Studies, U. of Sussex, on “Deepening Democracy and Increasing Popular Participation in Vietnam”
- These ideas are a ‘work in progress’ and are presented today for discussion, not as final conclusions. Ideas presented today are solely those of the researchers and do not reflect the position of the UNDP.
- The final UNDP report will be forthcoming this November.

## General Aims and Objectives of the Discussion Paper

- The general aim of this project is to advance public discussion on grassroots democracy, and ultimately strengthen policies and policy implementation for deepening democracy and good governance in Viet Nam.
- The specific objectives of the discussion paper are
  - to compare recent Vietnamese developments with international experience and theory on participation and grassroots democracy, and
  - to present issues for discussion, including policy choices and alternative paths for strengthening grassroots democracy in Viet Nam.

## Legal Framework for Participation

- Since 1998, Vietnam has had a legal framework to support and increase direct citizen participation in local governance, known as ‘Grassroots Democracy’ (dân ch? co s?) (Decrees 29 and 79 primarily).
- These decrees attempted to provide new mechanisms for citizens’ voices to be heard by allowing them to exercise rights to be informed of government activities that affected them, to discuss and contribute to the formulation of certain policies, to participate in local development activities, and to supervise certain government actions.
- These rights are summed up in the well-known Vietnamese phrase that “people know, people discuss, people do, and people supervise” (dân bi?t, dân bàn, dân làm, dân ki?m tra).

## Other legal frameworks on governance

- In addition to the GDDs, a number of related legal documents have been promulgated since 1998, including:
  - laws on better reception of citizens at administrative service centers
  - requirements that elected officials meet regularly with citizens
  - asset declaration for elected officials

- financial transparency for local infrastructure projects
- first law on complaints and petitions of citizens
- first ordinance on anti-corruption measures
- reform of elected bodies and electoral systems
- reform of elements of the Communist Party
- increased roles in governance for the mass organizations.
- Uniting all these elements was a conviction that the party and state needed to focus on the very base (cơ sở) of their support at the lowest administrative levels, hence the focus on ‘basic democracy’ (dân chủ cơ sở)

## Current VN Policies and Institutions that Improve Citizens Voices

## Current VN Policies and Institutions that Improve State Responsiveness

### Good Governance is a Two-Way Street

- The GDD and other laws are not just about increasing **citizen participation**.
- They are also about **reforming government** to make it more responsive to citizens. Deepening democratic governance means strengthening the processes of citizen participation – bringing new forms of inclusion, consultation and mobilization. Government must RESPOND to citizen participation for it to work.
- **Good governance involves BOTH a more active and engaged citizenry AND a more responsive and effective state which can deliver needed public services.**
- IN SUM, increased participation alone is usually not enough!
- Participation should ideally involve not just strengthening voices (empowerment of citizens) but receptivity to voice by government on the other (capacity and accountability of govt)
- **Most INGOs/NGOs in VN focus on the citizens participation side, not the government responsiveness side.**

### Participation vs. Democratization

- Our research is looking not just the localized development projects that emphasize participation, but rather to look more broadly at the role of participation in the overall governance structure. ***That is, how are people participating in the government decisions that affect their lives? How are they interacting with elected officials and government institutions? How are these institutions and officials in turn responding to increased citizen action and participation?***
- This will deepen the analysis of participation in Vietnam, and draw distinctions between:
  - “Community participation in development” (which may be understood as community involvement in development projects and making community contributions to government projects) and
  - “Grassroots democracy” (which might be understood as a broader realm of governance reform for citizen involvement in making both local and higher-level decisions and ensuring accountability and effectiveness of government).

### What kind of things are we looking at?

- **Institutional barriers** to enhancing grassroots democracy
- Ways to create **incentives for citizens** to operationalise their rights
- Ways to encourage **learning and sharing** among donors, NGOs and the state to advance the processes of democratisation.
- The **relationship** between grassroots democracy and poverty reduction, public administrative reform, other improved governance programs and economic competitiveness.
- The need for of additional or amended **legislation on grassroots democracy.**

- What further **research** needs are.

## Some Types of Participation in the Grassroots Democracy Decree

- Participation in Learning (Dân Biê' t)
  - Activities on public information access; posting of village and commune budgets; publishing of policies in EM languages.
- Participation in Deliberations (Dân ba' n)
  - Activities in participatory planning; VDP/CDP; participatory budgeting.
- Participation in Doing (Dân la' m)
  - Activities on community contributions; village compacts (huong uoc); cultural villages.
- Participation in Monitoring (Dân kiê' m tra)
  - Activities in participatory auditing; report cards; complaints and denunciations.
- **But note--these are primarily activities where citizens are invited and have rights to participate in government-initiated policies and actions. A framework for local autonomy in decision making, esp. in minority areas, does not yet exist.**

## Implications for EM Communities

- Difficulties in accessing information because of language barriers
- Physical barriers of remoteness and distance from authorities
- Widespread ideas that ethnic minorities have 'low capacity' and 'low intellectual levels'. These ideas are a huge obstacle to decentralization and increased participation in minority areas.
- **In fact, what should be noted is that community solidarity and action is often extremely strong in ethnic areas.**
- Therefore mobilizing participation among rural and minority areas should in fact be easier than in other areas. If it is not happening, blame can be laid on officials, not the 'low capacity' of minorities.

## Needed Next Steps

- Better training of ethnic minority cadres and politicians at all levels, particularly in administrative offices
- Better training & higher salaries/budgets for village headmen
- Greater focus on disseminating information in ethnic minority languages
- Training for govt staff on working in multi-ethnic environments
- Trainings for MOs working in EM areas
- Local CBOs that focus on citizen's rights (legal clubs)
- Flexible VDP approaches that allow EM communities more choice
- Better legal environment for local autonomy

## What can be the role of NGOs/donors in improved governance/participation in Vietnam?

- Some NGO and donor projects work only on empowerment/participation of citizens, some on capacity of govt, but few on both. Can these be better linked in projects?
- In particular, NGOs rarely work with elected officials (H?i ð'ng Nhân dân ) or the National Assembly (Qu?c h'i) on issues.

- Sharing processes amongst NGOs on lessons learned from participatory projects are not yet in place.
- Integrating NGO project lessons into formal government planning remains difficult. How can such long-term sustainability be improved?