

DEEPENING DEMOCRACY
AND INCREASING POPULAR PARTICIPATION
IN VIET NAM

Ha Noi, June 2006

Foreword

The Grassroots Democracy Decree issued in 1998 represents an important moment in the development of democratic institutions in Viet Nam. With this decree the government has created the conditions necessary for decision-making processes that are more open, inclusive and responsive to local needs.

Viet Nam has implemented many effective measures to increase accountability in public life and citizen involvement in decision-making. Democratic governance and citizen's participation also contribute to political stability, an essential building block of economic development. Democratic governance is important in its own right but even more so for its contribution to the formation of a more fair and equal society, in which power rests with the people. In short, democratic governance is needed to create a society of the people, by the people and for the people. The Viet Nam Academy of Social Sciences and the United Nations Development Programme share a commitment to promote the implementation of the Grassroots Democracy Decree.

This paper is the product of a series of discussions and consultations that have not only helped to clarify concepts and terms but have also generated a new level of mutual understanding among international and Vietnamese researchers. It has been an enriching experience for all of us.

While the views expressed in the paper do not necessarily reflect those of UNDP or VASS, both organizations welcome the opportunity to encourage debate and discussion on this vital issue in Viet Nam's development. We commend the research team for their expertise and knowledge of Viet Nam's specific historical, political and social context. We hope that the publication of the paper will further stimulate discussion and analysis of the nature and development of grassroots democracy in Viet Nam.



Do Hoai Nam

President, Viet Nam Academy of Social Sciences



Subinay Nandy

UNDP Resident Representative, a.i.

Acknowledgements

This Policy Dialogue Paper was prepared by a team led by Pamela McElwee of Arizona State University, USA, and Ha Hoa Ly, National Academy of Public Administration, Ha noi, who conducted the fieldwork and who are the primary authors. Additional discussions on the international context and research questions were provided by Andrea Cornwall and Peter Taylor of the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.

Within UNDP Viet Nam, Koos Neefjes designed the project and provided strategic guidance as well as comments on successive drafts. Jonathan Pincus provided editorial and administrative support and direction. The team would like to thank Pham Thu Lan and Pham Thi Viet Anh for their expert coordination of the administrative details. Ho Yen Lan translated many drafts from English to Vietnamese and back again with considerable skill.

Professor Do Hoai Nam, President of the Viet Nam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS), provided guidance and comments on earlier drafts, and also organised an extensive and extremely useful process of peer review involving scholars and practitioners from a wide range of Vietnamese institutions.

The team wishes to express its gratitude to the following scholars of the Viet Nam Academy of Social Sciences for constructive comments and suggestions: Professor Tran Hau, Professor Chu Van Thanh, Professor Ngo Duc Manh, Professor Bui Quang Dung, Professor Vo Khanh Vinh and Professor Ho Van Thong. Dr Nguyen Si Dung of the Office of National Assembly and Dr Le Du Phong of the Prime Minister's Research Commission also contributed detailed comments and suggestions.

Dr Vu Quoc Binh of the Institute for Social Economic Development Studies in Ha Noi and Mrs Tran Thi Thanh of the Centre for Community Development in Ha Tinh helped coordinate our fieldtrips to Ha Tay and Ha Tinh respectively, and the team would like to express our gratitude for their assistance. Dr Nguyen Trung Thong of the Public Administration Reform board of the Ho Chi Minh City People's Committee and Nguyen Van Cao, head of the Hue City People's Committee, kindly spent time with us to share their cities' experiences with grassroots democracy. Many other INGOs, Vietnamese NGOs, and mass organizations allowed us to interview them and to learn from their experiences, and while we cannot thank them all here, the organizations we visited are listed in Appendix One. We greatly appreciate all their efforts to help us understand the varying opportunities and challenges that lie ahead for grassroots democracy and popular participation in Viet Nam.

Contents

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms	ii
Glossary	iii
Executive Summary	iv
1. Introduction	1
1.1. Objectives of the Discussion Paper	1
1.2. Good Governance, Increased Participation, and Deepening Democracy: What Do We Mean?	3
1.3. Participation and Local Governance in Viet Nam	6
2. Participatory Democracy in Viet Nam	11
2.1. Participatory Planning	11
2.2. Participatory Budgeting/Auditing	14
2.3. Participatory Monitoring	17
2.4. Complaints, Denunciations and Petitions	20
2.5. Conclusion: Future Trends in Participatory Democracy	20
2.5.1. <i>Problems with Implementation</i>	21
2.5.2. <i>Future Ideas to Strengthen Participatory Democracy</i>	21
3. Representative Democracy in Viet Nam	23
3.1. The History of Representative Democracy	23
3.2. New Changes and Roles for Representative Institutions	24
3.2.1. <i>Village Leaders</i>	24
3.2.2. <i>People's Councils</i>	25
3.2.3. <i>National Assembly</i>	27
3.3. Conclusion: Future Trends in Representative Democracy	27
3.3.1. <i>Expansion of Village Representative Institutions</i>	28
3.3.2. <i>Wider Use of Elections</i>	29
3.3.3. <i>New Types of Electoral Systems</i>	29
3.3.4. <i>Extended Constituent Services</i>	30
3.3.5. <i>Votes of Confidence/Referenda</i>	31
4. Conclusion: The Future of Participatory Democracy and Good Governance in Viet Nam	33
4.1. Continuing Challenges	34
4.2. Conclusion: Some Final Thoughts	38
Reference	40

List of Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
CBO	Community-Based Organisation
CDP	Commune Development Planning
CIEM	Central Institute for Economic Management
CPV	Communist Party of Viet Nam
DFID	Department for International Development, UK
GDD	Grassroots Democracy Decree
GTZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, Germany
FF	Fatherland Front
HEPR	Hunger Elimination and Poverty Eradication programmes
IDS	Institute for Development Studies, Sussex
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
MoHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
MOLISA	Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs
MOs	Mass Organizations
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
MRPD	Mountain Rural Development Programme, Sweden
NA	National Assembly
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NTP	National Targeted Programme
ONA	Office of the National Assembly
OSS	One Stop Shop
P135	Programme 135
PAC	Partnership to Assist the Poorest Communes
PAR	Public Administration Reform
PC	People's Council
PPA	Participatory Poverty Assessment
RIDEF	Rural Infrastructure Development and Education Fund
SIDA	Sweden International Development Agency
UNCDF	United Nations Capital Development Fund
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USD	U.S. Dollar
VASS	Viet Nam Academy of Social Sciences
VDP	Village Development Planning
VNGO	Vietnamese Non-Governmental Organization
VND	Viet Nam Dong
WTO	World Trade Organisation
WVS	World Values Survey

Glossary

Decentralization: Separation and distribution of authority, resources, and/or bureaucratic processes and jurisdictions to lower levels of government.

‘Deepening’ Democracy: A redesign of democratic institutions to expand the inclusion of stakeholders in decision-making processes, to design decision-making processes that improve the quality and inclusiveness of public policy decisions and to improve the quality of information available to participants.

Deliberative Democracy: A system of political decision-making based on some form of consensus and representative democracy. In contrast to the traditional focus on electoral democracy, which emphasizes voting as the central institution in democracy, deliberative democracy places greater emphasis on public deliberations among the citizenry.

Direct Democracy: The direct participation of people in policy and management, particularly at the local level, through meetings and other forms of interaction with state authorities.

Electoral Democracy: A form of democracy founded on the exercise of popular sovereignty in which voters choose representatives to act in their interests. Usually also defined as democracy which has free, multi-party elections carried out regularly on the basis of a secret ballot and universal suffrage.

Governance: The overall institutional environment in which citizens interact and within which economic, political, legal and administrative authority are exercised to manage a country’s affairs at all levels.

Good Governance: An ideal type of professionalised governance conducted in a transparent and accountable manner. Usually defined as predictable, open and enlightened policy making (transparency); a professionalised bureaucracy; accountable government institutions; strong civil society organizations participating in public affairs; and all actors accepting the rule of law as a basis for their activities.

Indirect Democracy: Rule through elected representatives (also known as representative democracy). Indirect democracy can be contrasted with direct democracy, which involves the direct participation of citizens in governance.

Liberal Democracy: Usually defined as a democracy in which individual liberties and individual responsibilities of citizens are protected by law. Often characterised by universal adult suffrage, political equality, legal protection for civil liberties, majority rule, a constitution, and rule of law.

Ombudsman: A person or office charged with responsibility for investigating complaints and organizing mediation to achieve fair settlements to disputes, including those involving citizens and government agencies.

Representative Democracy: Rule through elected representatives (also known as indirect democracy). Representative democracy involves periodic elections to select representatives who reach decisions on law and policy issues on the behalf of electors and citizens. Representative democracy can be contrasted with direct democracy, which denotes the direct participation of citizens in public decision-making.

Participatory Democracy: A form of direct democracy that requires citizens to engage directly in public deliberations and law making rather than only participate in periodic elections to choose representatives (see also deliberative democracy).

Rule of Law: The principle that every member of a society, even rulers, must act in accordance with the law. The rule of law also requires that the powers of the state are derived solely from and limited by legislation enacted by a parliament or legislature or through the decisions of an independent judiciary.

Executive Summary

Viet Nam's 1998 Decree on Grassroots Democracy (*dan chu co so*) put in place the legal framework required to expand direct citizen participation in local government. The decree established new mechanisms to enable citizens to exercise their rights to be informed of government activities that affect them, to discuss and contribute to the formulation of certain policies, to participate in local development activities and to supervise government performance. In addition to the Grassroots Democracy Decree, a number of related legal instruments have also been promulgated over the past ten years, including an ambitious Public Administration Reform (PAR) master plan, a decentralised State Budget Law, a new Law on Complaints and Petitions of Citizens and the first official ordinance on anti-corruption measures. There have also been moves to reform elected bodies and electoral systems, to reform elements of the ruling Communist Party, and to strengthen the role of mass organizations.

This discussion paper assesses these and other new trends through a discussion of the role of citizens in local government and the relationship between citizens and the state in twenty-first century Viet Nam. The main objective of the paper is to assess both the level of participation of citizens in local government and the responsiveness of government to efforts to increase participation. The paper links an analysis of participation in Viet Nam to international trends towards the 'deepening of democracy', defined as the inclusion of larger numbers of people in more deliberative and democratic local government processes.

The paper focuses on two dimensions of 'participation in citizenship' that have increased the space for citizen involvement in Viet Nam. One dimension is direct democracy, or the direct participation of people in policy and management, particularly at the local levels, through meetings and other forms of interaction with state authorities. The second dimension is representative democracy, or governance through elected representatives and deliberative bodies, primarily local village leaders, People's Councils and the National Assembly. The paper analyses activities related to both direct and representative democracy, including participatory planning and budgeting, participatory local monitoring of government, the resolution of complaints and grievances against government, new activities of local representative institutions and the reform of elections to these bodies.

While new spaces have opened up within which citizens can engage with government directly (such as the expanded Village Development Planning programmes) and indirectly (such as increased public visibility of the National Assembly), a number of difficulties remain. Lack of clarity of legal instruments, insufficient funding and overlapping roles and responsibilities among government institutions and mass organizations remain obstacles to more active engagement of citizens in their political institutions. Civil society actors outside of mass organizations remain mostly unengaged in policy discussions and do not yet form a strong conduit between citizens and the state. Public-private partnerships to improve governance are still limited. A lack of incentives for government officials to respond to increased citizen engagement has also placed limits on the scope of grassroots democracy reforms.

The paper concludes that expanding the space for participation in Viet Nam must come about through both direct and indirect democratic forums. Recommendations for the future include holding further discussions on the appropriate means to expand the quality and scale of participation in local government and specifying indicators to gauge the extent and quality of participation. Additional recommendations relate to the reform of elections and representative bodies, to enable these institutions to function in ways that are better aligned with the interests of constituents.

Viet Nam put in place the legal framework for the expansion of direct citizens' participation in local government in 1998. Prompted by episodes of rural protest in Thai Binh province and elsewhere in the 1990s, the governing Communist Party of Viet Nam (CPV) issued a new policy on what has since become known as 'Grassroots Democracy' (*dan chu co so*).¹ This decree provided new mechanisms to enable citizens to exercise their rights to be informed of government activities that affect 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 'people know, people discuss, people do, and people supervise' (*dan biet, dan ban, dan lam, dan kiem tra*).

In addition to the main legal framework of the grassroots democracy decree (GDD), a number of related legal documents have been promulgated since 1997. These include policies requiring improved treatment of citizens at administrative service centres, regular meetings between elected officials and citizens, asset declarations by elected officials and financial transparency for local infrastructure projects, as well as the first law on complaints and petitions of citizens and the first official ordinance on anti-corruption measures.² There have also been moves to reform elected bodies and electoral systems, to reform elements of the CPV and to strengthen the role of party-organised mass organizations grouped under the Fatherland Front.³ Uniting all of these elements is a conviction that the party needs to focus on the base (*co so*) of their support at the lowest administrative levels. Hence there has been a focus on 'democracy at basic levels' (*dan chu co so*) or 'grassroots democracy' as it is often referred to in English.

This new focus on citizen participation and the reform of local government parallels international trends in the development discourse regarding empowerment, citizen participation and the need to improve government services through decentralisation and greater involvement of civil society and the private sector. Many donors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) view the new legal environment as a step toward more responsive local government. Others both within and outside Viet Nam are more sceptical, interpreting the grassroots democracy decree as a stop-gap measure to stave off rural unrest. While the party has since declared the new approach to be a resounding success, others have emphasised the absence of significant changes in the quality and extent of participation of people in local politics after the grassroots democracy decree was promulgated.⁴

This paper presents an analysis of the impact of the grassroots democracy decree, and asks whether new spaces have opened up for local participation in Viet Nam. The paper assesses the GDD and the new legal environment for citizen participation from the perspective of improvements to governance and the deepening of democracy.

1.1. Objectives of the Discussion Paper

This discussion paper assesses new directions in local governance as a result of the grassroots democracy decree through a discussion of the role of citizens and the relationship between citizens and the state in twenty-

¹ The first new policy was Party directive 30/CT-TW, dated 18 Feb. 1998. This was later issued as Decree 29 in 1998, superseded in 2003 by Decree 79. Both decrees were officially titled 'Decree on the issuance of regulation on implementing democracy in communes', however they have become popularly known as the 'grassroots democracy decree'. Thus, for the sake of simplicity, this paper refers to GDD, meaning both the Decree 79 and similar decrees providing for increased democracy in other fields. These include state owned enterprises (Government Decree no. 7/1999/ND-CP of 13 Feb. 1999 on implementing grassroots democracy in state enterprises) and administrative offices (Decree 71/1998/ND-CP of 8 Sept. 1998 on the promulgation of the regulations to realise grassroots democracy in government agencies).

² For example: Decree 89/CP, dated Aug. 1997, orders government ministry staff and People's Committee cadres at all levels to be available to hear citizens' complaints on a regular basis; Government Decree No 24/1999/ND-CP of 16 Apr. 1999 on regulations for organizing, mobilizing, managing and utilizing voluntary contributions to infrastructure at commune levels; Prime Minister's Decision no 225/QĐ-TTg of 20 Nov. 1998 on the issuance of regulations on financial disclosure of the State Budget of various levels, budget preparing units, state-owned enterprises and funds derived from people's contributions; Government Decree no. 64/1998/ND-CP of 17 Aug. 1998 on details and guidelines for implementation of the Ordinance on prevention of corruption; the Law on Denunciations and Complaints of 2 Dec. 1998 passed by the National Assembly; and the Ordinance on Anti-Corruption Campaigns, 9 Mar. 1998.

³ For example, the 2003 Law on Election of Deputies to People's Councils, the 2003 Law on the Organisation of People's Councils and People's Committees, and new Party policies on the declaration of assets of Party members.

⁴ For the Party's assessment of the GDD, see Voice of Vietnam 2004b and *Tuoi Tre* 2004. For more critical assessments, see Tran Thi Thu Trang 2004 and Zingerli 2004.

first century Viet Nam. Many political changes have taken place over the past two decades, and the pace of change has accelerated over the past five years. The State Budget Law, new legal provisions on elections to and role of People's Councils, Public Administration Reform (PAR) programmes and a draft Law on Associations (discussed below) have all contributed to the remaking of the institutions of governance in Viet Nam. The aim of this paper is to understand the new roles assigned to citizens and to analyse the incorporation of these roles into the procedures and processes of state administration. The paper is based on a variety of sources, including official documents, interviews with key officials, scholars, leaders of Vietnamese mass organisations and Vietnamese NGOs (VNGOs), and staff of international donor agencies and international NGOs (INGOs). The findings of the paper are supported by limited but targeted fieldwork in both urban and rural areas to engage in consultations with citizens and officials directly responsible for the implementation of grassroots democracy (see Appendix 1 for a description of the fieldwork).

Several recent reports have examined the role of participation in the development process in Viet Nam (Fritzen 2000, Shanks *et al* 2003, Neefjes 2004, Saxena *et al* 2004). These reports have given examples of how development projects, from small-scale NGO efforts to large state-led poverty reduction projects, have tried to promote local participation. Some of these projects are reviewed in this paper, and readers can consult individual in-depth studies for more information. However, the main aim of this discussion paper is not to survey participatory aspects of local or area development projects. Instead, the paper looks more broadly at the role of participation in Viet Nam's overall governance structures. That is, the paper investigates the ways in which people participate in the making of government decisions that affect their lives, how they interact with elected officials and government institutions and how these institutions and officials in turn respond to increased citizen action and participation. This paper contributes to the analysis of 'participation' in Viet Nam by drawing a distinction between 'community participation', understood as local involvement in development projects and community-wide contributions to government projects, and 'participation in citizenship'. The latter term refers to a broader conception of involvement in local and higher-level decision-making and in increasing the accountability and effectiveness of government through the operation of elected bodies and representatives.

The analysis of participation in citizenship demands that we do not limit ourselves to the GDD, but that we also consider other aspects of the new legal environment that relate to citizenship and democracy. The term 'democracy' has gained wider usage within Viet Nam in the years since 1998, and it has been applied in more varied contexts. Democracy was added to the well-known national slogan: 'A prosperous people, strong nation, and just, *democratic*, and civilised society (*Dan giao, nuoc manh, xa hoi cong bang, dan chu, van minh*)' in the 2001 amendments to the 1992 Constitution.

Viet Nam's main activities relating to democratisation and citizen participation fall into two dimensions. The first dimension is 'direct democracy' (*dan chu truc tiep*) or the direct participation of people in policy and management, particularly at the local level, through meetings and other forms of interaction with state authorities. The second dimension is 'representative democracy' (*dan chu dai dien*), also sometimes referred to as 'indirect democracy' (*dan chu gian tiep*), which denotes the activities of electoral bodies such as village councils, People's Councils, and the National Assembly. The grassroots democracy decree pertains to both dimensions of democracy, and to other policies such as public administration reform, anti-corruption laws and the decentralisation of state budgets and service provision.

