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STUDY ON THE PARTICIPATION OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (NGOs) IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN VIETNAM

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Abstract. The article presents an analysis of the real participation of Vietnamese non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in local government and their interaction with authorities. Particular attention is paid to such areas as access to information, political initiatives, public criticism, public control, self-government, volunteer movement, etc. In the course of the study, the author conducted a sociological survey, the results of which indicate the strengthening of the role of NGOs in local government. The article also notes shortcomings in the work of local authorities in cooperation with NGOs, gives recommendations for improving this activity in the conditions of the modern model of public administration.

Keywords: Vietnam, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local government, public control, self-government, volunteer movement, sociological survey.

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Introduction

Shifting from the traditional public administration model to a modern public governance model with the main feature emphasizing openness in government is the focus of government reform in countries worldwide today [Nguyễn Trọng Bình 2018]. In this context, promoting the participation of NGOs in public governance, both general local, is one of the indispensable strategies. Many researchers believe that cooperation between government and society, especially non-governmental organizations, is an indispensable mechanism of public governance [Frederickson 1980; Denhardt et al. 2003; Jun 1994; Perri et al. 2002; Giddens 2000; Maitland 2003; Ostrom 2001].

The implementation of the *Doi Moi* policy followed by the transformation of the socio-economic model, the model of government since 1986 in Vietnam, which has set an objective requirement for strengthening the involvement of NGOs in local governance, as promoting the participation of NGOs is not only an important condition for the implementation of “good governance”, but also a way to expand and realize social democracy. The questions that need to be answered here are (i) What is the current

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status of NGOs in Vietnam? (ii) How effective is the participation of NGOs in local governance in Vietnam?

Overview of NGOs in Vietnam and some studies on NGOs in Vietnam

Overview of NGOs in Vietnam

Normally, NGOs are often called differently: non-profit organizations (to distinguish them from business); the third sector (to distinguish it from the first sector (the government) and the second sector (the market); tax-free areas; voluntary organizations; independent organizations. So, it can be said that NGOs are associations, professional associations, foundations existing outside the state, political parties and markets voluntarily established by citizens. Therefore, NGOs implements self-governance, are recognized by law, and operate independently and voluntarily, through many different ways to realise the interests of members and the public.

One can believe that a number of NGOs existed in Vietnam before the *Doi Moi* period (1986). However, NGOs in Vietnam have only grown strongly since *Doi Moi* introduction in Vietnam. The reasons of NGOs being thrived since Vietnam's *Doi Moi* are numerous: (i) the market economy has created an important socio-economic basis for the operation of NGOs; (ii) a rational settlement of the (reformed) relationship between government, market and society has created an important political basis for the emergence and development of non-profit organizations; (iii) the government's responsibility to ensure and deliver public services is increasing while the government's financial resources are limited. This requires the promotion of the NGOs' role in social governance; (iv) people's needs for various types of public services increase, requiring the promotion of NGOs role in providing diverse public services to the people; (v) the development of NGOs in Vietnam is also due to the necessity to improve the effectiveness of people's participation in social governance. In the opinion of Putnam [1993], the development of NGOs is beneficial to the development of social capital and improves the effectiveness of people's participation.

Therefore, during the *Doi Moi* period, NGOs in Vietnam have developed very quickly. Excluding international NGOs (now more than 900 international NGOs are operating in Vietnam), Vietnam currently has about 500 NGOs at the national level; 4000 NGOs at the provincial level; 10,000 NGOs at district and commune levels; 1,800 NGOs operating in the fields of science, environment, health care and education. There are 150 professional associations. Besides, there are more than 140,000 active community-based organizations (CBOs) [Nguyễn Đăng Long 2021].

Some studies on NGOs in Vietnam

Recently, many scientists have studied NGOs in Vietnam. Bui The Cuong [2005] has not given any definition of an NGO, but said that NGOs can also be called social organizations or non-profit organizations. Non-governmental organizations are not of the State; they are not profit-oriented but voluntary organizations. Nguyen Khac Mai [1996] classifies NGOs in Vietnam into (i) the people's organizations in the Vietnamese political system; (ii) mass associations. He also states that mass associations perform four common roles, such as participation in social protection and development, self-interest, self-education, and social regulation. Thang Van Phuc [2002] refers to three types of NGOs in Vietnam, including: (i) the people's organizations actively set up by the Communist Party of Vietnam to rally the masses, such as: Fatherland Front, Trade Union, Vietnam Farmers' Association etc.; (ii) socio-

political organizations such as the Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations; (iii) NGOs emerged in the *Doi Moi* period. Phạm Van Duc [2018] said that NGOs are formed on the principle of voluntariness and self-management of employees, organized and operated according to the charter or regulations of the State, employees, etc. NGOs participate in state management, social management as well as in order to protect the legitimate interests of their members.