International trends and experience provide a useful framework for discussing democratisation and participation in Viet Nam. One of the main objectives of this paper is to assess whether Viet Nam is an 'unusual case'. To what degree does the fact that Viet Nam is a one-party political system contribute to unusual conditions for governance? Some have argued that 'participation' in Viet Nam is different from that found elsewhere for a variety of reasons, such as the lack of independence of civil society, the underdevelopment of the rule of law or the lack of official channels through which citizens' voices can be heard (Fritzen 2000, Saxena *et al*. 2004). One of the intents of this paper is to assess these assertions and consider the extent to which Viet Nam is different and why.

For example, Viet Nam often ranks low on international assessments of 'democracy', such as those published by Freedom House. However these assessments are often based on narrow standards and criteria, such as the presence or absence of multiparty elections (Puddington and Piano 2005). Viet Nam ranks very low in the World Bank Institute's 'Governance Matters' reports that attempt to rank governance along a scale of several dimensions.¹ Viet Nam scores lowest in 'voice and accountability' and is ranked in the bottom 25 percent of the sample. Yet

closer examination of these measures reveals that voice and accountability are proxied by only two indicators: contested elections and the existence of an opposition party. In other words, the reports adopt a very limited measure of *electoral democracy*, and make no assessment of citizen 'voice and accountability' through *direct democracy* or other channels. These sorts of generic assessments of 'democracy' based only on party systems or types of elections do not provide a complete picture of how citizens participate. Therefore, one of our goals is to assess Viet Nam as an organic entity and to look at participation in culturally specific terms related to Viet Nam's own history and policies. This requires an analysis of Vietnamese ideas of democracy and participation, rather than imported ones, and forces us to look beyond simple indicators such as the presence or absence of the traditional conventions of liberal democracy.

In fact, Viet Nam's low rankings in international polls of liberal democracy can be contrasted with the high rankings that Vietnamese citizens usually give the administrative system in Viet Nam. Citizens appear to maintain remarkably high levels of confidence in the state, as indicated in the 2001 World Values Survey (WVS).² More than 90 percent of survey respondents said that they have confidence in the national government, parliament and party. The WVS surveyors indicate that 'Vietnamese levels of institutional confidence are extremely high when compared to most nations.' Even more remarkable is that 96 percent of Vietnamese surveyed are positive about the governance system. 'These views are more positive than images of the government a decade ago—implying that political support is increasing, perhaps as a consequence of the reforms that have been introduced as well as the apparent allegiant aspects of the Vietnamese political culture. Vietnamese approval of government is also much higher than in other East Asian nations surveyed in the 1995-98 World Values Survey' (Dalton and Ong, 2001). This paper considers the positive impacts of the GDD and other enlarged spaces for citizen interaction in Viet Nam as a partial explanation for this high level of citizen confidence in the governance system.

Another objective of the paper is to see where participation is falling short. The paper seeks to highlight areas where governance might be improved, and the degree to which new laws, policies or approaches may need to be tried in the future. This is timely given that Viet Nam has just begun implementation of a new socio-economic development plan for 2006-2010 and related decisions of the Tenth Party Congress. The paper raises a variety of questions in the governance field to stimulate discussion among various groups of people that we hope will ultimately lead to new projects and better outcomes.

The rest of this section presents current trends in thinking about participation, citizenship and participatory democracy in Viet Nam and globally. Section 2 takes a detailed look at new trends in direct democracy and participation in Viet Nam and puts them in comparative perspective. Section 3 addresses recent changes in representative democracy in Viet Nam and assesses future steps in this area. Finally, the report concludes with some recommendations to continue the process of deepening democracy and increasing citizen participation in Viet Nam.

1.2. Good Governance, Increased Participation, and Deepening Democracy: What Do We Mean?

Governance issues have gained in importance in recent years. The Millennium Development Goals explicitly include 'ensuring good governance for poverty reduction.' Viet Nam has decided to use several indicators to assess progress towards good governance, including effective implementation of the grassroots democracy decree, budget transparency and legal reform (Socialist Republic of Viet Nam 2002). Another major governance programme is the Public Administration Reform (PAR) Master Plan of 2001. The PAR plan seeks to create a

⁵ The areas assessed include: 1) the process by which those in authority are selected and replaced (voice and accountability and political stability); 2) the capacity of government to formulate and implement policies (government effectiveness and regulatory quality); and 3) the respect of citizens and state for institutions that govern interactions among them (rule of law and control of corruption). See Kaufmann *et al.* 2005.

⁶ The World Values Survey was carried out for the first time in Viet Nam in 2001. The survey is a cross-cultural tool for measuring satisfaction with one's life and country, and tries to evaluate support for various social, economic and political values. It has been carried out in a large number of countries for several decades and is based on a weighted random sample of 1,000 respondents nationwide. See Dalton and Ong 2001.

more efficient and professional government by renovating the legal system, redefining the roles of administrative agencies, reducing the size of the state bureaucracy, increasing capacity of civil servants, reforming salary structures, improving financial transparency and modernizing the administrative system (Socialist Republic of Viet Nam 2000, Painter 2003). Recent governance debates in the CPV leading up to the 2006 plenum have focused on five areas:

- Clarification of the functions of basic government units, including redefining the government's role in the budgetary process, land administration, household registration, management of investment projects and tax collection;
- Organisation of the People's Councils and People's Committees and training of personnel;
- Allocation of budgetary authority to lower levels;
- Promotion of grassroots democracy;
- Changes in relations between the centre and localities.⁷

Despite the popularity of the term 'governance', questions remain over whether donors and government officials mean the same thing when they use it. A report by the Poverty Task Force (2002), a joint donor-government initiative to discuss and implement poverty reduction initiatives, stated that:

Governance is concerned with the overall institutional environment in which citizens interact and within which economic, political, legal and administrative authority are exercised to manage a country's affairs at all levels.... Good governance is epitomised by predictable, open and enlightened policy making (that is, transparent processes); a bureaucracy imbued with a professional ethos; an executive arm of government accountable for its actions; and a strong civil society participating in public affairs; and all behaving under the rule of law.

While the donor view often emphasizes the role of citizens and civil society and the rule of law, this view of governance is not always shared by the party and Government of Viet Nam. Even the word 'governance' is hard to translate into Vietnamese. It is often translated simply as '*quan ly nha nuoc*', or 'state management'. This is an indication that Vietnamese debates on governance usually concern state management reform and a rethinking of the political system at the very lowest levels of administration.⁸ In other words, for donors the term governance denotes a wide realm, encompassing the central government, the CPV, local government, social groups and civil society, individual citizens and the spaces where these actors and stakeholders meet. For government officials in Viet Nam the idea of governance is restricted to ways that state management can be reformed for economic development and public stability, particularly through the use of mediating groups like the mass organizations. In our view, these two perspectives should not be seen in opposition to each other, but as different ways of looking at the same sorts of problems based on different assumptions about the role of the state and citizens. However, it is important to understand the assumptions behind the use of the term 'governance' by the various stakeholders in Viet Nam in order to avoid a situation in which groups talk past one another.

Participation and Participatory Democracy

Discussions of 'good governance' in the 1990s often focused on improving *representative* or *electoral democracy*. Concern centred on whether states had robust democracies, primarily judged by regular elections. Now, however, more attention is paid to the idea of '*direct*' or '*participatory democracy*', as even in representative democracies elections may not be enough to ensure citizen engagement and participation. Government officials can be voted in or out, but the engagement of citizens with their state institutions may not extend beyond this (Heller 2001, Fung and Wright 2001). Furthermore, representative democracies may be dominated by elites, business interests, the military or other blocks that leave many people unrepresented, particularly the poor, minorities, and the socially excluded. This has led some to seek more inclusive alternatives to representative democracy.

⁷ Resolution of the fifth plenum of the central committee (Ninth Congress), March 2002 on '*Doi Moi* and improving the quality of the political system at the grassroots level'.

⁸ For examples of these discussions, see Nguyen Quoc Pham 2000 Duong Xuan Ngoc 2000, Nguyen Tien Phon 2001, Nguyen Van Sau and Ho Van Thong 2002, Nguyen Cuc 2002, Le Minh Quan 2003, Do Trung Hieu 2004, Hoang Chi Bao 2004, Bo Noi Vu 2004 and Ban dan van trung uong 2005.

One solution is increased citizen participation. Participation has long been a popular term in development and is seen as a contributor to better policies, more efficient government and therefore to more rapid economic development.⁹ However, 'participation' can mean different things to different people. Within development circles, for example, 'participation is starting to be seen as the right of people to become involved in decisions that affect their lives and to be more related to rights of citizenship and to democratic governance.'¹⁰

This was the thinking behind calls for more *participatory democracy*. Manor, for example, argues that democratisation alone is insufficient. 'Poor people must be more fully included in newly democratised systems. Just as an earlier generation recognised the need for growth with redistribution, many today have come to see the need for *democratisation with inclusion*' (Manor 2004). Participatory democracy is a form of direct democracy that is concerned with increasing citizenship action and enhancing the quality of civic engagement, in order to extend the role of citizens beyond that of simply occasional electors.¹¹ Citizens should be active in deciding local planning priorities and participating in decision-making forums for government and public services. Furthermore, the aim of participatory democracy is not just to get everyone around the table, but also to improve the *quality* of deliberation and participation in these new public arenas. Participatory democracy can also involve reform of political and electoral systems, especially as new forms of representation are needed for newly created participatory governance spaces, such as reformed local councils (Manor 2004).

Internationally, citizen participation in local governance ranges from limited consultation to active involvement and control. New approaches to participation often have been started from the bottom up in response to citizens' demands. Activities found in other countries include citizen education and awareness building, particularly citizen-based monitoring and evaluation programmes. Top-down approaches have also been instigated by governments as a means to increase responsiveness and open up spaces for citizen participation and involvement. These approaches include new legal frameworks for participation in local governance and mechanisms to increase the flow of information to citizens, particularly with regards to the delivery of services.¹²

For example, the Local Government Code adopted in the Philippines in 1991 mandates the transfer of power and resources from the central government to new Local Development Councils, in which citizens have a right to participate directly. In India, a constitutional amendment passed in 1993 incorporated local institutions as a third tier of government and institutionalised citizen participation in them. In Bolivia, a Law on Popular Participation was passed in 1993 to recognise the role of grassroots indigenous organizations in municipal planning (McGee 2003, Antlov et al 2004). Other innovative approaches, such as citizen report cards, participatory budgeting, public auditing, citizen-government partnerships, civil society-government partnerships and neighbourhood/village councils have been piloted in a number of countries (Crook and Manor 1994, Schonwalder 1997, Blair 2000, Heller 2001, Gaventa 2002, Estrella and Gaventa 2000). These new approaches are redefining the ways in which citizens and states interact. 'Placing an emphasis on inclusive participation as the very foundation of democratic practice,' write Cornwall and Gaventa, 'these approaches suggest a more active notion of citizenship, which recognizes the agency of citizens as "makers and shapers" rather than as "users and choosers" of interventions or services designed by others' (Cornwall and Gaventa 2000).

The goal for the many countries that have adopted participatory approaches is to achieve higher quality service delivery and more inclusive governance. Thus citizen participation is most often encouraged at the lowest administrative levels, where people are closest to the institutions that affect them. This is why 'direct democratization' often goes hand in hand with decentralisation. Direct democracy and decentralization, at their best, give more people a better chance to participate, help protect the rights of minorities and increase efficiency and transparency of service delivery (Manor 1995, Devas and Grant 2003, Blunt and Turner 2005). Ideally, democratic decentralisation would 'involve the transfer of real competence to the local level so that government could be

⁹ Beall *et al.* 2000, Blair 2000, Charlick 2001, Estrella and Iszatt 2004, and Plummer and Taylor 2004. Note, however, that there have been strong critiques of the 'participation' literature, primarily surrounding issues of power. Not everyone can participate equally given existing power inequalities in many countries, a problem for which the enthusiasts for participation have been criticised for not paying adequate attention. For more on this critique, see Cooke and Kothari 2001 and Hickey and Mohan 2005.

¹⁰ Logolink website: <http://www.ids.ac.uk/logolink>.

¹¹ For a more thorough discussion of 'participatory democracy', see the Logolink website.

¹² See many examples at the Logolink website, from which this information was taken.

responsive to popular demands' (Charlick 2001). An important link between increased participation and government responsiveness is the contribution decentralisation can make to the reform and empowerment of government institutions at the lowest level, such as local councils. In the words of one observer, 'The best way to promote broadening of participation and higher levels of responsiveness to popular demands would normally entail establishing meaningful locally elected deliberative bodies. In fact locally elected councils have become the hallmark of reformed or democratic local governments' (Charlick 2001).

Does decentralisation to the lowest political levels and strengthening of elected local deliberative bodies actually expand opportunities for citizen participation? This is an empirical question that must be asked in specific contexts. Why some people participate, and how others can be motivated to do so, depends on a range of culturally and historically specific factors. Participation is not an automatic outcome of decentralisation. It is sometimes difficult to increase citizen participation without reforming representative institutions in order to build confidence. In other words, direct democracy and representative democracy are often integrally linked. Studies of participation have stressed that citizens need opportunities both to participate meaningfully and to have their interests represented by organizations accountable to them. Direct democracy and representative democracy both have a role to play in increasing citizen participation.

1.3. Participation and Local Governance in Viet Nam

Ideas concerning the nature and impact of participation vary with the cultural context in which they are found. The levels and type of participation differ across countries and among stakeholders within countries. This is the case in Viet Nam, where competing ideas exist about what participation is and what it should aim to do. Simple categories are often misleading. To say that Vietnamese state officials prefer a more instrumentalist version of participation and NGOs and donors prefer a more empowerment-oriented model would be misleading. However, Vietnamese interpretations of participation do often differ from those of donors. Participation played an important role in governance before the influx of international agencies and their various views on participation. The Vietnamese discourse on participation is distinctive and contextually grounded, and must be understood as such. This paper emphasizes throughout that issues of governance and participation must be understood in the context of Viet Nam's culture and history and must appreciate the ways in which the Vietnamese case does not fit the usual prescriptions for 'good governance', as well as the ways that it does.

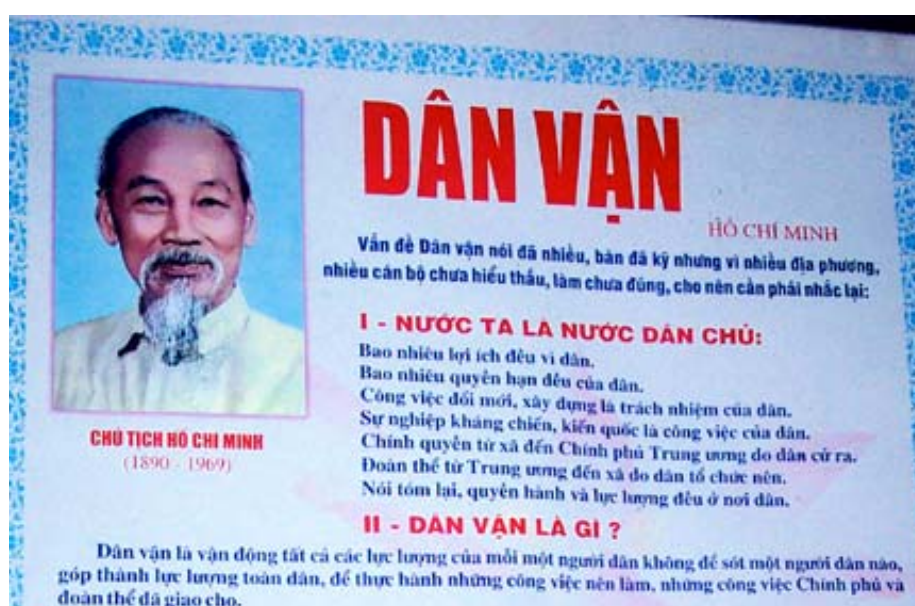
Understanding Vietnamese views on participation requires one to look at the country's long history of ideas pertaining to the relationship between citizens and the state. Ho Chi Minh once said that 'A ten times easier thing could not be done without the people's involvement, but a thousand times more difficult thing could be done if the people care' (*De tram lan khong dan cung chiu, kho van lan dan lieu cung xong*). 'The mastery of the people' (*nhân dân làm chủ*) is an enduring precept of the Communist Party of Viet Nam, but this does not easily translate into 'human rights' in the European or North American sense. For the CPV the people's mastery implies providing voice to the working classes. For Marxist thinkers, liberal democracy in the absence of economic equality cannot guarantee the human rights of working people. Similarly, theoretical socialism in its purest form employs a form of direct democracy, in which there is no state independent of 'the people'. The challenge, of course, is building this state. Class interests and capitalists would be opposed to such a system, thus the leadership of the Communist Party is necessary to achieve the people's mastery. While socialism has retreated as a state organizing vision in much of the world, it still forms the basis of the thinking of the Vietnamese leadership. Yet it is important to remember that when 'the people's rule' is invoked in Viet Nam, what is meant is the need for a broad class-based movement led by the Communist Party, not that 'the people' can be trusted to manage things themselves independently from the party.

Another key concept relating to the party's role is that of democratic centralism (*tap trung dân chủ*), often explained as the horizontal unification of the three main branches of government (legislative, executive and judicial), and the vertical integration of administrative ranks from lowest commune to the central state. What this means in practice is that while lower administrative levels may be consulted and encouraged to participate in the formulation of policies, the structural tendency is that of 'the part submitting to the whole, the minority yielding to the majority, lower ranks obeying upper ranks and localities obeying the centre' (Dixon 2004). Once policy decisions have been made, the inclination is to ask for full support from all sectors, rather than additional

consultation or critique. Democratic centralism can also leave local representatives more attuned to the officials above them than to the constituents below.

Mass mobilisation (*dan van*) is another key term. It is often said that mass organisations and the party have long deployed ‘people’s participation’, and that this is not a new concept in Viet Nam. Yet this form of ‘participation’ was for many years a more top-down approach. The CPV’s mass mobilisation section, in concert with mass organizations (see below), works to communicate government policies to the people and to help the people understand and implement them. These campaigns call on citizens to ‘participate’ (*tham gia*) in all types of government policies, from planting new varieties of rice to family planning. ‘Participation’ was in fact the *mobilisation* of peasants and workers in support of the state (see Figure One).

Figure One: Poster encouraging ‘mobilization’ of the people by cadres, based on Ho Chi Minh’s teachings, posted at People’s Committee of Soc Trang province, 2005.



The mass organizations (*to chuc doan the*) involved in this mobilisation are an important element in social relations and participation in Viet Nam. The mass organizations (MOs) were originally founded during the early years of the Indochinese Communist Party as a way to include all sectors of society in the anti-colonial struggle. MOs continue to occupy a position between the state and citizens to this day, as they have members and cells in nearly every village and neighbourhood in the country. The Viet Nam Fatherland Front (FF - *Mat tran To quoc*) is the overarching political alliance of all the mass organizations including the Veteran’s Union (*Hoi Cuu chien binh*), the Women’s Union (*Hoi Phu nu*), the Youth Union (*Hoi Thanh nien*) and the Farmer’s Union (*Hoi Nong dan*). The MOs in theory represent the interests of large sections of society to the state, and at the same time act as a channel for state policies to filter down to the citizens who make up the membership rolls (McCormick 1998). MOs also perform a variety of other social roles. Some have become welfare service providers, helping their members gain access to credit or agricultural supplies. MOs have long been a ‘testing ground’ for new party policies on various matters and are widely consulted in policy-making (Stromseth 2003).

The MOs play an important role in governance issues, a role that is affirmed and supported by the party-state. Thus they should be considered the main vehicle through which citizens gain access to the political realm. The MOs are the only social institutions that exist across the board in all localities and have the stated role of helping people to gain access to the state and government (Phan Xuan Son 2002). MOs are nominally democratic, as leaders are elected at the lowest levels from among the MO membership. Many MO leaders are also elected to local People’s Councils. The MOs disseminate government information for discussion at local meetings and work with People’s Committees to gauge public opinion of policies via meetings or comment-gathering cards. MOs help village chiefs and other elected officials organise meetings and arrange annual confidence votes for key

elected officials. The MOs also play a large role in representative democracy by supervising nomination and election procedures for legislative bodies.

However, questions have been raised about both the technical capacity of MOs and the degree to which they operate independently from the state. While they are part of the party-state apparatus, some observers assert that mass organizations have only a limited role in decision-making at higher levels. According to one evaluation, 'MOs may be invited to meetings, but their opinions often do not differ from the mainstream or tend to be neglected when they do' (MOLISA and UNDP 2004). The head of a Ha Noi-based Vietnamese NGO noted in an interview that despite the presence of MOs, 'rural society is organised in a way that citizens are underrepresented. The heads of the mass organizations do not contact the people before they go and represent them.' He added that there is an absence in rural areas of civil society groups that can act as an intermediary between government and society and that are more egalitarian and closer to the people than MOs.¹³

Many donors and international NGOs (INGOs) were concerned about the small space for civil society when they began working in Viet Nam in the 1980s and 1990s. Many early donor projects promoted people's participation through projects that focused specifically on local development contributions. In the view of one INGO representative, 'wherever such self-organised community-based management of development resources is seriously undertaken, it generally results in more efficient and productive resource management, a reduction in dependence on external resources, increased equity, increased local initiative and accountability and a strengthening of economic discipline' (Care International Viet Nam 2003). This view is widely held among INGOs. Donors used these projects as pilots to demonstrate to government partners that local participation positively empowers rural people to identify, plan, implement and contribute to their own economic development.

These projects also assumed that there should be independent, citizen-oriented civil society organizations to which donors could direct funds and assistance for local development, and that increased citizen participation needed this 'civil society channel' to be truly effective. INGOs often saw their role as empowering people and 'bringing social capital into play in economic development.' The presence of civil society groups would make the government more responsive to people's needs, and even replace ineffective institutions (Care International Viet Nam 2003). Current debates concerning participation in Viet Nam among INGOs and donors continue to explore how civil society can be strengthened and contribute to increased participation. This view is based in part based on the assumption that there is no 'independent' civil society in Viet Nam, and that MOs and many Vietnamese NGOs are too close to the state. These ties between the state and civil society have led some to call Viet Nam's NGOs part of a 'state-led civil society', similar to what might be found in China or Malaysia, where NGO activity is somewhat restricted (Alagappa 2004). The difficulties in defining 'civil society' are not confined to donors and INGOs. The long gestation period of the Law on Associations, currently being discussed in the National Assembly, indicates that uncertainty still exists in the party over what constitutes a real 'civil society organization' and what the activities of these organisations should be.

It is important to keep these debates relating to civil society in mind when assessing Viet Nam's framework for participatory democracy and how it compares to experiences in other countries. The first legislative framework to address participation in Viet Nam did not result from civil society pressure, as was the case in neighbouring countries such as the Philippines. As noted earlier, the 1998 Decree on Grassroots Democracy stemmed from high-level party discussions in the wake of incidents of rural unrest. This does not necessarily mean that civil society will be excluded from implementation and improvement of the GDD. Rather, it calls attention to the fact that participatory democracy in Viet Nam has been and remains a state-focused concern.

The main arguments in favour of GDD and participatory democracy, put forward by both the party and by state authorities in Viet Nam, have not focused on 'participation for participation's sake' as usually advocated in the international literature. In most cases, Vietnamese officials have taken a much more pragmatic approach, seeing participation as a way to improve government services, to increase accountability and authority and to reduce the number of rural protests and public complaints. Some of the key arguments in favour of grassroots democracy/participation advanced by government and MOs include:

¹³ Interview with VNGO, Ha Noi, March 2005.

- 1) **The need for de-concentration and decentralisation of government power.** There is increasingly a realisation in post-centrally planned Viet Nam that the central government cannot do everything, and that 'it is wasteful and ineffective if [central government agencies] cover all functions and tasks that can be fulfilled by local authorities' (Nguyen Van Sau and Ho Van Thong 2002). Thus grassroots democracy complements efforts at PAR that have been underway for several years.
- 2) **Capacity building.** Strengthening local governance can contribute to capacity building of local authorities and citizens, and help to 'develop all intellectual and material resources available at localities and in every single citizen' (Nguyen Van Sau and Ho Van Thong 2002). Grassroots democracy contributes to efforts at capacity building under PAR and fits with PAR's core objective of building a professional civil service.
- 3) **Bottom-up approaches as pilots.** According to many in the party, the local level is the appropriate site from which to begin political reforms. The practice of allowing small changes in local areas as pilots, and then adopting the most successful reforms nationwide, is well established in Viet Nam. Experiments in local direct democracy are a form of 'testing of the water' to see if confidence in government can be restored in places where it has been eroded. Following local pilot experiments, democracy might then be expanded to different sectors and at higher levels. Debates in Viet Nam now centre on how grassroots democracy principles can be extended upwards from the village level.
- 4) **Stability.** Stability can be restored to local areas if people regain faith in the administrative system. When people participate they feel more 'invested' in their local leadership and are more willing to make a positive contribution. Stability has been restored to many rural areas since 1998 as a direct result of GDD, according to party officials. Party Secretary Do Muoi noted that 'openness and transparency will strengthen local authorities.'¹⁴ This will in turn create the necessary conditions for the party to retain its singular role in politics.
- 5) **Increased citizen's contributions.** Some have argued that deepening democracy will help local authorities to mobilise resources from local people, particularly financial and labour resources. People will want to contribute time and money to government if they feel that the process is fair. Thus local participation is an exercise in 'efficiency' and 'development' as much as it is an exercise in democracy.
- 6) **Fighting Red Tape.** The 'bureaucratism' and red tape (*quan lieu*) that characterizes much administrative work in Viet Nam have long been sources of complaint. Reducing the burden on the average citizen has thus been a recurring governance theme. This can be seen in government policies such as the 'one-stop shop (OSS)' administrative model recently adopted.¹⁵ The GDD supports these efforts by encouraging local officials to spend more time learning about people's problems and finding ways to reduce red tape and address complaints.
- 7) **Fighting corruption.** Many cadres have noted that direct democracy provides a means by which people can check on the transparency of financial transactions and thus reduce corruption. This was the main argument in favour of participatory democracy made by Former Party Secretary Do Muoi. Numerous examples have been recorded of government projects in which infrastructure built by outside construction companies rather than local people ran to four or five times the original estimated cost due to rampant corruption (Poverty Task Force 2003).
- 8) **Economic development.** Much of the Vietnamese literature on the rationale for grassroots democracy makes the argument that democracy in local communes will enhance economic development through increased transparency and reduced corruption, and will increase citizen support for local development (Minh Nhut Duong 2004).

¹⁴ Interview, Ha Noi, April 2005.

¹⁵ Under the OSS model basic administrative matters for citizens will be solved quickly and in one office in the hope that a streamlined administrative system will foster better relations with citizens; see Meyer 2003. Studies have confirmed that where the OSS model has been adopted, it has contributed to better feelings toward government offices; see ADB 2003.

In addition to these arguments, international donors and NGOs have presented other points of view in favour of participation and improved democracy. Many donors and INGOs have highlighted the new grassroots democracy policy in their work, emphasizing the spaces that it opens up for participation and citizen action. This 'opening of space' for discussion about participation and locally-centred development has been one of the greatest strengths of the GDD. In a society that is often politically closed to outsiders, the GDD has given donors and INGOs greater confidence in raising the issue of participation with government partners. Some of their arguments in favour of participation include:

- 1) **Empowerment.** Donors and INGOs have often encouraged participation for participation's sake, arguing that people become empowered through active involvement in discussion and political activity, and this can 'spill over' into other areas of life. People become empowered when they are given space to participate in decisions that affect their future prospects. This creates better development outcomes and can have knock-on effects into areas such as state programmes for poverty reduction (Neeffjes 2004).
- 2) **Equality.** INGOs and donors have grown concerned in recent years about increasing disparities in income during the *doi moi* period in Viet Nam. Endemic poverty in some rural and remote areas, particularly in places where ethnic minorities predominate, stands in sharp contrast to evidence of emergent affluence in some urban areas. Donors have referred to the grassroots democracy legislation in urging more inclusive, pro-poor projects and policies to give ethnic minorities and other socially excluded people a larger voice in development strategies and approaches.
- 3) **Transparency.** Donors have been concerned for some time about the lack of transparency in many government practices, particularly budgeting. Donors have pushed for an independent and public State Audit body and for public auditing of government institutions. A State Audit was established in 1994 and the 2005 Law on State Audits aimed to make audits more independent. Donors have also been pushing for decentralisation of budget decisions, particularly down to the commune level. Donors propose that decentralisation would allow for more local autonomy and at the same time increase the transparency of financial transactions.
- 4) **Accountability.** In the absence of a strong legislative system, it is difficult to hold government officials accountable. In the past accountability was confined to the party. CPV members could be disciplined and expelled but only at the instigation of other party members. Letting citizens decide the fate of public servants by allowing them to lodge complaints and give feedback on how government can be improved has been a goal for many donors and INGOs. Donors have set up pilot projects using local management of development funds to encourage citizens to view themselves as 'owners' of projects, thereby increasing accountability.

Understanding the history and context within which ideas regarding participation have emerged can help all stakeholders in Viet Nam appreciate the views of their partners. Donors must understand the history of mass mobilisation and 'the people's mastery' if they are to grasp the unique role of the MOs. Vietnamese officials would benefit from a deeper understanding of international approaches to participation that emphasize individual empowerment and a civil society independent of the state. This would help the party and government appreciate the eagerness of donors and INGOs to create spaces of engagement between civil society and government actors. This paper emphasizes that international examples are relevant to Viet Nam, but that ultimately Viet Nam's path will depend on the country's specific cultural, historical and political conditions. The following sections of this report focus on the present status of participatory and representative democracy in Viet Nam, examining recent changes resulting from the GDD and other policies and highlighting areas where participation and governance can be further strengthened.

2. Participatory Democracy in Viet Nam

Local participation in Viet Nam has been promoted primarily through two channels: the legislative framework under the GDD, and a number of donor-funded projects that seek to encourage citizens to participate in local development. The most comprehensive statement on direct democracy was the GDD of 1998, which distinguished between different levels of participation by local people in government and management decisions. Within the GDD, the four basic areas of citizen participation are:

- 1) *Information Sharing*: The GDD sets out the sorts of information that must be disseminated to local people, particularly on land use and budgets.
- 2) *People participate in discussion and decisions*: The GDD identifies several areas where financial contributions, local regulations, internal affairs and village constitutions (*huong uoc*) should be discussed and decided on by local people themselves, without the involvement of higher levels.
- 3) *People participate in discussion but local authorities decide*: The GDD elaborates the rights of the people to have discussions and make recommendations on a range of government policies for which higher level authorities will make final decisions. These include local planning, the implementation of national target programmes and compensation for land use rights.
- 4) *People supervise and control*: The GDD identifies areas in which local people have the right to supervise the activities of authorities. These include the work of the People's Councils, the lodging of complaints and grievances, budget expenditures and construction of local infrastructure.

In reality, the GDD has been implemented with varying levels of success in different areas of Viet Nam. This section assesses examples of different types of direct democracy promoted under GDD: participatory planning, participatory budgeting, participatory monitoring and complaints and denunciations.

2.1. Participatory Planning

Participatory planning encompasses a range of different activities depending on the country and context. In other regions, participatory planning is implemented through citizen panels, citizen juries, citizens' conferences, stakeholder forums, youth parliaments, community radio and neighbourhood action groups, or any combination of these approaches. Many of these initiatives are built on partnerships between the state and local NGOs or citizens' organizations, and focus on 'visioning' (fostering citizen discussion on the desired future of a community), which becomes the basis for planning goals (Plein *et al* 1998).

Participatory planning was first introduced in Viet Nam through a number of small INGO and donor projects intended to build local capacity for increased participation in development. Some of the most well known projects are the Rural Infrastructure Development and Financing (RIDEF) project of the UN Capital Development Fund, which introduced the idea of community block grants to communes, the Viet Nam-Sweden Mountain Rural Development Programme (MRDP), which emphasised participatory research methods in poverty reduction, and several International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) rural development projects that established participatory mechanisms for rural infrastructure (UNCDF 2003, MARD MRDP 2002, Markanday 2004). In recent years, these participatory approaches have been 'scaled up' into larger projects. The World Bank has provided a US\$123 million loan for a Community Based Rural Infrastructure Project covering 13 provinces of Central Viet Nam. A similar amount has been allocated to six provinces under the Northern Mountains Rural Development Project. Both projects provide grants for small-scale public infrastructure projects that are identified and managed through a community participation process. Participatory planning has since been taken up with enthusiasm in many other sectors. The government is currently discussing institutionalizing and expanding participatory processes in the government planning system (Shanks *et al* 2003).

Currently, under GDD guidelines, participatory planning should be implemented at the village and commune levels. Citizens are to be given an opportunity to discuss and comment on the following: socio-economic development plans of communes; the use of land and management of public land funds; planning of residential areas; policies for sedentarisation and new economic zones; plans and projects on the mobilisation and use of people's contributions to construction and infrastructure; demarcation and adjustment of the administrative

boundaries of villages and communes; the implementation of national target programmes in the communes; and plans for land compensation. Commune authorities are obliged to transmit the opinions of local people to higher levels of government.

The effectiveness of participatory planning varies considerably from place to place. The quality of implementation appears to depend on the location of the commune and the issues addressed. Some communes are very active in discussing local plans, others less so. Even within a single district, there may be a pro-active and participatory discussion in one commune and a top-down planning process in another. Much of the success of participatory processes comes down to whether or not commune authorities and village leaders have the will and the capacity to undertake participatory planning.¹⁶

Some focus areas are also more likely to be discussed than others. Participation in the National Target Programmes on Poverty Reduction (HEPR) and Programme 135 (P135) for small-scale commune infrastructure is relatively robust. In a survey of 3,700 households conducted for a 2004 review of these programmes, 75 percent of respondents said that the lists of poor people to receive programme benefits were made on the basis of participatory consultations (MOLISA and UNDP 2004). P135 also gets generally good marks for incorporation of participatory processes in planning. Under P135, 'the guidelines state that project activities and the infrastructure works for investment should be discussed and decided at commune level – that is, from the set of investment options determined by the selection criteria. Local people should be consulted on the content of the plans, and on the level of their community contributions, before approval takes place' (Shanks *et al*/2003). Communes are supposed to prepare a five to ten year strategic plan for P135 investment based on the demands of each village. The commune's plan is then submitted to the district and forms part of the provincial P135 master plan.

An official of the Central Institute for Economic Management (CIEM) noted that new planning laws for the future will reinforce people's participation in the local planning process, and that it is likely that pilot projects for Village Development Planning (VDP) will be expanded and strengthened.¹⁷ VDP has been promoted by many donors as an example of direct democracy and the embodiment of the principles of the GDD, as it allows local communities to discuss and decide on investment priorities at the village level (without being limited to P135 infrastructure projects like roads and schools), which are then funded by various sources. Current donors include Germany, Sweden, Australia, Canada, the World Bank and ADB. Several INGOs, including Plan International and Helvetas, have adopted some version of VDP (GTZ 2003, CIEM, SFSD and GTZ 2004). Under VDP, facilitators organise village planning meetings, prior to the government planning cycle, to which all households are invited. In some VDP systems, mass organizations play a major role in organizing these meetings.¹⁸ Several days are spent with a small number of villagers to work out a suggested yearly plan (usually constrained by the amount of money that the donor has committed), which is then presented to the village for a vote. The results are sent upwards to the commune to be included in the commune development plan.

Improvements Needed to Participatory Planning

While VDP and the National Target Programmes are examples of the potential role for local discussion and participatory planning, many other reports of the exclusion of local people from planning have also been recorded. In one commune in Dak Lak province, a Participatory Poverty Analysis (PPA) conducted in 2003 revealed that decisions on emergency aid for people affected by serious drought were made primarily by cadres, which submitted lists to their superiors. After a six month delay, it was revealed that many poor households on the proposed list had been deleted without local consultation and replaced by households less severely affected (Viet Nam Solutions and ActionAid Viet Nam 2003).

The quality of participatory planning appears to be weakest in the context of land and natural resources issues. In most cases plans are decided and funded at levels above the commune, and in many cases above the district. For example, rural people are usually informed about agriculture and forest land allocation decisions but do not

¹⁶ Results from field discussions in Ha Tinh and Ha Tay.

¹⁷ Interview with CIEM official, Ha Noi, May 2005.

¹⁸ VNGOs interviewed raised concerns that while VDP may be transferring responsibility to local communities, there has been no significant push to include VNGOs in VDP activities. The VNGOs saw VDP as empowering current government channels and contended that it did not strengthen civil society under the new planning model.

take part in the process of decision-making and implementation (Gomiero *et al* 2000 and McElwee 2004). In one commune of Tuyen Hoa district in Quang Binh province, households requested a certain forest land allocation through the commune and were surprised to receive other land that was in many cases more than 10 to 15 km from their homes. These families stated that because they were not involved in the selection of their forest land allocations, they had no desire to go check on the land. This defeated the purpose of allocating the land in the first place.¹⁹ In a different commune in the same district, the province had decided in 2003 to establish a new State Forest Enterprise on land that had previously been allocated to individual households for reforestation. The area of the enterprise covered nearly three-fourths of the land area of the commune. Commune authorities claimed to have no say in the matter, as the decision had been made at higher levels. They had merely been informed and could not involve local people in discussions or in providing feedback. In order to tackle such problems, several INGOs and bilateral donors have tried to implement more participatory land-use planning in some areas of Viet Nam, such as projects on participatory forest land allocation funded by GTZ in Dak Lak. Participatory techniques, however, are not yet widespread or officially adopted by the relevant government ministries dealing with these controversial land use issues.