Nguyen Minh Phuong [2006] refers to the functions of NGOs in Vietnam, which are the following: they (i) act like a bridge and channel to transmit the people's voices and aspirations to the government; (ii) participate and coordinate in the planning of government policies, implementing and monitoring the policies; (iii) practise social criticism of policies and supervision of the quality and behavior of civil servants in order to combat bureaucracy and corruption, and improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the government; and (iv) promote the resources, dynamism and initiatives of all classes of the population, participate in the provision of public service such as education, health, culture, science, environmental protection etc.

In general, studies on NGOs in Vietnam have addressed three main aspects: (i) elaboration of the NGO definition; (ii) classification of NGOs in Vietnam; (iii) investigation of the NGOs' function and role in national governance and in other areas of social life. However, it is conspicuous that there is still a lack of research-works on the participation of NGOs in local governance in Vietnam. So, in this article, we are going to survey and evaluate the participation of NGOs in local governance in Vietnam in 6 aspects, namely: (i) access to information; (ii) policy initiatives; (iii) social criticism; (iv) self-governance and social autonomy; (v) social supervision by NGOs; (vi) cooperation of local governments and NGOs in public service.

Methods and Data

In addition to the document research methods and normative methods to form the above-mentioned theoretical framework, this study uses the sociological investigation method to collect data to clarify the status of the participation of the NGOs in local governance in Vietnam. Particularly, this study has processed the data within the scope of the research (the six aspects mentioned above) into specific aspects that can be surveyed, evaluated and measured. In each aspect, the study tries to ask questions to collect information on the extent and form of the NGOs' participation in local governance. This survey was conducted in 2021; there were 6,000 respondents at the grassroots level, divided into two groups: (i) heads of NGOs (5000 votes) and (ii) grassroots people (1000 votes) in 15 provinces and cities of Vietnam.

The 15 provinces and cities of Vietnam under the survey are located in different regions, including: the Northern Midland and Mountainous region (surveys carried out in the provinces of Son La and Hoa Binh); the Red River Delta and Northeastern coastal areas (surveys carried out in Hanoi Capital and Thai Binh province); the North Central region (surveys carried out in the provinces of Thanh Hoa and Ha Tinh); the South Central Coast region (surveys carried out in the province of Ninh Thuan and Da Nang City); the Central Highland region (surveys carried out in the provinces of Lam Dong and Gia Lai); the Southeast region (surveys carried out in the province of Binh Duong and Ho Chi Minh City); the Southwest region (surveys carried out in the provinces of Dong Thap and Ca Mau, and Can Tho City). For each of the province or city, five districts were randomly selected to conduct the study. For each of the district, six communes and wards were randomly selected to conduct the survey. The total number of communes and wards randomly selected for the survey was 450.

There are two types of questionnaires for two different groups of respondents. With 5,000 questionnaires for leaders of NGOs at the grassroots level, there are 6 axes of content surveyed to assess the participation of NGOs in local governance in Vietnam including: (i) access to information; (ii) policy initiatives; (iii) social criticism; (iv) self-governance and social autonomy; (v) social supervision by NGOs; (vi) co-operation between local governments and NGOs in public service delivery. In each axis of the content, questions were designed to collect information mainly in two aspects of extent (expressed in the percentage) and form (for example, form of information access). For example, with the content axis of access to information, the questions were designed to examine aspects, such as access to information on local development strategies; access to information on major local policies, access to information on local development plans; access to information about local development projects; access to information on land planning; access to information on budget estimates. To examine the form of access to information, questions were designed to examine how NGOs access information, for instance, whether they access information by means of mass media or the local government portal. Similar to the policy initiatives axes, questions were designed to see whether the participating NGOs raised policy initiatives, and if they did, so in what areas and by what means they used. The same was applied for other content axes. With 1000 questionnaires for people at the grassroots, the questionnaires were designed mainly to see the level of participation in self-management groups of the people at the grassroots.