Another concern in participatory planning is the quality of local discussions. For example, in some areas commune officials have designated a few local people to be 'representatives' of local villages in discussions held under GDD rules. The selected individuals are asked to collect opinions and pass them on to the commune. Villagers have complained that these representatives do not consult with them before the commune meetings.²⁰ In other areas, all local villagers are invited but discussions are not open. Village meetings are often mentioned in the donor and government literature as a means of providing people with access to information and engaging in active discussions about options. Certainly, Viet Nam is further along in promoting direct democracy in this way than many other countries (Blair 2000). But critical literature on the content of public meetings is still limited, as is our understanding of power dynamics in these village meetings. For example, meetings do not always involve everyone in the village. Attendance ranges from 90 percent for some wards in HCM City to less than half of villagers in other areas. One cadre in HCM City said that families often send children to local meetings as 'seat-fillers' to ensure that the family has a representative there (Nguyen Thi Thu 2005). Another problem is that in some areas village meetings are announced to a select few 'invited' villagers who are considered articulate and knowledgeable. Those invited are in some cases referred to as 'noddors' since they agree with everything that the leaders of the meeting propose (Tran Thi Thu Trang 2004).

There are other power dynamics at play at village meetings. The poor and socially marginalised may have trouble attending participatory planning meetings, as they live far away or do not have time. The need to involve women and the socially excluded more actively in village discussion is clearly pressing. A PPA in Dak Lak noted that at many village meetings, 75 to 85 percent of participants are men (Viet Nam Solutions and ActionAid Viet Nam 2003). The Women's Union notes that there are no explicit provisions in the GDD to increase women's participation, although the VDP supported by some donors does require that 30 percent of village meetings attendees are women. Even when women do attend meetings, they often do not speak up. VNGOs working on women's issues argue that mechanisms should be put in place to provide village heads with gender training, or at least training on how to encourage women to speak up and participate actively at meetings.²¹

Another major question, particularly for VDP, regards the degree to which a one-off planning event held once a year can really reflect local priorities. There is a risk that these events produce project wish lists primarily for aid donors. Such planning is limited to disbursement of funds and does not really touch on local peoples' visions of the future. According to one assessment:

In most projects the [planning] process and approach is quite narrow and scheme specific and not a part of a wider community empowerment and local development process. Insufficient attention is paid to organization, process, and development of effective community participation forums; there is a dearth of qualified social mobilisation staff and in most projects no such staff is employed...By feeling

¹⁹ Focus group discussion and interviews, Tuyen Hoa district, Quang Binh, June 2005.

²⁰ Focus group in Truong Yen commune, Ha Tay province, June 2005.

²¹ Interview with VNGO, June 2005.

Figure Two: Village meeting in a Thai community in Nghe An Province, 2005.



peripheral to the whole process, the community fails to develop the necessary self confidence to develop linkages with the government agencies and demand for more or better services.²²

Another danger is that local meetings are held but then nothing happens at higher levels. One VNGO that has been working on GDD implementation stated that ‘the opinions of the people are not listened to closely by the leadership.’²³ Giving people a voice in planning has not been enough because it has not been matched by the development of mechanisms through which the leadership can use locally developed plans. Financial constraints are a part of the problem. Encouraging villagers to spend time on participatory planning exercises for which no money has been allocated by higher-level authorities can lead to frustration. Local planning remains constrained under what is widely known as the ‘beg-give’ system (*xin – cho*), whereby localities are dependent on central government allocations. This has spurred efforts to reform the budgeting process to make it as participatory as the planning process (discussed below).

2.2. Participatory Budgeting/Auditing

Participatory budgeting is a hot topic internationally. Perhaps the best-known example comes from Brazil, where the 1988 Brazilian Constitution allocated a larger share of federal revenues to states and municipalities for service provision. In some municipalities, including the well-known Porto Alegre experiment, an alliance was formed between local government, civic organizations and neighbourhood-based forums to make funding decisions. In Porto Alegre, regularly scheduled, institutionalised community meetings are held in neighbourhoods, at which every person in attendance has an equal vote on budgeting priorities, which are then passed up and incorporated into the overall municipal budget (Bruce 2004). Studies of participatory budgeting in Brazil claim that the changes have reduced corruption and clientellism, increased spending on social services and led to reform of municipal government institutions (Abers 1998).

Budgeting in Viet Nam is increasingly decentralised as well, with 40 percent of government revenue now allocated at the provincial level and below. Since 2001, provincial People’s Councils have been allowed more flexibility to decentralise budgets further to districts and communes, and to set revenue targets and decide on expenditures.

²² Nawaz 2004.

²³ Interview with VNGO, June 2005.

Although there has been much discussion in Viet Nam about making communes the true holders of authority over budgets and investment decisions, districts and provinces still control the purse strings in most areas. A major reason for communes' financial dependence on higher levels is that most rural communes cannot raise enough revenue themselves. For example, in one commune in Ha Tinh province, the commune collects only 39 million VND per year in revenue, but government expenses totalled 526 million VND. The 487 million VND shortfall is covered by disbursements from the central budget. Only about a dozen of Viet Nam's 64 provinces generate enough revenue to balance provincial budgets without the central government's help.

Communes prepare financial plans to submit to the district. The district considers these submissions and incorporates them into the district budget for approval by the province. The provincial budget plan is then submitted upward to the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Planning and Investment. These ministries submit the national budget to the government and National Assembly for endorsement and approval. Once the NA and government approve the budget, communes, districts and provinces find out how much of their budget request has been confirmed. According to one observer, a major problem with this system is that 'when central disbursements fail to meet the salary and maintenance bills of local operating units, *ad hoc* and decentralised systems of levies and charges are the only alternative and become accepted as the norm' (Painter 2003). Local officials impose new taxes, fees, levies and contributions on local people to cover central government budget shortfalls. Complaints over arbitrary fees and taxes were some of the main causes of the Thai Binh protests of 1997.

Under the slogan 'the state and the people working together' (*nha nuoc va nhan dan cung lam*), citizens are required to contribute ten days' labour per year to national infrastructure projects such as road-building, as well as an unlimited number of 'voluntary' contributions (in labour, money or in kind) to local development projects. These voluntary contributions are a volatile issue in the countryside. In a commune in Vu Quang district of Ha Tinh province, citizens complained during a focus group that they had to give to at least 14 different 'contribution' funds. In a focus group in Ha Tay province, local people divided their contributions into four types: *voluntary contributions*, such as funds for flood victims, poverty reduction, war veterans, Agent Orange victims, and poor children; *service contributions*, which included contributions to agricultural extension and production services, irrigation fees and other management fees; *construction contributions*, which included road construction and school construction; and finally, *state duties*, such as agricultural, personal and land taxes. In addition to these charges, schools and health services are increasingly funded through 'user fees.' This policy, known as *socialisation* in Viet Nam, allows service providers to raise revenue to replace reduced central transfers. This has meant that public services are increasingly provided by semi-public and private entities (such as private water and electricity companies), and that most people have to pay more out-of-pocket user fees (particularly in the health and education sectors). Cost cutting measures have also been taken in many sectors, including larger class sizes in schools (London 2004).

Although the GDD clearly states that these contributions and commune budgets should be discussed locally in participatory budgeting processes, this does not happen everywhere.²⁴ A focus group in Vu Quang district, Ha Tinh agreed that discussion of contributions, particularly over infrastructure, was more open after the GDD. However, citizens reported that discussions were primarily confined to the level of contributions that they would be required to make, while the uses to which the funds would be put was not discussed.²⁵ In a focus group in Ha Tay, people complained that they did not directly discuss the amount of contributions, but instead elected representatives to a commune board that made these decisions. Members of the board said that figures were set by the state and by the local cooperative. The province decided the level of contributions to school construction, and all residents with school-aged children were required to contribute. There was no discussion of these fees. Across the board, in all places visited, commune residents expressed frustration that contributions and user fees have increased at a time when the amount and quality of actual services received have declined.²⁶

²⁴ The GDD's statements on budget supervision were bolstered recently by Decision 80/2005/QD-TTG on the issuance of regulations on community investment supervision.

²⁵ Focus group in Vu Quang district, Ha Tinh province, May 2005.

²⁶ In addition, one of the biggest problems with the contribution system is that it is highly regressive, affecting poor households more than the rich. Large households, many of which are poor, are more affected because contributions are assessed on a per capita basis. Smaller and richer households are more likely to be able to afford cash payments, while others must contribute labour or in-kind. Furthermore, contributions are regressive in the sense that remote and rural areas bear a greater burden of contributions, and the services they receive in return for them are consistently worse than in urban areas.

Both donors and officials have pointed out that until budgets are decentralized, there will continue to be a lack of true participation on budgeting and contributions in many communities. Participatory local budgeting is a useful exercise in direct democracy, but this participation cannot effectively change priorities if local areas do not have the right to manage revenues and expenditures. Only when communes have control over their own budget can participatory budgeting truly have meaning. Many donors therefore support more decentralisation to the commune level. In 2003, however, only 385 communes out of the 2,362 poorest were budget holders for central programmes on poverty reduction (Nawaz 2004).

Improvements to Participatory Budgeting

Many donor projects encourage commune-level 'investment-ownership', in which donors and/or the state provide a set amount of money per commune. Local people must discuss and decide how these funds will be spent. Such donor projects have helped to pilot approaches to decentralised budgeting that can be used to encourage provinces and districts to further decentralise authority to communes. Yet some advisors indicated that simply devolving authority to the commune without the necessary training could lead to problems. Moreover, some aspects of budgeting do need to remain centralised to ensure equal access to services and development funds.

Furthermore, many of the 'participatory budgeting' schemes introduced under P135 and donor programmes are limited to discussing budgets for local infrastructure that will be funded by donors or the central state. Communities are restricted in the ways in which they can use these resources. For example, the funds can usually only be used for construction, and not for training, education, production inputs or social services. One advisor with experience in community budgeting in Pakistan noted that in that country,

commune budgets for infrastructure could be used as a catalyst for the empowerment of grassroots participatory institutions, local capital and employment generation, local skill development and promotion of linkages between grassroots institutions and district and province level service providers. In short, it should be part of an integrated strategy for the community participation and empowerment rather than a stand-alone activity for the sake of an infrastructure scheme or two.²⁷

Notable features of such schemes in Pakistan are the built-in incentives under which the community was, in the words of the advisor,

eligible to retain any savings that they could muster against the approved cost through greater community contribution and/or diligent and efficient use of funds. Second, if a community functions in accordance with the laid down project procedures for a period of three years and completes all the agreed tasks and activities in a satisfactory manner, it becomes eligible for another grant of an amount equal to the initial grant.²⁸

These sorts of incentives do not yet exist in Viet Nam's budgeting system.

In addition to incentives for participation, there is a need to achieve greater financial transparency, particularly above the village and commune levels. Since the GDD more communes are posting their local budgets for public inspection (see Figure Three), however many localities still do not do this. No national survey of compliance has yet been carried out. In the absence of such financial transparency, it is difficult to ask local people to participate in planning and budgeting. Yet openness regarding finances can lead to positive management outcomes. For example, one focus group in Ha Tay claimed that local people could save the government money if they had access to information, since state construction contracts were overpriced by some 30 percent but still produced infrastructure of poor quality. Protests in neighbouring areas of Ha Tay in 2005 were attributed to conflicts over corruption and lack of financial transparency in land deals (Associated Press 2005). This demonstrates the important relationship between transparency and participation in budgeting and social stability. Although budgets are voted on by elected officials under the State Budget Law of 2004, simply letting higher representatives view and discuss budgets is not enough. Private citizens need to be given incentives and the right to get involved. The success of municipal budgeting in Brazil is a good example of the positive impact of openness and public engagement.

²⁷ Nawaz 2004.

²⁸ Ibid

Figure Three. Public posting of investment budgets at a commune People's Committee in Yen Bai province, 2005.

STT	Tên dự án đầu tư	Tổng số vốn		Vốn ngân sách		Vốn vay		Vốn khác	
		Tổng số	Đơn vị	Tổng số	Đơn vị	Tổng số	Đơn vị	Tổng số	Đơn vị
I. CÁC DỰ ÁN ĐẦU TƯ									
1	Đầu tư xây dựng trường tiểu học	100	USD	100	USD				
2	Xây dựng đường giao thông	50	USD	50	USD				
3	Đầu tư xây dựng trạm y tế	20	USD	20	USD				
4	Đầu tư xây dựng trường mầm non	15	USD	15	USD				
5	Đầu tư xây dựng trường trung học	30	USD	30	USD				
6	Đầu tư xây dựng trường đại học	10	USD	10	USD				
7	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
8	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
9	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
10	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
11	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
12	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
13	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
14	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
15	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
16	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
17	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
18	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
19	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
20	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
21	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
22	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
23	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
24	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
25	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
26	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
27	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
28	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
29	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
30	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
31	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
32	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
33	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
34	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
35	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
36	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
37	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
38	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
39	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
40	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
41	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
42	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
43	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
44	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
45	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
46	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
47	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
48	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
49	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
50	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
51	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
52	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
53	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
54	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
55	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
56	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
57	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
58	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
59	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
60	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
61	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
62	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
63	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
64	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
65	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
66	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
67	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
68	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
69	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
70	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
71	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
72	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
73	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
74	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
75	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
76	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
77	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
78	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
79	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
80	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
81	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
82	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
83	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
84	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
85	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
86	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
87	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
88	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
89	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
90	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
91	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
92	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
93	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
94	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
95	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
96	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
97	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
98	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
99	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				
100	Đầu tư xây dựng trường dạy nghề	5	USD	5	USD				

To sum up, budgeting has been decentralised and made more participatory in some national target programmes and donor-supported projects. Nevertheless, many localities still have little or no say over how taxes are collected and central transfers spent. In many places finances are not transparent and public budgets are not posted. Furthermore, in the words of one observer, 'commune budgets are still considered an end in themselves and not as a means to an end, for example sustainable rural development, local empowerment, transparency and local accountability' (Nawaz 2004). In addition, the burden of local service delivery, particularly health and education, has fallen increasingly on households under the socialisation policy. Voluntary and compulsory contributions hit household budgets hard. Increasing demands on households to pay for services that used to be free, while not providing these households with a voice in determining how taxes and contributions are spent, has led to disillusionment in some areas. Participatory budgeting may eventually help lessen these problems, but for now participation remains an under-utilised tool in the Vietnamese system.

2.3. Participatory Monitoring

In a number of countries monitoring and supervising the work done by government is a major focus of direct democracy programmes. Examples include 'citizens' report cards', joint citizen-government monitoring boards and participatory auditing. Most of these participatory monitoring schemes began at the instigation of NGOs and other civil society organizations that were seeking ways to make government service provision more accountable, according to a recent review (Estrella and Gaventa 1997). In this review, the most successful cases of participatory monitoring have been those that:

- Provided for legal standing or formal recognition of non-governmental observers within policy making;
- Allowed monitors access to the entire policy and service delivery process;
- Provided citizens with structured access to information; and
- Established the right of citizens to complain and demand formal investigations or redress when services were inadequate.²⁹

²⁹ Goetz and Gaventa 2001.

Participatory monitoring is a key activity allowed under the 1998 GDD law.³⁰ However, the actual mechanisms of supervision are not well defined in the legislation itself, and do not meet the success criteria set out above. In reality, according to most people interviewed, monitoring and supervision are the weakest aspects of grassroots democracy.

There is considerable confusion over the precise supervision mechanisms allowed. In the GDD decree itself, four main modes of supervision and monitoring of government activities and service delivery are defined. These include monitoring:

- 1) by individual citizens themselves;
- 2) through socio-political organizations (mass organizations);
- 3) through representative organizations (elected People's Councils); and
- 4) through new people's inspection boards, management boards, and supervision boards.

Monitoring by individuals is complicated by the fact that citizens may not attend commune or higher-level administrative meetings unless specifically invited. This limits their ability to monitor directly. As Viet Nam lacks a legal framework governing access to public information, there are no clear channels for people to seek information not provided by the authorities, and no 'ombudsman' type organizations to help people obtain information.³¹ The GDD does not require that meetings of the People's Council or People's Committee should be open or that citizens should be involved. Yet in many parts of the world, laws are explicit that meetings must be public and announced ahead of time so that anyone who wants to attend, can. Adoption of such procedures would represent a major step forward in Viet Nam. In addition to public access to government meetings, Viet Nam could also consider setting up government partnership meetings to give citizens a channel through which they can provide feedback on service delivery.

Mass organizations have a stronger claim than private individuals to attend commune or other administrative meetings and to hear annual reports on work performance and 'self-criticism' of People's Committees and People's Councils. Yet these reports fall short of other international initiatives like 'report cards' on government services, because there is no formal mechanism for citizens to hear and respond to these reports beyond the provision that the village head should organise the 'the collection of people's opinions'. What usually happens is that the village head makes a yearly report to higher authorities about what was implemented in the village during the year, and this report is not necessarily based on 'gathering people's opinions.'

The various local boards that have been established are another monitoring mechanism. 'People's Inspection Boards' (*Ban Thanh tra Nhan dan*) were first set up under Resolution 26-HDBT in 1984, which created an overall State Inspection Committee now known as the State Inspectorate (State Inspectorate of Viet Nam 2004). Ninety-five percent of communes and wards in Viet Nam now have a People's Inspection Board, and some localities have lower 'mediation organizations' at village and neighbourhood levels (Socialist Republic of Viet Nam 2004). These boards and organizations have a broad mandate and are part of the national structure of supervision, which to date has focused mostly on financial matters. The inspection boards are supposed to investigate citizens' complaints of any nature. However, most citizens interviewed could not name anyone on the inspection boards in their area, nor did they know the purpose of the boards. Furthermore, even in a wealthy ward of HCM City, the inspection board members received only 300,000 VND per month (around US\$20) to carry out their work.³² As a result their activities were severely limited.

³⁰ Government activities that are supposed to be supervised and inspected by people in communes include: operations of the commune administration, socio-political organizations, social organizations and professional organizations; the implementation of resolutions of the commune People's Councils and decisions of the commune People's Committees; activities and moral quality of officials and public servants; the settlement of local citizens' complaints and denunciations; commune budgets; construction projects built with people's contributions; projects implemented by authorities in the communes with direct impact on production, security, order, socio-cultural affairs, environmental sanitation and the lives of local people; management and use of land in the communes; collection and spending of various funds and fees; results of the examination, inspection and handling of complaints and corruption cases; implementation of policies on preferential treatment for war invalids, social insurance and social relief policies (Article 12 of GDD).

³¹ An ombudsman is an independent organisation or department, the purpose of which is to help citizens gain access to information and make complaints.

³² Interview with head of FF, HCM City ward, March 2005.