Results and discussion

Access to Information of NGOs

The level of access to information from the local governance is both a criterion for assessing the level of transparency of local governments and an important basis for the NGOs' participation in the local governance. That is, only with full access to information can NGOs perform well in functions such as policy initiative, social criticism and monitoring. On the other hand, the fact that NGOs have full access to information from the local government also helps these organizations to provide information to their members as well as carry out policy propaganda functions. The responses of the NGOs' leaders concerning the level of access to information and the methods for accessing information of NGOs are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Level of access to information and methods of access to information of NGOs

<i>Level of access to information, %</i>	
Access to information on local development strategies	78.03
Access to information on major local policies	86.01
Access to information on local development plans	87.06
Access to information on local development projects	30.00
Access to information on land planning	26.00
Access to information on budget estimates	25.00
<i>Forms of access to information, %</i>	
Access to information through mass media	40.00
Access to information from the Local Government Portal	20.00
Directly provided by local government	17.00
Other	23.00

Source: Author’s survey results in 2021

The above-mentioned results show that the level of access to information about local development strategies, major local policies and local development plans by NGOs is relatively good. However, the extent to which NGOs have access to information for development projects, land planning and budget estimates are not good, so far, with the corresponding rate of 30%; 26% and 25%. Regarding the method of accessing information, the government’s adoption of the portal and digital platforms to provide information to society, non-governmental organizations as well as directly provide information to organizations and NGOs has not been good enough. This means that the local government needs to attach more importance to building a digital government to provide better information to society.

Outlining of policy initiatives

Policy initiative is a form of participation of NGOs in the local governance. Policy initiatives mean that non-governmental organizations actively raise their initiatives to local governments about the issue of either new, or revised, or adjusted policies [Nguyễn Trọng Bình & Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Anh 2019]. NGOs are representative organizations of citizens; therefore, if NGOs value policy initiatives and the local government attaches great importance to receiving policy initiatives from NGOs, this will contribute to improving the accountability and responsiveness of the local government, as well as making the government more responsive. Local government policies and actions reflect the “will of the people”. The survey results on policy initiatives and policy initiatives methods by NGOs are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Policy initiatives of NGOs and methods of Policy initiatives

<i>Level of policy initiatives, %</i>	
Making policy initiatives, in which:	36.00
- Local development policy	60.00
- Local development project	20.03
- Order of priority in implementing local development projects	7.00
- Innovating public service delivery of local government	5.00
Policy initiatives have been absorbed by the local government	85.00
<i>Methods of stating policy initiatives, %</i>	
Directly in the written form to the local government	40.00
Via local government portal	10.00
Via email to local government agencies	15.00
Via conferences and dialogues with local government representatives	20.00
Others	15.00

Source: Author’s survey results in 2021

The results of the above study show that, although a high percentage (85%) of the respondents believe that the local government is receptive to policy initiatives raised by NGOs, however, a fairly large percentage (64%) of respondents (leaders of NGOs) said that NGOs did not raise policy initiatives. State policy initiatives of NGOs mainly focus on local development policies, while highlighting policy initiatives on development projects and the order of priority in implementing projects. The project on

development and renewal of public service provision by the local government has not been given due attention.

Social criticism of NGOs

Social criticism of NGOs means that non-governmental organizations based on theories, practice and people’s position to comment, evaluate, state their opinions, recommendations for draft local government policies. Social criticism demonstrates social constructivism in policy design, which is also an important requirement of democratic governance [Jun, 2007]. If NGOs value social criticism and local governments receive reasonable voices from NGOs, it will contribute to improving the quality of local government policies. The survey results on social criticism activities and methods of social criticism of NGOs are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Social criticism of NGOs and methods of social criticism

<i>Level of social criticism, %</i>	
Social criticism, in which:	50.00
- Draft long-term and medium-term development policy	28.00
- Draft development plan	13.00
- Estimated annual budget	3.00
- Draft government performance report	51.00
- Lack of criticism	50.00
<i>Methods of social criticism, %</i>	
- Organizing a meeting of the NGOs’ leaders ()	50.00
- NGOs collect feedback from members of the organization	20.00
- NGOs collect feedback from external organizations and individuals	15.00
- Organizing direct dialogue between NGOs and local government	15.00

Source: Author’s survey results in 2021

The above survey results show that the social criticism activities of NGOs are still unsatisfactory while only 50% of the respondents believe that the organization they are in charge of has carried out social criticism. On the other hand, the social criticism of NGOs focuses mainly on policy drafts that are not really important (51%), while the criticism of important policy drafts, like drafts of long-term and medium-term development policies; draft development planning; the draft budget estimate has not been given due attention. As far as methods and forms of social criticism are concerned, such forms as collecting opinions of members of the organization; collecting feedback from external organizations and individuals and organizing direct dialogues between NGOs and local governments have not been given due attention.

Social Supervision of NGOs

Social supervision of NGOs means the monitoring, detection, review, evaluation and recommendations of these organizations in order to influence local governments and relevant public managers to the implementation of policies and laws. There are many categories of monitoring a local government, such as internal surveillance, supervision by elected bodies, supervision by judicial

authorities, monitoring of the political party, supervision by NGOs and citizens. Thus, surveillance by NGOs falls under the category of social supervision. In a variety of ways, oversight by NGOs is important in promoting government accountability [Rosenbloom et al. 2008]. The survey results on the performance of the monitoring function of NGOs are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Supervision of NGOs and methods of Supervision

<i>Supervision of NGOs, %</i>	
The implementation of development projects	30.00
Behavior of local government	31.00
The implementation of the regulation on democracy	26.00
New construction and repair works	41.11
Local government public spending	8.00
<i>Form of feedback to local government,</i>	
- Through the regular dialogue with local government	50.00
- A written petition to local government	40.00
- Other	10.00
<i>The government has responded satisfactorily to the recommendations of NGOs, %</i>	20.17

Source: Author's survey results in 2021

The results show that, in the monitoring contents of NGOs, the supervision of new construction and remodeling works is paid the most attention, while the monitoring of contents, such as the implementation of development projects, behavior and employment of the local government, the implementation of the regulation on democracy at the grassroots level, monitoring public expenditure by local government has not received enough attention from NGOs. The response of the local government to the opinions and recommendations of NGOs is also not good while but 20.17% of the respondents believe that the local government has responded satisfactorily to the opinions and recommendations of the NGOs.

Social autonomy and self-governance

A good government is not so much a government that meets all the needs of the citizens, but a government that creates the necessary conditions for the citizens to be able to do some work within the scope of their ability [Zhang Cheng Fu 2014]. Social self-governance is a form of governance centered on citizens and NGOs, where within certain organizations and regions, citizens and NGOs manage public affairs on their own. The social self-governance of NGOs in the local governance in Vietnam mainly shows itself in three basic aspects: (i) organizing voluntary movements and activities to contribute to solving social problems; (ii) propagating and educating members and union members of NGOs; (iii) self-governing organization in residential areas. The results of this survey are shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Social autonomy and self-governance

<i>Organizing movements and volunteering activities, %</i>	
Organizing and implementing movements and volunteering activities	100.00

Percentage of members of NGOs participating in volunteer activities	45.00
<i>Propagating and educating members and union members, %</i>	
There is propaganda and education among members and union members	100.00
Members of NGOs accessing information provided by NGOs	40.00
<i>Self-governance in residential area, %</i>	
Establishing self-managed teams and groups at the grassroots	100.00
Percentage of members, union members participating in self-managed teams at the grassroots (%), in which:	54.00
- Self-managed team on security and order	38.00
- Self-managed team on environmental protection	11.30
- Self-managed team on grassroots mediation	18.00
- Self-managed team on legal education	12.70
- Self-managed team of public works	2.70
- Other self-managed teams	17.30

Source: Author's survey results in 2021

The results above show that it is a priority for all NGOs to organize voluntary movements, to carry out propaganda and education, as well as to establish self-governing teams and groups at the grassroots level. Score on social self-governance of NGOs in local governance. Compared with other forms of participation, this form of participation in the NGOs' local governance has many advantages. However, the quality of social self-governance of NGOs in local governance needs to be improved. Because the percentage of members and union members participating in voluntary movements and activities organized by NGOs; the percentage of members and union members accessing information provided by NGOs as well as the percentage of members and union members joining self-managed teams and groups are but average or below average.

Cooperation between the government and NGOs in public service delivery

According to the traditional view, citizens are merely users of public goods and services, passive recipients of government policy. The modern point of view is that citizens are both the object and subject of the local governance. Being an important aspect of public-private partnership, cooperation of local governments and NGOs is important. More specifically, through forms such as contracting, government subsidies to social organizations and procurement of public services from NGOs, cooperation of local governments and NGOs. NGOs that contribute to the lack of government resources; promote the strength of many parties to the quick and effective resolution of social problems, to reduction of public spending by local governments, to faster provision of public services, to reduction of the social task of government, promoting self-governance and self-government of society as well as improving the quality of public services [Nguyễn Trọng Bình 2021]. Implementing the policy of “maximum socialization” and “unnecessarily handing over government work to NGOs, shifting public service delivery directly to ordering” [Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam 2021], local authorities have initially attached great importance to cooperation with NGOs in public service provision. However, in this respect, the degree of cooperation

of the local government and the “pro-government” and other NGOs is different.² The results of the survey in this respect are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Cooperation of government and NGOs in public service delivery