In addition to the People's Inspection Boards, many communes have Project Supervision Boards (*Ban giam sat du an*) implemented through the National Targeted Programmes (NTPs) on HEPR and 135. These boards are supposed to supervise construction projects in the communes. Each board should have three to five elected members, who are supervised by the local Fatherland Front and the commune People's Council. Finally, in many areas there are also 'Project Management Boards' (*Ban quan ly du an*) set up for various projects funded by government or international agencies. These boards usually consist of members from various departments and mass organizations.

Thus there may be a number of monitoring boards operating in each locality: construction boards, project boards, inspection boards, supervisory boards and so on. Estimates put the number of such boards in any one commune at between ten and 15 (Shanks *et al* 2003). Yet the danger in having so many boards is that their roles and functions may overlap, leading to confusion and ineffectiveness. Also, these boards are usually not participatory in nature, as they are strongly influenced by the People's Committees. Citizens who sit on the boards are sometimes appointed by the People's Committee and not elected as required. Some supervision/inspection boards have no citizens' representatives and are made up entirely of officials.³³ In many cases, People's Inspection boards had participation by MOs and this was considered sufficient representation of 'the people'.

Improvements to Participatory Monitoring

Both supervision and inspection boards are generally seen as too weak and lacking a clear mandate. Many boards also do not possess the technical skills needed to judge the quality of work carried out, particularly on construction projects. One focus group in Ha Tay stated that while people on the boards viewed their work as a 'serious duty', they did not have the ability to read through all of the documents or understand technical specifications. Thus their main role was to simply make sure that the roads being built did not have obvious or visible flaws. Inspection/supervision boards need technical training to judge the quality of work. The Partnership to Assist the Poorest Communes, a joint donor-government working group, is now engaged in capacity building for these commune supervision boards.

There have been some successes. A recent view of the HEPR programme notes that in some areas the boards' effectiveness 'has gradually improved since 1998, and there are suggestions that the Project Inspection Boards may in some cases have been strengthened as a result of the Decree 29 and the popularisation of the mandate of Project Supervision Boards' (MOLISA and UNDP 2004). In one commune in Ha Tinh, an inspection board was rated highly for transparent action to solve local problems and provision of information about who was on the board and what they were working on. As a result, problems were resolved locally and did not need to be taken to the district.³⁴ In cases in which the monitoring/inspection boards were making a difference, an important factor in their success seems to have been the determination of individual board members. However, most interviewees expressed the opinion that monitoring mechanisms remain weak. One government advisor stated that 'the situation of monitoring might look like it has been solved already and there are no problems [through the supervision boards under GDD] but if they really monitor [like they are supposed to] it is often too late in the process.'

Aside from the monitoring boards, there have been other recent moves to monitor public services in Viet Nam. In some areas, 'report cards' are being piloted to gauge progress toward GDD implementation and general service delivery. One such project began in 2004, funded by several donors including the World Bank, to allow citizen feedback on administrative services in four provinces. Yet even this simple pilot has not been problem free. The donors wanted report cards to be developed and monitored by the People's Councils in each locality, as monitoring is part of the mandate of these elected bodies. However, the Councils did not want to take on the task. Instead the report cards are managed by People's Committees themselves, which are the very providers of the public services being evaluated. This may lead to accusations that the 'fox is guarding the henhouse' and that People's Committees may not genuinely want to use the report cards for reform.

In other parts of the world, civil society plays a monitoring role. NGOs work with government agencies to implement surveys or report cards on service delivery. Community-based organisations (CBOs) seek to provide a conduit for complaints to government agencies. In GDD no clear monitoring role exists for civil society outside of MOs, and

³³ Focus group, Ha Tay province, June 2005.

³⁴ Focus group, Vu Quang district, Ha Tinh province, May 2005.

even MOs feel that their role is unclear and that they lack the resources to conduct monitoring. Future work on monitoring under GDD should consider ways to involve the private sector and civil society in independent monitoring. However, this is unlikely to happen as long as the legal status of NGOs and civil society groups remains ambiguous.

One government advisor stated that the one way to make cadres accountable and to monitor them effectively was to make them elected representatives accountable to the people through open and frequent elections. This would force the authorities to listen to the opinions of the people. He stated that although elected positions in mass organisations and People's Councils already exist, in reality 'there is no one with responsibility to the people' as these organs are only responsible to the party and to higher ups. Thus there are discussions underway behind the scenes within the party and state to consider the expansion of electoral democracy as a complement to participatory monitoring (discussed in Section 3).

2.4. Complaints, Denunciations and Petitions

Another way that citizens can monitor is through complaints, petitions and denunciations (*khieu nai* and *to cao*). Indeed, these are some of the only ways that citizens have been able to register their grievances about land appropriation and corruption in rural areas. Successive Constitutions since 1959 have granted citizens the right to lodge complaints and denounce illegal acts committed by state agencies and officials. Under the Law on Complaints and Denunciations of 1998, citizens have the right to file petitions against administrative decisions, and the authorities must respond to petitions within established time limits.

However, one government advisor noted that grassroots democracy remained 'formalistic' in part because these complaint mechanisms remained weak. According to the Law on Complaints and Denunciations, complaints are supposed to be lodged first at the office against which they are directed, not to higher offices. As a result, few complaints are resolved.³⁵ Further, people are reluctant to complain against officials for fear of reprisals. According to current law, anonymous denunciations are not considered valid. This should be changed to allow people with genuine grievances to take advantage of the complaint system without fear of retaliation.

Since many people have no idea where to send complaints, they simply send them to the places with which they are most familiar, for example the National Assembly or newspapers. However, the NA admits that it does not have the capacity to follow up all the petitions that it receives. In 2004 alone the NA received over fifteen thousand complaints (Bich Ngoc 2004). Once the NA receives a complaint, it is sent to the relevant ministry, which then sends it to the office of the State Inspectorate in each ministry. The NA does not have the resources to make sure that complaints have been adequately addressed, and must rely on the good faith of the inspection offices. Many government agencies have been accused of dealing with petitions ineffectively, and NA deputies often receive no response to their forwarded complaints. Citizens in a focus group in Ha Tinh emphasised that even small complaints lodged locally were not addressed quickly, and sometimes involved repeated visits to local authorities. More work is needed both to help citizens understand how to make complaints and to improve the response channels to deal efficiently and effectively with these problems.

2.5. Conclusion: Future Trends in Participatory Democracy

Participatory democracy requires new rules and incentives for both citizens and the state to improve the quantity and quality of participation. Have the GDD and other new laws given Viet Nam the environment it needs? While the legal framework of direct participation is important, it is not the only key to success. It is necessary to create new spaces for direct engagement, many of which are not easy to develop. Examples in other parts of the world suggest that the structure and power of local government and the level of organisation of civil society also play a role (Antlov *et al* 2004). Yet as we have noted earlier, the hierarchical nature of local government in Viet Nam means that officials are often more responsive to the top than to the bottom. Civil society outside of the mass organizations has played little role in local governance issues to date.

³⁵ Interview with central government advisor, Ha Noi, May 2005.

Implementation of direct democracy has been complicated by a number of factors. These include practical issues of funding and capacity building, as well as more fundamental issues surrounding culture and cultural change. The history of Confucianism in Viet Nam, combined with ideas related to the role of the family and elders, has reinforced traditional respect for authority. Combined with many years of central planning, this has meant that citizens often defer to the will and views of officials. Years of top down planning have left people expecting officials to do everything for them, as was the case under the cooperative system known as *bao cap*. Citizens often lack the self-confidence to organise things for themselves, and the unclear legal framework for community-based organizations, petitions and complaints works to discourage participation. Many people rely on networks of relatives, friends and colleagues to get things done in government offices. The widespread reliance on personal connections to manage and manoeuvre through the administrative system is a disincentive to formal participation. Moreover, those without personal connections are often the most under-represented people: women, minorities, people in remote areas and people with little or no formal education. These deeply engrained beliefs, traditions and practices cannot be changed overnight, nor can they be overcome by simply issuing laws and decrees. A concerted effort is needed to strengthen people's awareness of and capacity to exercise their rights. Some NGOs and CBOs have been working on this, but much more is needed.

2.5.1. Problems with Implementation

One of the greatest obstacles to increased 'direct democracy' and participation is the problem of 'formalism' (*hinh thuc*). Formalism means that implementation results in changes on the surface rather than real changes. Some villages had a few meetings when the grassroots democracy decree was first promulgated, but treated these as 'one-off' events. In other cases, authorities pay lip service to participation by allowing people to speak, but then do not follow up on what has been said.³⁶ No mechanisms exist to ensure the *quality* of participation in Viet Nam. Nor are incentives in place to stimulate participation. Thus the number of meetings held is used as an indicator of success, with no reference to the quality of the discussion or the information exchanged. Similarly, there has been little discussion to date on whether participation should be viewed as a means to an end (the dominant view in government) or an end in itself (the donor and INGO view).

One way to combat 'formalism' is to allow local flexibility and autonomy for local authorities to apply direct democracy in ways that make sense in their areas, while at the same time providing clear guidance on how direct democracy will be assessed. Although many commentators have made note of Viet Nam's decentralised nature and the possibility for localities to act independently of the state, in fact much local policy is meant to appease higher authorities rather than respond to local needs. Long chains of command, formalistic approaches at the local level and target driven approaches to policy implementation distract from the original goals of participation policy.

The formalistic implementation of participatory processes is also in part due to lack of resources. There is not enough money available to print copies of public documents or to hold additional meetings. Cadres often are interested in receiving training on the new policies and acquiring necessary skills, such as how to facilitate public meetings, but they lack the means to do so. INGO and donor projects that have funded participatory activities have learned important lessons that can be shared with the government and other partners, but as of yet there are no regular channels for dissemination of information between the two sides. Study tours and field visits to areas where participation has been implemented well would also be welcomed by many.

2.5.2. Future Ideas to Strengthen Participatory Democracy

Strengthening the legal framework: To many local authorities and citizens, the GDD is just another policy that has not fundamentally changed the way that the government goes about its business. In many areas, hundreds of edicts are delivered from the centre to the commune every year, making it hard to distinguish the important from the minor policy changes. The GDD was one in a series of things that had to be communicated *to* the people, but was not viewed as a different way of conducting government operations *with* the people. Academics from the Ho Chi Minh Political Institute pointed this out when they wrote: 'we must not dissolve the grassroots democratic movement into other social ones like that of cultural village building, family planning, etc., but consider

³⁶ Interview with member of Policy Board of Women's Union, Ha Noi, May 2005.

it as a foundation and as basic principles on which people can decide to do the things necessary to their life, including to renovate party organization, executive branch, and other social associations at commune and village levels' (Nguyen Van Sau and Ho Van Thong 2002). Elevation of the GDD to a law that is debated and passed by the National Assembly would afford the GDD greater visibility and provide it with a stronger legal basis.

Incentives for Participation: Currently, incentives for participatory democracy are weak for both citizens and officials. Without incentives, formalism in implementation and a lack of enthusiasm among officials are likely to continue. Localities that do not implement GDD laws (estimated to be at least 17 percent of all communes in Viet Nam) are not punished and no rewards are given to those that perform well (Socialist Republic of Viet Nam 2003). This is unfortunate, as Viet Nam is accustomed to granting 'awards' (*bang khen*) to institutions and localities that achieve government targets. A special *bang khen* for good implementation of GDD is needed, and should be accompanied by a rigorous set of indicators. Incentives should also be put in place for households participating in local affairs. Participation in village planning and budgeting could be added as a criterion for receiving the government designation of 'cultural family', which is currently given to families that follow laws on family planning, social evils, and so on. The designation of 'cultural village', now granted if more than 75 percent of the population is a 'cultural family' could be changed to include indicators of community participation. While many have argued that participation will bring direct benefits to households, added incentives like *bang khen* and 'cultural and participatory family' certificates can help keep families involved until the real benefits are apparent.

Financial incentives, such as allowing localities to keep extra funding if they can reduce corruption and expenditures on basic infrastructure, are also necessary. Other special kinds of financial incentives could be given to administrative offices to encourage them to make strides toward improving service delivery, such as linking staff pay rises and promotion opportunities to participatory approaches. Incentives should be extended not just to elected officials, but also to MOs in order to increase their involvement in local governance. Funding for MO activities could be tied to the adoption of participatory mechanisms.

Other projects and partnerships: More creative projects, based on international examples, can also be championed in the years ahead. These include more 'partnerships' to plan and monitor government action. Currently, there are a number of partnership working groups involving government and donors and some international NGOs. However, these are based in Ha Noi and primarily entail discussion of central government policies. VNGOs and other sectors of civil society such as MOs, as well as citizens themselves, do not usually take part in these forums. New partnerships might focus on the local level outside of Ha Noi, and create citizen-government collaborations to assess such important fields as education and health. Currently, 'health care committees' have been established in about 90 percent of communes in Viet Nam, but they are not yet effective (Ha Noi Medical University *et al* 2003). Public meetings of these partnerships would encourage other agencies of government to hold open meetings and disseminate information to citizens. Report cards and 'citizen audits' can also be modelled on international examples, although care must be taken to ensure that this is done in an open manner. Strengthening and formalizing civil society's role in local governance can be a goal of these public-private partnerships as well. It will take a long time for citizens to feel confident enough to share opinions of government services openly and honestly. The slow progress with regards to petitions and complaints has disappointed many citizens, who may now be sceptical when new methods of opinion gathering are introduced. Movement toward direct participatory democracy in Viet Nam that results in highly motivated citizen engagement and an adequate response from government will entail a long-term process of change. These changes will not occur quickly, and are likely to take unpredictable forms and appear in unforeseen ways.

3. Representative Democracy in Viet Nam

This section examines participation in representative democracy, including elections and the role of elected officials. 'Deepening democracy' requires not just increased direct citizen participation, but also a response from the formal representative institutions of government. International comparisons show that enhancing citizen participation is often difficult without reform of representative institutions, particularly at the lowest levels of the state, in order to build public confidence. Making representative bodies more accountable and transparent and improving the quality of interaction between them and the public is thus a key objective of deepening democracy.

Representative democracy in Viet Nam is manifested in the right of citizens to elect three main types of officials. First, local leaders—village headmen in rural areas and residential group heads in urban areas—have been elected positions since 1998 when local elections were promoted under the GDD. Second, citizens vote for local People's Council members at different administrative levels every five years. The last elections were held in 2004. Finally, citizens directly elect deputies to the National Assembly (NA) every five years, with the next elections due in 2007.

The government has worked to improve the election system in recent years through the enactment of new election laws and other activities. The Law on the Organisation of the National Assembly of 2002 sought to improve the professionalism of National Assembly deputies by increasing the share of full-time legislators to 25 percent. Nevertheless, elected bodies still face key constraints in carrying out their assigned tasks, and the conduct of elections often discourages citizen involvement. This section looks more closely at how the electoral systems of Viet Nam are changing, and the implications of these changes for democratisation. We will not attempt to address all aspects of representative democracy in this paper. Instead, we will concentrate on areas directly related to giving citizens more voice in governance systems at all levels.

3.1. The History of Representative Democracy

One of the first administrative acts of the Viet Minh when they took power in 1945 was to set up village councils. These councils of 15 to 25 village members were to be freely elected, with a term of office set at two years (Ginsburg 1962). Yet during the 1950s, as administrative consolidation proceeded across North Viet Nam, village councils were abolished and replaced by People's Committees and People's Councils at the commune level and above. The village ceased to exist as an official administrative unit, which is still the case today. After the abolishment of Village Councils, the position of village headman and residential head became an unofficial post, one that had no clear role and little power, particularly during the period of collectivised agriculture. For many years, the commune or other higher authorities appointed village heads, or they were selected from the local party cell. The first official law to propose the direct election of village heads was in the GDD in 1998. Now it is asserted that 90 percent of village heads are elected directly by the people (Socialist Republic of Viet Nam 2004). New guidelines have recently been issued governing these local elections.³⁷

In addition to the elected village headmen, People's Councils (*Hoi dong Nhan dan*) are elected in each province, district, commune and city. The first elections to People's Councils took place in 1957-8 and have continued in essentially the same form since (Kerkvliet 2004). People's Councils range in size: commune councils consist of seven to 25 members, district councils have 25 to 30 members and provincial councils and cities have anywhere from 40 to 95 elected members. People's Councils usually meet for just two four-day sessions per year, typically after sessions of the National Assembly.

The Constitution provides the legal basis for the People's Councils in Article 119, which states that the 'People's Council is the local organ of State power; it represents the will, aspirations, and mastery of the people; it is elected by the local people and is accountable to them and to the superior State organs.' According to the 2003 Law on the Organisation of People's Councils and People's Committees, the main functions of the People's Council are decision-making and supervision of the activities of the other branches of government. This includes reviewing and reaching decisions on budget allocations to lower levels of government under the 2004 State Budget Law, monitoring, reviewing and overseeing the implementation of People's Committee policies (the executive

³⁷ See Circular 01/2005/TTLB-BTTUBTWMTTQVN-BNV on 'Providing guidelines on the procedures for electing, releasing and dismissing village heads and residential group heads'.

branch) and supervising the People's Court and People's Procuracy (the judicial branch). In addition, it is the People's Council's job to appoint the People's Committee (*Uy ban Nhan dan*), the executive branch, with the party playing an important advisory role in this process. In reality, because People's Councils meet so infrequently, they often 'govern primarily by endorsing whatever is put before them' (Kerkvliet 2004). Scholars from the Ho Chi Minh Political Academy agree that the People Councils perform their duties in a formalistic manner (Nguyen Van Sau and Ho Van Thong 2002). The tendency to bypass and hence disempower elected bodies like People's Councils is also a common feature of most development projects (Fritzen 2000).

Another problem is the limited contact between the legislative branches and their constituents. One member of a People's Council in Ha Noi noted that members 'were afraid to interact with voters because they could listen to the voters but could not tell them who could solve their problems or whether their problems could be solved.'³⁸ A 1998 national conference on People's Councils pointed out that they 'have rights but no power,' and therefore are akin to 'bladeless swords' (Koh 2004). The idea that People's Councils represent constituents, rather than simply pass laws, is in fact new. In the past this representative aspect of the Councils was not emphasized. Democratic mechanisms for elected representation are not yet mature in Viet Nam, not so much because formal rules and structures are lacking but because differences persist in knowledge, behaviour and awareness with regard to the proper role of elected officials. Empowerment of the legislative branch is now widely discussed in Viet Nam (Viet Nam News 2005a). Current actions to increase the representative and legislative role of Councils include making the electoral process more transparent and giving legislators greater power over the executive branch.