<i>Local government contracts with NGOs, %</i>	
- Signed contracts with the “pro-government” NGOs)	25.00
- Signed contracts with other NGOs	18.00
- No contracts	57.00
<i>Local government subsidies for NGOs, %</i>	
- No contracts	
- Subsidies to the “pro-government” NGOs	100.00
- Subsidies to other NGOs	50.00
<i>Local government procurement of public services from NGOs, %</i>	
- Procurement of public services from NGOs “friendly” to the government	20.00
- Procurement of public services from other NGOs	10.00

Source: Author’s survey results in 2021

The survey results in the table above show that the local government has initially cooperated with NGOs in providing public services through forms such as signing contracts, subsidizing NGOs as well as procurement public services from NGOs. However, cooperation of the government and NGOs in public service delivery is still limited, especially when local governments sign contracts with NGOs as well as procure public services from NGOs. This shows that, between the policy of "maximum socialization" and the reality of cooperation of local governments and NGOs in public service provision, there is still a huge gap. Besides, the degree of cooperation of local governments and NGOs in public service delivery differs from that of “pro-government” NGOs and other NGOs. In particular, “pro-government” NGOs receive better subsidies from the local government than other NGOs.

The above-mentioned results show that NGOs have promoted a certain role in local governance in Vietnam, especially in terms of self-governance and social autonomy at the grassroots level. The advantages and results of the participation of NGOs in the local governance in Vietnam partly reflect the content and results of the transformation of the local governance model in Vietnam from the “management of the local government” to the model of “modern local governance”. However, there is still a lot of room to promote the participation of NGOs in local governance, especially in the aspects of public policy development, supervision and cooperation with the government in the

² “Pro-Government” NGOs are understood the author as NGOs belonging to the political system of Vietnam, having close relationships with the ruling Party and the State, performing the role of the political base of the ruling party and the government. Currently, there are six NGOs belonging to the political system of Vietnam, including the Vietnam Fatherland Front; Youth Union; Women’s Union; Farmers’ Union; Vietnam Trade Union and Veterans Association. Russian researchers classify these organizations, formed long before the reforms of the Renovation, not as the Western category of NGOs, but as traditional social movements characteristic of socialist countries [Mazyrin 2007]. In fact, they differ in terms of criteria and mission from Western-style NGOs. – *Editor's note.*

provision of the local governance. In other words, NGOs have not yet fully played their due role in policy initiatives; social feedback; supervision and provision of public services.

Conclusions and recommendations

Local government reform towards the formation of a “citizen-centered”, “pro-market”; “pro-social” government has been carried out by Vietnam operating during the past 35 years of *Doi Moi*. However, the room for reform and renewal of local government in Vietnam as introduced in the modern local governance model is still very large. Therefore, transforming the governance model from the traditional management model of the local government to the modern local governance model is the sole and exclusive subject in solving public problems,. A modern approach with active and effective participation and cooperation of the local government, the market and society (the core are non-governmental organizations) is an important task of Vietnam in the present and future.

To promote the transformation of local governance model in Vietnam today, the basic and core orientation is through reform and innovation to establish an open local government model. Open local government needs basic categories including: information transparency, policy advice and criticism, participation of society, cooperative governance and self-governance, social autonomy. In the context of a digital society, building an open government cannot but refer to digital government transformation to form a digital government. Operating in the “administration” environment, leaders and managers in the public sector should "look outside", thus knowing how to connect and implement widely spread interaction and information exchange with citizens, citizens’ organizations and taxpayers. In Smith’s view, this requires leaders and public sector managers to develop skills related to interactive activities, flexible exchange of relevant stakeholders, especially communication skills [Smith, 2004].

Similarly, in order to promote the participation of NGOs in local governance, it is necessary to strengthen the reform of the governance institutions of local governments in the direction of good publicity and transparency; institutional reform and effective implementation of institutions for NGOs to participate in public policy development (policy initiatives, policy advice, policy criticism etc.), to monitor the implementation of local government policies, cooperate with local governments in public service delivery and expand social self-governance. In particular, local governments need to create a favorable environment for the development and healthy operation of NGOs, as well as actively cooperate with NGOs. Also, NGOs themselves have their failures; moreover, as practice in some countries shows, if the rule of law is not guaranteed, the activities of some NGOs can have a negative impact. Therefore, developing and promoting the role of NGOs in local governance must be associated with a strong government as well as the government’s management role. Besides, NGOs themselves also need to improve their autonomy in their operations and perform their social responsibilities well.

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