The highest legislative body in Viet Nam is the unicameral National Assembly (*Quoc hoi*), which was established in 1946. The 498 National Assembly (NA) deputies are elected for five-year terms. A Standing Committee conducts the business of the NA between sessions. Deputies are elected from 188 constituencies established according to population. Ha Noi, for example, has 21 constituencies. 'Delegations' consist of groups of deputies from the same province or city. Most delegates hold other jobs in the localities from which they are elected. However since 2002 118 deputies work full time as legislators and there is also a full time Office of the National Assembly (ONA) that provides support services such as research and policy information. The ONA is also responsible for receiving petitions and complaints from citizens and passing these on to the relevant state agencies (Office of the National Assembly and UNDP 2004).

The NA, as the only body entrusted with the power to make laws, is in theory the highest organ of state power in Viet Nam. In practice, the NA is building capacity to take on some of the functions that are currently performed by the executive branch, such as drafting laws. The NA is increasingly exercising its independence from the executive, as reflected by the calling of government ministers to testify before the Assembly and the periodic rejection of government proposals. Most observers are of the opinion that more needs to be done to help the NA become a truly independent legislative body.

3.2. New Changes and Roles for Representative Institutions

Strengthening the role of representative institutions has emerged as a priority within the Communist Party and government. This section examines some of the changes taking place in Viet Nam in electoral processes and in the functions and activities of representative bodies, and assesses their impact on citizen involvement in governance.

3.2.1. Village Leaders

In the past, particularly in ethnic minority areas, the village leader (*gia lang*) was a respected elder who organised the necessary social and productive work of the village. Now, however, every village in Viet Nam has a state-recognised headman (*truong thon*) who is elected directly by local people even though the village itself is not a recognised administrative unit. Elections for village head are usually preceded by a village conference run by the Fatherland Front (FF) of the village and/or commune, at which at least two candidates are supposed to put themselves forward. Village heads are elected by majority vote, with a quorum consisting of more than 50 percent

³⁸ Koh 2004.

of the people in the village. In practice, only one representative from each household usually votes, acting as a 'proxy vote' for other household members.

What do people look for when they choose village leaders? People usually cite the personal qualities of candidates such as virtue, trustworthiness, integrity and knowledge rather than specific electoral promises or platforms (Malarney 1997, Shanks *et al* 2003). Village leaders are likely to be relatively well educated. For example, in ethnic minority areas leaders must be fluent in Vietnamese. They must be well respected locally and willing to invest time in completing vast amounts of paperwork and attending meetings. This requires that leaders be well off financially. The situation is somewhat different in urban areas. Urban areas are divided into wards (*phuong*) rather than communes, and clusters (*cum dan cu*) and resident groups (*to dan pho*) rather than villages. These units elect group heads (*to truong*), who, like village heads, carry a heavy work burden and receive small salaries of about 100,000 to 200,000 VND per month. Salaries are paid out of local contributions, and as these localities are not official administrative units, group heads are not official civil servants and therefore do not receive public sector benefits such as health insurance and pensions. Neighbourhood group head positions are often occupied by older neighbourhood residents, and more women take on this role in urban than in rural areas.

Recent studies in rural Viet Nam, such as the Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPA) carried out in 1999 and 2003, have emphasised the importance of these positions (Viet Nam Solutions *et al* 2003). In many rural areas, village headmen and women received top marks as the most effective and important government actors. Similarly, in urban areas the head of the neighbourhood unit is seen as an important person who can help local people negotiate with higher-level officials. Across the board, village and neighbourhood heads are more trusted and more accessible than other levels of government (Turk 1999). In UNDP's survey on access to justice, 62 percent of 1,000 respondents reported that village or neighbourhood units were the most important institution in settling disputes, ranking far higher than other institutions such as People's Committees or the court system (UNDP 2004).

Despite this generally positive assessment, complaints have been voiced about the performance of village and neighbourhood heads. The 1999 PPA reported that headmen and women often faced constraints in surveying local opinions, or were selective in the feedback that they recorded. As village heads are overwhelmingly male,

women's opinions were often ignored. In other cases, commune level officials ignored local leaders, or village heads were ineffective in calling attention to the views and concerns of local people.

Figure Four. The village headman of a Thai village in Nghe An calls citizens for a village meeting, 2005.



3.2.2. People's Councils

Elections to People's Councils have been reformed in recent years and are now governed by the 2003 Law on Election of Deputies to People's Councils. The 2003 law states clearly that 'The election of deputies to the People's Councils shall be organised on the principles of universal suffrage, equality, directness and secret ballot.' The franchise includes all citizens over the age of 18, although voters must also be registered on local lists in their place of residence to be eligible to vote.

Candidates for office must be over 21 years of age and citizens of Viet Nam. In practice, the nomination process is not simple. Under the 2003 law, the Fatherland Front is given the task of running the nomination process by 'organizing consultations to select and nominate candidates.' Ninety days before the election, each level (commune, district and province) organises an Election Council (*Hoi dong Bau cu*) composed of representatives of the People's Councils, the People's Committees, the FF Committees and other agencies of the State, as well as members of political organizations and socio-political organizations. The composition of the election board at each level must be approved by higher authorities. While the election boards sometimes choose non-party members to run for office, such

candidates are in the minority. Because the electoral boards are run by those already in politics, it is common to find local elections dominated by a small group of people who rotate between positions with the People’s Committee, People’s Council and Mass Organizations. For example, one commune People’s Committee Chairman interviewed in Ha Tinh was appointed Chair in 2004, but before that he had worked at the commune for more than 25 years, first as commune Party Secretary, then chairman of the People’s Council for 10 years and most recently as head of the Committee for Mass Organizations for 11 years.³⁹ Restrictions on the nomination process place limits on the pool of people eligible to obtain political experience in Viet Nam, which has serious implications for citizen participation. Once the candidates are nominated and approved by the election boards, the campaign takes place. Candidates canvass voters at meetings or through the mass media, but these meetings must be pre-arranged by the FF. On election day the polls open in the morning and voters must vote in person and produce a voter’s card. Voter turnout is regularly reported at 99 percent and higher.

What are the characteristics of the resulting People’s Councils? A recent survey of several commune People’s Councils found that minorities were represented in proportion to their share of the population (15 percent of council members). Women, however, were less well represented, comprising only 20 percent of commune council membership (Nguyen Canh Nam 2004). Nevertheless, Viet Nam ranks first among Asian countries in representation of women on local councils (Viet Nam News 2005b). Half of the People’s Council deputies surveyed had served one five-year term, 25 percent had served two terms and 25 percent had served more than 2 terms. Some examples indicate the composition of the elected councils. In the Ha Noi People’s Council elections of 2004, 95 candidates were elected. Of the winners, 31.5 percent were women and eight percent were under 35. Seven percent were not party members, but only one percent had been self-nominated. In HCM City’s election, 21 percent of elected candidates were women, six percent were under 35, 17 percent were non-party members and five percent were members of ethnic minority groups (Voice of Viet Nam 2004a). In some areas, particularly the Central Highlands, minority representation on People’s Councils in minority-dominated areas remains low (Viet Nam Solutions and ActionAid Viet Nam 2003). Furthermore, the Ministry of Home Affairs estimates that only 8.5 percent of People’s Councils members nationwide are ‘ordinary people’— in other words, people who are not cadres of the executive branch, mass organizations, army or other state organizations, or party members (Bo Noi Vu 2004).

Figure Five. Public posting of the elected members of a commune People’s Council in Yen Bai Province, indicating the council members, their personal information (name, age, ethnicity, address and educational background), party membership and occupation.

STT	HỌ TÊN	Ngày sinh	Giới tính	Địa chỉ	Đức tính	Đảng viên	Chức vụ hiện tại	Đang học	Đang làm	Đang ở	Đang ở	Đang ở
1	Ông ĐIANG A CHU	13/4/1967	Nam	Hà Trại Tầu, Trại Tầu	Nữ Trại Tầu, Trại Tầu	Nam	Mảng Hồng	Mảng đỏ	Chi bộ Văn phòng UBND xã	Đang làm	Đang ở	Đang ở
2	Ông SINH A CHU	20/1/1975	Nam	Phù Hồ, Trại Tầu	Phù Hồ, Trại Tầu	Nam	Mảng Hồng	Mảng đỏ	Bí thư xã đoàn	Đang làm	Đang ở	Đang ở
3	Bà LÊ THỊ THU HA	5/11/1987	Nữ	Việt - Nam Hồ	Việt Nam Hồ Trại Tầu	Nữ	Mảng Hồng	Công nhân	Chủ tịch Hội phụ nữ huyện	Đang làm	Đang ở	Đang ở
4	Ông LÃO A PÓS	28/12/1962	Nam	Hà Trại Tầu, Trại Tầu	Việt Nam Hồ Trại Tầu	Nam	Mảng Hồng	Công nhân	Chủ tịch hội cựu chiến binh	Đang làm	Đang ở	Đang ở
5	Ông MUA A LÔNG	18/12/1962	Nam	Hà Trại Tầu, Trại Tầu	Hà Trại Tầu, Trại Tầu	Nam	Mảng Hồng	Mảng đỏ	Chủ tịch hội cựu chiến binh	Đang làm	Đang ở	Đang ở
6	Ông NGUYỄN ĐỨC THÀNH	1/5/1958	Nam	Hải Hòa, Bắc Quang	Việt Nam Hồ Trại Tầu	Nam	Mảng Hồng	Công nhân	Chủ tịch hội cựu chiến binh	Đang làm	Đang ở	Đang ở
7	Ông TRẦN A TÙNG	1/5/1958	Nam	Phù Hồ, Trại Tầu	Phù Hồ, Trại Tầu	Nam	Mảng Hồng	Mảng đỏ	Phó chủ tịch HĐND xã	Đang làm	Đang ở	Đang ở

Once elected, what do People’s Councils do? They are supposed to play a multitude of roles, such as monitoring of the executive branch, serving as a ‘pathway’ for information from higher authorities to citizens, petitioning State agencies to ensure proper law enforcement and replying to voters’ petitions. At their twice-yearly meetings, People’s Councils are supposed to approve socio-economic development plans, decide on budget estimates and allocations, and scrutinise working reports of the judicial and executive branches of the same level.

³⁹ Interview, Vu Quang district, Ha Tinh province, May 2005.

However, the People's Councils in most areas have limited capacity and conduct only minimal supervision. They typically approve the budgets and policies put in front of them without much deliberation, and do not proactively investigate the government's performance. A major problem is that the 2003 People's Council law does not define sanctions that the People's Councils can impose on state institutions, such as People's Committees, if such institutions perform poorly. Another problem is that People's Councils lack professional staff, and thus cannot monitor effectively. Some recent donor projects, funded by UNDP and Denmark, have tried to professionalise the People's Councils by building staff capacity to carry out legal duties. Still, much remains to be done in this area.

3.2.3. National Assembly

The most recent round of elections for deputies to the National Assembly was held on 19 May 2002. The recent Law on Election of Deputies to the NA stipulates that every seat must be contested and that independent candidates can nominate themselves. In addition, since 2002 candidates have been required to declare their assets. As with People's Council elections, the nomination process is run by the Fatherland Front in concert with party authorities. Of the 762 candidates for 498 seats in 2002, only 12 were self-nominated, and only two of these were elected. One hundred and thirty five candidates in 2002 were non-party members, but the share of seats won by non-party members actually declined from 14.7 to 10.2 percent. The share of women increased by one percent to 27.3 percent of the NA. Over 90 percent of the deputies hold a university degree. Unlike many countries where business interests dominate the legislature, only 14 deputies came from the private and business sectors (Viet Nam News 2002).

The National Assembly is noticeably more assertive than in previous years. Deputies now frequently press cabinet officials to explain the performance of their ministries. Since 1998 ministerial question-and-answer sessions have been broadcast live on TV. These broadcasts are hugely popular, indicating high levels of public interest in the government's activities. The legislature is also more autonomous, as bills proposed by the government have been rejected or subjected to major revision more often than in the past. The NA now plays a larger role in supervision of government activities through monitoring of citizens' complaints and petitions. However, as one NA official notes,

Supervising how local governments solve citizens' complaints and criticisms is a very burdensome mission of the NA. The involvement of all NA bodies and NA deputies in solving citizens' complaints and criticisms is possibly a [unique] characteristic of Viet Nam. With around 14,000 complaints and criticisms received each year on average, NA bodies and deputies are overloaded. The NA must face a risk: if it really supervises this field, it will have no time for other legislative activities.⁴⁰

This suggests that the NA must recast itself primarily as a law-making body and encourage the strengthening of an independent State Inspectorate system to follow up on and investigate citizen complaints.

The relationship between NA deputies and their constituents also remains poorly defined. Many deputies serve both in the NA and as members of the executive. Ministers of government agencies at both central and local levels are usually also NA deputies. This has the potential to create conflicts of interest and reduce accountability. Are deputies accountable to the voters or to their administrative units? Making deputies more accountable to the electorate requires funding, increased capacity for the development of constituent services and creation of more opportunities for voters to interact directly with their representatives.

3.3. Conclusion: Future Trends in Representative Democracy

Lack of free and fair elections and limitations on the powers of the legislature weaken representative democracy. Therefore, a number of initiatives in the field of representative democracy have been launched to increase citizen participation in legislative affairs and intensify the level of interaction between members of elected bodies and citizens. Such initiatives can be found operating both within Viet Nam and internationally. Some of the most relevant examples are described below.

⁴⁰ VietNamNet 2004.

3.3.1. Expansion of Village Representative Institutions

Village-level administration in Viet Nam is handled by a lone village headman or woman who is not paid a state salary. Some observers in Viet Nam advocate the creation of the position of vice-head to help the village cope with the bureaucratic workload and to widen the pool of people with political experience at the local level. The position of vice-head could be taken up by younger, educated villagers, whose contribution would free up the time of the village head to focus on more proactive aspects of leadership. Similarly, giving official status to village leaders would increase the pay and prestige of the position and thus help promote the implementation of decrees on local participation. Providing village headmen and women with state salaries and additional allowances for travel, meetings and training would help them carry out the many important duties assigned to them. Access to government training programmes is particularly important, although at present there is a lack of specialised training courses for headmen and women in the areas of participation, meeting facilitation and promotion of gender equality. While some have argued that the creation of an additional layer of administration at the village level would only add to the bureaucracy, one option would be to simply institutionalise the village as part of the existing commune administration. Under this arrangement villages would become sub-sections of the commune, and village heads would automatically be granted seats on the People's Council or People's Committee of the commune. Funds for village heads and village activities would be paid out of a special commune fund.

The re-institution of village assemblies or village councils, in order to increase the number of citizens involved in local administration, should also be carefully considered. Village assemblies existed in pre-colonial and colonial times, and again briefly under the Viet Minh government. Many neighbouring countries have village councils, comprised of anywhere from three to ten elected members. Thailand has had elected village councils since 1972 and Indonesia set up village councils in 1999 following the fall of the Suharto government. In both countries the councils are oriented downward, not upward. That is, they work for the people of the village, not for higher administrative levels. Village councils have the right to draft village legislation, manage the village budget and monitor village government including the performance of the headman or woman and party leaders (Antlov *et al* 2004). Research on these experiences could help leaders to adapt the positive aspects of village councils to Vietnamese conditions.

China too has been moving in this direction and provides the most similar political landscape to Viet Nam. In China, village committees were first formed by villagers themselves during decollectivisation in the early 1980s. These committees were given full administrative recognition in the state constitution in 1982. In 1987, a provisional draft law, known as the Organic Law, temporarily provided for free elections to select members for these councils and guaranteed the autonomy of villages from higher-level interference (the law was later fully adopted and village elections are now permanent). Village committees are composed of three to seven people who are nominated in an open process and elected for three-year terms. The committees are charged with the tasks of 'self-management, self education and self-service.' They are responsible for mediating disputes, maintaining public order and social stability, developing public services and representing opinions and suggestions to the higher level government officials. They also carry out enforcement and monitoring functions, such as ensuring compliance with national and provincial laws and payment of fees and levies. Officials at the town, township and municipal levels of government are supposed to guide and support the work of the committees, but are not supposed to intervene (Benewick *et al* 2004). Chinese leaders and international observers consider the village councils to be a success. One recent book notes that,

[T]here is little doubt that the committees and assemblies have actively pursued village interests. In many reports, there are accounts of committees successfully reducing charges and levies, securing funds for village services, arranging infrastructure improvements, publicizing financial allocations and details of use of village resources, reducing illegal land seizures, defraying hospital charges and mobilizing uncompensated workers for local employment. Village codes and charters, detailing the rights and responsibilities of villagers and their leaders, have been used to settle water and irrigation disputes, to curb illegal tree cutting, and to set up and distribute funds to village households.⁴¹

Learning more about the positive aspects of these councils could help leaders in Viet Nam to formulate policies relevant to conditions in their own country.

⁴¹ Plummer and Taylor 2004.

3.3.2. Wider Use of Elections

Another option under discussion in Viet Nam is the use of elections to select People's Committee chairmen and other local leaders (Bo Noi Vu 2004). The direct election of township heads has been piloted in some regions of China. Township heads are the equivalent of commune People's Committee chairmen and women in Viet Nam, although Chinese townships are generally larger than Vietnamese communes (Li 2002). Other countries in the region are moving toward the use of elections to select the lowest levels of executive government. For example, Commune Council elections were held for the first time in Cambodia in 2002, replacing the Commune Councils that had previously been appointed by the central government. The aim of the reform was to establish a pluralist democracy that would increase the accountability and transparency of local administration and thus contribute to pro-poor participatory development (ADB 2002). Proponents of election reform in Cambodia have argued that elections promote a feeling of solidarity among elected cadres and voters, thus facilitating policy implementation. Studies in China have shown that elected officials are more respected than those who are appointed (Li 2003). At the same time, elections for the executive provide villagers with leverage against corrupt cadres.

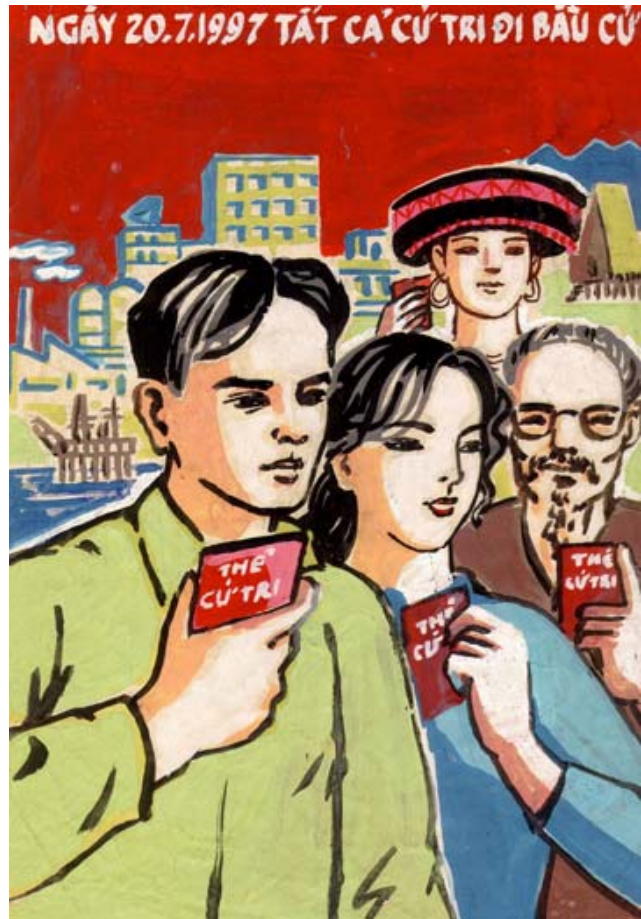
Another innovation in China is the move toward election of local-level party leaders. This has come about via small-scale experiments in areas where party leaders had been accused of graft and corruption (Li 1999). In an effort to align the interests of the village party secretary more closely with those of villagers, rather than with the higher level interests of the party, a new mechanism called the 'two-ballot-system' was devised. Under this system all villagers may cast a free nomination for the party secretary's position. The two candidates attracting the most nominations then compete in an intra-party run-off election. Thus, villagers have an indirect say in the selection of their party secretary. In other places, the party secretary is required to have first been elected to a Village Council (which confirms his or her local popularity), after which he or she may be appointed party secretary by higher-ups (Li 1999).

The expansion of the number of elected positions in Viet Nam could also be accompanied by a reduction in the overlap between the legislative and administrative roles held by any one individual. It is now possible for a commune People's Council member to also be elected to serve on the district or provincial People's Council, for party members to serve as local party Secretaries and also as People's Committee Chairs and for deputies to the National Assembly to serve on a local People's Council or to hold an executive position in a local administration. These overlapping roles make it possible for officials to act 'both as football player and as referee', a phrase often heard during discussions of this issue. Satisfying the demands of multiple roles places a heavy burden on leaders and leaves them less time to interact with their constituents. They are perhaps therefore more likely to identify with the concerns of other politicians and administrators than with the concerns of voters.

3.3.3. New Types of Electoral Systems

Viet Nam claims to hold democratic elections. However, the term 'democratic' is often a source of confusion. The concept of democratic elections needs to be distinguished from that of competitive elections, the latter of which

Figure Six. Poster encouraging voters to exercise their right to vote for National Assembly candidates in the 1997 elections.



requires only that more than one candidate stand for each available post. The concept of democratic elections generally includes reference to 'the way candidates are nominated and selected, if the anonymity and secrecy of the ballot is guaranteed, if there is a modicum of campaigning and if there are safeguards against vote-rigging (sealed ballot boxes, independent election workers, open ballot count etc.)' (Alpermann 2003). These issues have not been adequately addressed in Viet Nam. For example, 'proxy voting', whereby the head or a representative of a household casts votes for everyone in the household, is widespread in rural Viet Nam. This can have the effect of disenfranchising women if they do not have the chance to discuss their votes with their husbands before the election. China no longer allows proxy voting because of these concerns (Shelley 2000, Thurston 2003). While Viet Nam's laws do not officially allow proxy voting, in reality it is widespread. Many locally elected officials compete with each other to have the largest number of votes cast in the shortest amount of time on election days, and proxy voting is seen as an easy way to achieve the goal of high turnout.

There has been some work by donors in the area of electoral reform, focusing on improving election transparency and election monitoring. One UNDP project supported the government in the management, preparation and monitoring of the local elections for People's Councils held in May 2004. The project helped establish the first web site for local elections and also worked with the government to disseminate rules and procedures for the elections. Donors could do more to help in these areas. For example, in China, the Ministry of Home Affairs has invited a range of international NGOs, including the Ford Foundation and the US-based Carter Centre, to observe local elections, help implement secret balloting and provide supervision of poll overseers (Shelley 2000). The subsequent media attention to China's emerging electoral democracy has improved its image abroad. Viet Nam could benefit in similar ways.

Other suggestions to increase citizen confidence and participation include the elimination of proxy voting and greater enforcement of secret ballot provisions at public meetings. Nomination procedures for candidates present additional opportunities. Originally the GDD in 1998 allowed for open local discussion of nominations for election, but this provision was removed from Decree 79 in 2003. The nomination of candidates has been assigned to the Fatherland Front. Opening up the nomination process to the public would stimulate participation among villagers and provide a check on ineffective and dishonest officials.

There may be direct economic and governance benefits from these proposed changes. In a survey in China, completed before and after the first open village leader elections, villagers indicated that after the change they felt more empowered to lodge complaints with the authorities and more likely to use their vote as a tool to get rid of ineffective leaders (Li 2003). Another study found that those villages that had held competitive elections showed greater agreement between villagers and local cadres on a variety of policy issues, meaning that local opinion was better represented in more pro-poor policies (Manion 1996). Others have noted that free and fair elections can increase trust between villagers and cadres, making villagers more likely to contribute financially to village projects.

Another area deserving of attention is campaigning. Campaigns are conducted formalistically in Viet Nam, with the FF inviting only specific voters to come to meet the candidates. Sensitive issues are rarely addressed. This puts a damper on citizen involvement. As an example, prior to elections to the NA, the FF in Thua Thien Hue organised 40 meetings attended by 5,559 people. However only 307 constituents out of a province of more than one million people raised questions and exchanged ideas and recommendations with candidates (Le Ba Trinh 2004). Limits on campaigning mean that voters have less access to information, especially those who have less contact with the mass media. Voters choose primarily on the basis of familiar names and strong resumes, rather than on the issues. Without more campaigning and easier access to candidates, voters will continue to find it hard to tell the candidates apart. This diminishes electoral officials' sense of responsibility, as they do not feel accountable to the electorate. The lack of campaigning is partly a reflection of the emphasis in Viet Nam on unity rather than division, and partly indicative of a fear that variation in political positions might lead to instability. Lessons could be learned from neighbouring Asian countries in which an increase in the space for campaigning and issue-oriented debates has not led to a loss of political stability. For example, Malaysia and Singapore are both strong party states that allow for campaigning as a way to increase citizen participation in policy discussions.

3.3.4. Extended Constituent Services

There are many concerns about the contact that elected representatives have with voters. The Law on People's Councils says in Article 4 that:

Members of People's Councils should have a close relationship with voters in the constituency in which he/she is elected, be subject to voters' observation, be responsible for honest collection and report of opinions and aspiration of voters, protect the rights and legal interests of voters, execute regulations on meetings with voters, and report to voters on the activities of the People's Council, and answer voters' requirements and petitions.

Deputies of the People's Councils at all levels are legally required to consult with their electorates by convening public meetings on a quarterly basis (usually organised by the FF). Yet the quality and effectiveness of these meetings varies. One focus group in Ha Tinh said their main information about People's Council meetings was from radio broadcasts rather than meetings held with councillors themselves.

One obstacle to increased contact between representatives and voters, particularly for the higher-level National Assembly, is the workload of deputies and the lack of support staff. Each province's NA delegation has only one full-time parliamentarian. Others continue to hold other full time jobs, and some are key leaders of national and local institutions. Since 2003 there has been a move to professionalise delegations through the provision of a full-time, fully staffed office in each province. Other changes to support constituent services are being piloted in some provinces. For example, in Hung Yen the NA delegation prints cards to canvass voters' opinions before each NA session. Voters' opinions are collected and reported back to regular meetings with constituents in the province (Bui Huy Thanh 2004).

Aside from meetings with constituents, each People's Council maintains a complaint box. Members of the Councils are responsible for studying the complaints and monitoring the resolution process. The results are then reported at People's Council meetings. However, the investigation and verification of complaints is not particularly effective. Part of the problem is that the Council's role in resolving complaints overlaps that of the State Inspectorate, and no one knows who should be in charge of which petitions. Recent directives have been adopted to require elected officials to move faster and more decisively in responding to complaints.

The National Assembly also tries to maintain voter contact, although this is more difficult at the national level. In the twelve months beginning in October 2003 the NA received 5,609 visitors who came in person to meet with their MPs, and 17,350 letters of complaint (State Inspectorate of Viet Nam 2004). Many of these complaints concerned corruption and wastefulness of state agencies, appropriation of land, and excess spending by state agencies. The head of the Petition board of the Standing Committee of the NA has proposed a hotline for voters during the NA Session, as the Committee receives a large number of comments from voters all over the country. Guidance for processing comments also needs to be provided to deputies. Creating more channels for voter contact with their representatives, through hotlines or other means, should be encouraged in the future to increase citizen participation and confidence.

3.3.5. Votes of Confidence/Referenda

One recent idea to improve the institutions of representative democracy in Viet Nam has been the adoption of a 'Vote of Confidence' (*Bo phieu tin nhien*) as a means to remove poorly performing government officials from office. This mechanism of recalling elected officials was first adopted in 2001 in amendments to the 1992 Constitution. The National Assembly now has the right 'to cast a vote of confidence on persons who hold positions elected or ratified by the National Assembly.' This includes the prime minister, president, and cabinet ministers. The first vote of no confidence was held in 2004 when the NA dismissed the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development from the cabinet following allegations of corruption (National Assembly 2004).

Citizens have also been granted through the GDD and other laws the right to hold confidence votes for elected posts in their localities. The FF is supposed to organise confidence votes for key elected positions each year. However, members of Front-affiliated organizations are the only citizens allowed to participate in these votes. It was noted during a field visit to HCM City that a 2004 'vote of confidence' was held in one ward for the People's Council chairperson and the People's Committee chairperson. The only people invited to vote were party members and members of the FF – 28 people in all, out of a ward of several thousand. Of this number, 22 showed up for the vote, and the officials holding the two positions were reaffirmed with 21 and 22 votes, respectively. This calls into question the idea that confidence votes strengthen voter control over elected officials. Even if by chance the select group of people who are allowed to participate does manage to vote someone down, the only consequence

currently in the law is that the commune FF Committees will 'propose that the commune People's Councils consider and remove the holders of these positions.' There is no automatic removal of officials who lose confidence votes.

Another topic of discussion in Viet Nam today is whether or not there should be a way for citizens to call public referenda (*trung cau dan y*). However, discussions on this issue have not yet addressed how these rights would be granted, to whom they would be granted and on what topics they might be allowed. For the moment public referenda remain an interesting idea in the first stages of development (National Assembly 2004).

4. Conclusion: The Future of Participatory Democracy and Good Governance in Viet Nam

When the research team set out to assess participation and moves to deepen democracy in Viet Nam, we received requests from many individuals and organizations, both national and international, to explain why participation in local governance has been implemented more successfully in some places than in others. What were the structural factors that led to success in one place and failure in another? This is not an easy question to answer. There are few places that act as good 'models', where local planning, budgeting and monitoring is done in a participatory manner, and where citizens regularly engage in active discussion with their elected officials. Indeed there is no single place in Viet Nam where participation has been implemented completely, leading to dramatic improvements in local governance and development successes. There have been some incremental changes, to be sure, but no one location scores highly on all three areas of transparency, accountability and the adoption of participatory approaches. This suggests that there is no one-size-fits-all approach that can be used to increase participation everywhere in Viet Nam.

Similarly, Viet Nam cannot import models of grassroots democracy and citizen participation from elsewhere. Structural, political, social and historical factors make Viet Nam an unusual case. Simply trying to re-create the self-help groups and village panchayats of South Asia would not work. Viet Nam's system of mass organizations, highly structured hierarchical administrative systems and lack of independent civil society would make that impossible. Viet Nam needs to play to its strengths, such as relatively low levels of social inequality within communities, a history of mass-regarding political stakeholders with an emphasis on pro-poor development and traditional respect for elders and authority, in order to build new structures that can increase participation and improve access of citizens to the state, without trying to bring in a completely foreign model.

How can we measure the success of governance initiatives in Viet Nam thus far? Many criteria to assess the quality of governance have been suggested in other countries. These include measuring electoral access, including the procedural aspects of the electoral process; equality among voters and opportunities for citizens to stand for political office; the degree of openness, accountability and responsiveness of government at different levels; the degree of protection for civil and political rights and freedom; and the involvement of democratic civil society, including the vigour of associational life, the accountability of economic institutions, the degree of media pluralism and the extent to which citizens are directly involved in governance (Bovaird and Loeffler 2003). But it is extremely difficult to come up with a concrete and standard set of indicators by which the success or failure of grassroots democracy and increased participation can be assessed in Viet Nam. Viet Nam has a number of culturally and historically specific characteristics that do not lend themselves to measurement using analytical categories adopted from other countries, cultures and systems.

One simple indicator that the party has used to assess the GDD is whether or not reporting units have issued their own regulations on grassroots democracy and reported these upwards. Such reports, when made, are taken as evidence that 'democracy has been promoted' (Trinh Trong Quyen 2003). Despite the simplicity of reporting guidelines- all that is required is a self-assessment of good, average or poor performance on grassroots democracy - up to 17 percent of communes still do not issue regular reports on the GDD because they have not yet implemented reforms (Socialist Republic of Viet Nam 2004). In addition to yearly reports, other quantitative indicators that some government officials have used to assess grassroots democracy are trends in tax collection and voluntary contributions. Yet the success of GDD cannot be judged in terms of the amount of money raised from local people because this indicator does not provide information on how participatory the process was. Intimidation is an effective way to mobilise contributions, but it is not democratic. Another indicator that some government officials use is the trend in the number of complaints and petitions. A decrease in the total is taken to mean that channels of communication have improved because of GDD. Yet the number of complaints is also not a reliable indicator, as officials may simply be discouraging citizens from lodging complaints. A final indicator used in some localities is the poverty head count. This assumes that poverty falls as governance improves. Yet localities are not equally endowed with economic advantages, and participation in some poor areas may in fact improve without any noticeable change in the poverty rate. Indeed, the international literature on participation cautions against the assumption that increased participation will immediately lead to tangible and measurable economic benefits.

If these indicators are not reliable, how can we measure the progress of participatory democracy in Viet Nam? Some possible indicators that have been suggested include:

- the number of local plans and projects adopting a bottom-up participatory planning approach (for example, use of VDP);
- the percentage of people participating in village meetings, including percentages of women and the poor;
- the quality of village meetings (as measured by the number of topics discussed and the number of people speaking up);
- the number of local plans that are accepted by higher-ups based on people's recommendations;
- the number of budgets decided by local planning meetings at commune level and below;
- the total amount of funding decided through participatory budgeting;
- the number of village and commune staff with facilitation skills for effective participation; and
- the number and range of training events actually carried out with the intention of supporting participatory processes.

Ultimately, whatever indicators are used, the success of grassroots democracy should be judged in two main areas:

- 1) How much have citizens been empowered to act and participate in governance? And,
- 2) How much has the state changed in terms of responsiveness to citizens, accountability and transparency?

As this paper has noted, usually it is this first area that is emphasised in Viet Nam—how many villages have VDP? How many people participated in local meetings? While these are important indicators, participation itself is inconsequential if it is not met with a receptive government response. Future research and projects in Viet Nam should focus not just on raising the amount of people's participation, but also improving the ability of the bureaucracy—including the legislative, judicial and executive branches—to respond to more active citizen participation.

For many people interviewed, this is the weakest part of the GDD. There has been little response from some government sectors to rising participation, and because of this, the promise of participatory grassroots democracy has 'come in like the head of an elephant, and out like the tail of a mouse,' in the words of one Vietnamese saying. Communes are still dependent on districts and provinces for resources. Some aspects of social services are highly centralized, such as the teaching curriculum and teacher recruitment. The legislative branch remains fundamentally weaker than the executive and has little contact with constituents. As of yet, there is no clear accountability of local officials to the people, as confidence votes and elections are still essentially formalities. A system of sanctions for poor performance in local governance could improve the situation. However, avoidance of sanctions should not be the only incentive for local areas to increase participation. Authorities must come to understand that participation provides benefits to them and their localities, rather than just act to avoid sanctions from above.

4.1. Continuing Challenges

This paper has raised a number of specific issues and made suggestions that will hopefully spark debate and discussion related to participation in grassroots democracy in Viet Nam. In this conclusion, we address a few crosscutting areas that we consider to be among the most important.

Who participates?

It is often heard that people in Viet Nam are passive and unwilling to participate actively in local governance. Some have attributed this to the fact that under central planning people were compelled to participate in mass mobilisation campaigns. Now that they have a choice, many people 'opt out' of participation of any kind, preferring to work within family and social networks rather than in the formal arena. Yet in places where citizens themselves have taken up the cause of the GDD, many successes have been recorded. In interviews in HCM City, ward officials said that they felt pressure from the bottom to improve their performance, and that people criticised them if commune budgets were not posted in the proper place or at the proper time. HCM city officials attributed this

to the high levels of education and good channels of information-sharing (including mass media) in their wards, which made citizens aware of their rights and increased their ability to exercise them. One CIEM official noted that people were most enthusiastic when they had had a chance to see the effects of participation with their own eyes, for example in a donor project or in poverty reduction programmes. Where people had not yet seen participation in action, they lacked confidence in themselves and the authorities, and participation remained a formality.

One reason for the persistence of formalism in participation is that the opportunities for citizen feedback through the GDD remain limited. The provisions for collecting 'people's opinions' rest entirely on the active solicitation of views by local leaders and MOs. One government advisor said that citizens do not yet have a platform from which to express their opinions and wishes. Much of the mass media is state-run and geared towards communicating state ideas to the people rather than providing space – beyond the occasional letter to the editor – for people to communicate amongst themselves and with government.⁴² This concern was echoed by a member of the National Assembly who noted that the assessment of public opinion was still weak in Viet Nam, as public polls and channels for public comment are underdeveloped. Feedback mechanisms are needed in all sectors. Policymaking bodies—not just elected bodies—need to solicit outside opinions as well. Current channels for criticism, like letter boxes, letters to the editor and so forth are inadequate, and no formal mechanisms are in place to ensure that complaints are answered. Strengthening current procedures like the Law on Complaints and the numerous laws on elected bodies would help.

Similarly, although the MOs are supposed to act as a channel through which people can make their voices heard, many people find the Fatherland Front weak and unable to carry out all the duties assigned to it under the GDD. The FF is supposed to organise the People's Inspection Boards, work on elections for People's Councils and village headman, organise votes of confidence for elected officials, and communicate the opinions of citizens to higher officials. It is supposed to play other roles as well, such as checking on the morality of local officials.⁴³ Interviews with MOs revealed that although they were given responsibilities under GDD, they did not see themselves as the 'primary implementers' with power. The MOs saw their role as 'mobilisers of the people' and 'questioners (*chat van*) and monitors' of local officers to make sure that officers follow the laws and policies of the party and state.⁴⁴ The FF also complained that the mechanisms through which the MOs exercise their monitoring rights are not clear. For example, what happens if the FF discovers a problem and wants to lodge a protest against a local official, and the official refuses to listen? 'This creates a problem if people and the FF give their opinions but the local authorities won't receive them, and there are no means (*bien phap*) by which this can be resolved (*xu ly*),' said a FF central committee member.⁴⁵ Former Party Secretary Do Muoi confirmed that the rights of MOs under Decree No 50/2001/ND-CP to supervise the activities of the state, People's Committees and People's Councils were still not implemented well except in a few pilot areas.⁴⁶

Furthermore, the voice of women is still unheard in much public policy making in Viet Nam. Women often take secondary positions in decision-making at lower levels of administration and in village affairs, leading to the misconception that women are not as publicly-oriented as men.⁴⁷ Some women are now taking a more active role in local political life. The establishment of a branch of the Women's Union in most villages has given women a say in administrative affairs. However, there are few female village heads and female party chiefs in rural villages, and the top jobs usually remain in the hands of men (it is estimated by MoHA that less than 10 percent of party secretaries are female). However, many higher-up positions are 'reserved' for women and thus gender equity tends to rise with the administrative level. There are also large rural-urban differences, with urban areas having more active female participation in elected and appointed political bodies.

The participation of ethnic minority groups in public life also remains limited. It is widely held that ethnic minorities have 'low capacity' and a 'low intellectual level.' These prejudices, often held by higher-level authorities, are a

⁴² Interview with government advisor, Ha Noi, May 2005.

⁴³ Interview with Fatherland Front central committee member, Ha Noi, May 2005.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Interview with Mr. Do Muoi, Ha Noi, April 2005.

⁴⁷ Interview with member of Policy Board of Women's Union, Ha Noi, May 2005.

significant obstacle to decentralisation and increased participation in minority areas. In fact, community solidarity and participatory action is often extremely strong in ethnic areas. Many minority communities are close-knit and highly egalitarian, and they often have long traditions of helping one another and organizing mutual support organizations and networks, though these may not be recognised formally. An official from CIEM agreed with this assessment when he noted that although authorities like to complain about the low levels of education in rural areas and among ethnic minorities, in practice social solidarity is stronger in rural areas and among ethnic minorities than in urban areas and among the majority Kinh. Therefore it should be easier to mobilise participation in rural and minority areas. If this is not happening, the blame must rest with officials, not with the 'low capacity' of minorities, this official argued.⁴⁸ Better training of ethnic minority cadres and village headmen and more focus on disseminating information in ethnic minority languages (both printed and oral) would help improve the situation.

Differences between rural and urban areas remain a challenge. While urban citizens have better access to information through the mass media and are often quite close to their local representatives' offices, rural dwellers may live a full day's walk from the People's Council office. Isolation and poor infrastructure are obstacles to participatory governance in these areas. Yet urban areas face problems too. Many are increasingly losing bonds of community as families become smaller and move into flats and housing estates. A recent survey of 500 households in HCM City found that only 15 percent of urban Vietnamese said that their immediate neighbours were like family (Carpenter *et al* 2004). Many urban residents do not know their neighbours, and do not spend much time participating in activities of the neighbourhood group or ward. A representative of an INGO stated that her organisation had begun phasing out participatory child-centred projects in Ha Noi, as participation had fallen among urban residents who did not want to work together and were 'too busy'. This lack of community orientation is likely to increase, as urban areas grow in size and households are drawn into larger, formal labour markets. The lack of community-based support in urban areas for programmes that encourage more direct participation in governance in Viet Nam is a matter of concern.

How can citizens be enabled/empowered to participate?

Ho Chi Minh once said that 'To inform people about their rights rather than instruct them about their duties constitutes a major change in Viet Nam.' Empowering citizens to take up their legal rights under GDD and other laws requires considerable effort on the part of the state, mass organizations and NGOs. Implementation of the GDD could provide more space for civil society, particularly with regard to monitoring, as this is a role that civil society organizations play in other parts of the world. The experiences of other countries suggest that civil society and government can complement each other in innovative ways to achieve shared objectives.

Some positive examples can already be found. The VNGO LERES is working with mass organizations in rural villages to set up 'legal clubs' and 'legal aid societies' to help people inform themselves about laws and cooperate to advance their rights. The clubs are also a place to learn new skills, such as meeting facilitation. Some donor projects have shown that the strengthening of grass-roots institutions, for example savings and credit groups, water users groups and village and commune development boards, fosters empowerment. This is particularly true where effective collaboration exists between community-based or mass organizations and commune, district and provincial institutions (Markanday 2004). Strengthening work with the MOs should be a key focus of governance proposals in the future, in order to provide the FF and other MOs with the skills and funding commensurate with their new duties. Among the other proposals for empowerment made by villagers and officials in local communities during the 2003 Viet Nam PPAs were: the encouragement and promotion of traditional community activities and practices through existing groups and/or organisations; building capacity of grassroots level leaders; provision of support to literacy programmes with community development to increase access to information; and development of a strategic plan to achieve adequate representation of ethnic minorities and women in the local elected and administrative systems (Viet Nam Solutions and ActionAid Viet Nam 2003).

New spaces for learning and exchange on empowerment, for example through NGO working groups, are opening. Many VNGOs welcomed collaboration from donors and INGOs in order to expand these spaces, with the aims of strengthening VNGOs vis-à-vis society at large and finding ways to learn and share experiences. Suggested avenues include conferences, journals, newsletters and funds for capacity building for VNGOs. It was noted that

⁴⁸ Interview with CIEM official, Ha Noi, May 2005.

many VNGOs and INGOs are not aware of the activities of other similar organizations in the field of grassroots democracy. Several VNGOs have produced similar booklets in support of citizens' rights, and there is considerable overlap among many GDD support projects. Groups could work together to produce material that could then be disseminated more widely, rather than each initiative starting from scratch. A People's Participation Working Group has been set up to provide a forum for donors and government to share information on good practice and discuss the implementation of direct democracy.

There are people who do not need better channels of empowerment. Viet Nam has plenty of citizens who write letters to newspapers, complain to the NA and send long lists of suggestions for improvements to Party Congresses. The newspapers often run stories about whistleblowers that have pestered officials in Ha Noi to bring a local instance of corruption to light. Many of these individuals are retired officials or veterans, and they have the self-confidence to lodge criticisms and make suggestions. People with connections or relatives in government, people in urban areas and people with easier access to mass media are more likely to play this role. HCM City officials noted that their constituents are well informed about issues from TV and mass media, and therefore are very insistent about their rights under GDD. People lacking connections, information channels and self-confidence are unlikely to be heard. It is for these people that clearer, more formal channels of feedback are most needed.

How do government institutions respond to participation?

Participatory democracy is largely dependent on the ability and willingness of local officials to undertake participatory planning and decision-making, and to engage in processes of public consultation. In places where local officials have not been willing to take on these duties, participatory democracy has not been successful. Where contact between citizens and officials is sporadic, so too is citizen involvement in governance. Many citizens have no idea what officials do — they cannot name a single member of their People's Council, have never heard of the State Inspectorate or the People's Inspection Boards and cannot say who sits on any of the local management boards or what such boards are supposed to do. This is largely because officials do not regularly visit citizens and voters, and the political system does not reward elected officials for maintaining contact with their constituents. The current political system places responsibility on individual political players to live up to the goals of increasing public participation, but does not provide adequate incentives to encourage officials to do so.

Wide variation exists, even among communes in the same district, with regard to the implementation of administrative reforms. The best explanation for this diversity is variation in the quality and enthusiasm of commune and village leadership. In places where cadres have seen the benefits of openness, they have strongly supported it. An official of the HCM City People's Committee noted that for him and his colleagues 'delays in a city the size of HCM City mean lost money. We cannot delay reforms.' Where leaders have enthusiastically embraced new forms of citizen participation, the people seem to know more about their rights and duties. Where leaders have dragged their feet, citizens have less knowledge (Vu Thanh Xuan *et al* 2004 and Institute of Economics 2003). Thus public participation needs to be linked to other improvements in administrative systems, such as civil service reform and better recruitment procedures for cadres. Improvements in the quality and skills of cadres can have a snowball effect on the implementation of the decrees on public participation. As an official of the HCM City People's Committee noted, 'We need to create space for cadres to feel that they want to embrace their duties and do their jobs. Unhappy cadres are more likely to be corrupt.' He went on to note that empowered cadres are more likely to be positive 'engines for change.'

Yet there is a sense in many quarters of the government that improvements to direct democracy and representative institutions are only desirable for communes and villages, at the lowest level of government, and that other administrative levels and agencies are exempt. In reality, there are decrees that apply to state offices and state owned enterprises (Decrees 71 and 7), but little attention has been paid to these policies. In only a few places is there evidence that central ministries have tried to improve participation in policymaking. This is unfortunate, as many areas of policy would benefit from increased involvement of citizens. Education policy is one example, as curricula and textbooks are chosen at the central level by the Ministry of Education. This could be decentralised to allow localities, schools and universities to develop curricula appropriate to local needs. Interviews with a member of CIEM noted that education and other social services are areas that need movement toward decentralisation most urgently.

Decentralisation should go hand in hand with the empowering of ordinary people at the local levels to play a supervisory and monitoring role. Currently, many branches of local government are not responsible to local people but rather to higher authorities. People describe the government system in Viet Nam as a Matryoshka doll, with identical looking dolls of different sizes nested within each other. Giving local authorities more autonomy to do things differently, in ways that are appropriate to local conditions, remains an important goal. Budget autonomy for communes is perhaps the single most crucial step toward improved local government, but it needs to be coupled with increased capacity and training for commune officials.

It must also be recognised that the government cannot do everything, and that it is unreasonable to expect local authorities to perform functions that can be more efficiently carried out by private firms and civil society organisations. There is a need for more public-private partnerships in many fields. At the same time there is a need to involve local people and civil society organizations more actively in discussing policies such as socialisation. Many people are asked to bear higher financial burdens in areas such as education and health, but they have little voice in the ultimate decisions and outcomes.

How can capacity be developed?

It is clear that cadres at all levels desperately need to learn about—and need real training in—the implementation of public participation and how to act as ‘service providers’ and ‘civil servants’ rather than bosses. The quality of training is an issue. Every province has a political school that trains government cadres, but officials at all levels are required to attend theoretical courses on politics rather than on more practical subjects. Even the HCM Political Academy, which runs a similar course for central level cadres, recognises that these political courses are ‘not suitable to the real needs of students who are dealing with very practical, concrete problems emerging from the commune’s everyday life. No country in the world, even China, has such a programme’ (Nguyen Van Sau and Ho Van Thong 2002). In the areas in which cadres need the most help, training is weak. Fifty-nine percent of financial cadres, 71 percent of land cadres, 80 percent of administrative and statistical cadres and 85 percent of legal cadres at the commune level have not had any professional training in their field (Nguyen Van Sau and Ho Van Thong 2002). Even the NTPs, with their focus on capacity building for poverty reduction, allocated less than one percent of their budgets for training. The new NTPs developed for 2006 to 2010 do have a greater focus on capacity building. Classes in facilitation, public service delivery, project implementation and monitoring, planning and budgeting, drawing on a combination of theory and practice, would be immensely helpful. In addition, as Shanks *et al.* have noted,

A huge amount of experience has been built up by NGO and donor supported projects on the methods and content of training and capacity building for commune and village cadres, extension workers, farmer organisations etc. Yet most of this has taken place outside the regular government training systems. Only a few projects have systematically addressed the issue of scaling-up in the government system and integrating the methods developed under project work into the curricula of the province training organisations.⁴⁹

Better coordination, perhaps through government-NGO partnerships, would improve these spaces for exchange on capacity issues and move from the current system of *ad hoc* training to a comprehensive programme of capacity development.

4.2. Conclusion: Some Final Thoughts

It is clear that discussions about democracy in Viet Nam did not start, nor will they end, with the new legal environment created by the Grassroots Democracy Decree. Although these discussions have ‘opened the door’ to more frank consideration of governance issues, much more needs to be discussed. This paper has argued that the promise of the GDD is still not fulfilled. It is vital that the conversation on the nature of participation and democracy in Viet Nam remains active and forward-looking, continually raising ideas to further the processes set in motion by the GDD.

⁴⁹ Shanks *et al.* 2003.

One note of caution is that although democracy has been deepening in some areas, for many people the system remains inaccessible. These people tend to be poor, female, ethnic minorities, socially excluded, rural or lacking connections in government. Discussions in Viet Nam need to pay attention to this variation in access to the democratic process. Ultimately, participation hinges on one's ability and willingness to get involved and on the spaces available in which to do so. The space for more participation has not yet expanded to reach the poorest and most marginalized. Widespread economic participation - the ability to participate in decisions affecting one's livelihood - is still a long way off. One major area where participation and autonomy is most lacking in Viet Nam is land use and natural resource management. Decisions in this area are still largely controlled by the state. People do not have much say, particularly in remote and rural areas, on the management of vast areas of land, as seen in the example of forest land allocation in Quang Binh. In rapidly urbanizing areas like Ha Tay, farmers feel cheated out of fair compensation through non-transparent land deals conducted by state actors. In both cases, democracy is weakened because of a lack of participation.

It should be emphasised in discussions relating to increasing participation and citizen involvement that the absence of participation can have serious economic and social consequences. People who do not have a voice in decisions, and who feel that their representatives do not communicate their views to the government, may decide that the only option available to them is to protest or to break the law. For example, the director of a research project on low income housing in HCM City surveyed a number of families that had been moved from a slum rehabilitation site. The families told her they had never been consulted about the move or about their relocation to new areas. While they had attended some meetings and received some information from the ward, they had had virtually no input into the process. The main decisions were made at higher levels and the residents were merely informed about them. After the families were moved to the new site, many found that their incomes had declined since they could no longer run small shops and markets from their homes, as they had been able to do in their former 'slum' dwellings. According to the survey of the resettled households, 51 percent said their lives were worse after resettlement. Twenty seven percent of the people who had been moved returned to a different slum while another 41 percent said that they intended to leave the resettlement site in future (Nguyen Minh Hoa 2003). A participatory process that provided opportunities for these residents to express their wishes would have prevented these problems from emerging in the first place.

Denying people a voice in decision-making can have even more serious consequences. While some in the party and government may fear that increased participation will lead to instability, there is in fact strong evidence that blocking participation can have the same effect. Recent episodes of rural protest in China have shown that when citizens feel that the benefits of development are accruing only to elites they grow frustrated and impatient with formal governance mechanisms. Similar protests have flared up in Viet Nam, as the Ha Tay example shows. Former Party Secretary Do Muoi made the same point, quoting Nguyen Trai. The party and state, he said, always needed to remember that 'the ones who can upset the boat are the people, and the ones who steer the boat are also the people.'

Viet Nam is engaged in intensive and simultaneous processes of economic and political change. Viet Nam's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) will accelerate reform and exert profound effects on all sectors of the economy. The economy will become increasingly complex, requiring ever more versatile methods of management. At the same time the political sophistication of the Vietnamese people will increase. They will want to know how public institutions are managed, and to influence the decisions that affect them. Managing these twin processes will not be easy, since, as we have argued, there are no blueprints or models available that are precisely suited to Vietnamese conditions. The Vietnamese people will have to find their own path. In doing so, they will create a distinctively Vietnamese democracy that promotes democratic citizenship, participation in human rights and economic prosperity for all.

References

- Abers, R. (1998) 'From Clientellism to Cooperation: Local Government, Participatory Policy, and Civic Organizing in Porto Allegre, Brazil'. *Politics and Society*, 26: 511-537.
- Asian Development Bank (2002) *Report and Recommendation of the President to the Board of Directors on a Proposed Loan and Technical Assistance Grant to the Kingdom of Cambodia for the Commune Council Development Project*. Asian Development Bank, Manila.
- Asian Development Bank (2003) *Participatory Poverty Assessment: Public Administration Reform Field Report*. Asian Development Bank, Ha Noi.
- Alagappa, M. (ed.) (2004) *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia*. Stanford University Press, Palo Alto.
- Alpermann, B. (2003) *An Assessment of Research on Village Governance in China and Suggestions for Future Applied Research*. China-EU Programme on Village Governance, Beijing. <http://www.chinarural.org/euchinapro/Website/eu/UpFile/File888.pdf>
- Antlov, H. *et al.* (2004) 'Citizen Participation in Local Governance: Experiences from Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines'. Logolink, Brighton.
- Associated Press (2005) 'Vietnamese Villagers Burn Local Government Building, Hold Official Hostage in Land Dispute'. *Associated Press*, January 27, 2005.
- Ban dân vận trung ương (2005) *Quy chế dân chủ ở cơ sở; ý đảng, lòng dân*. NXB Chính trị quốc gia, Hà Nội.
- Beall, J. *et al.* (2000) 'Local Government, Poverty Reduction and Inequality in Johannesburg'. *Environment and Urbanization*, 12: 107-122.
- Benewick, R. *et al.* (2004) 'Self-Governance and Community: A Preliminary Comparison between Villagers' Committees and Urban Community Councils'. *China Information* 7: 11-28.
- Bích Ngọc (2004) 'NA Shows its Supervising Might and Weaknesses'. *VietNamNet online*, March 23, 2004.
- Blair, H. (2000) 'Participation and Accountability at the Periphery: Democratic Local Governance in Six Countries'. *World Development*, 28: 21-39.
- Blunt, P. and M. Turner (2005) 'Decentralization, Democracy and Development in a Post-Conflict Society: Commune Councils in Cambodia'. *Public Administration and Development*, 25: 75-87.
- Bộ Nội Vụ (2004) *Hệ thống chính trị cơ sở thực trạng và một số giải pháp đổi mới*. NXB Chính trị quốc gia, Hà Nội.
- Bovaird, T. and E. Loeffler (2003) 'Evaluating the Quality of Public Governance: Indicators, Models and Methodologies'. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 69: 313-328.
- Bruce, I. (ed.) (2004) *The Porto Allegre Alternative: Direct Democracy in Action*. Pluto Press, London.
- Bùi Huy Thành (2004) 'The Organizational Model of the MP Delegation Offices'. Paper Presented at the Seminar on Improving the Effectiveness of Provincial MP Delegation Offices, July 2004, Hue.
- Care International Viet Nam (2003) 'Engagement of People's Organizations in Poverty-Focused Rural Development and Natural Resource Management in Viet Nam: Background Study'. Care, Ha Noi.
- Carpenter, J.P. *et al.* (2004) 'Social Capital and Trust in South-East Asian Cities'. *Urban Studies*, 41: 853-874.
- Charlick, R.B. (2001) 'Popular Participation and Local Government Reform'. *Public Administration and Development*, 21: 149-157.
- Central Institute for Economic Management (CIEM) and Deutsche Gesellschaft fuer Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) (2004) *Decentralization: National Policies and Field Experiences on Decentralisation of Planning and Budgeting*, GTZ, Ha Noi.
- Cooke, B and U. Kothari (eds.) (2001) *Participation: The New Tyranny?* Zed Books, London.
- Cornwall, A. and J. Gaventa (2000) 'From Users and Choosers to Makers and Shapers: Repositioning Participation in Social Policy'. *Institute of Development Studies Bulletin*, 31: 50-62.
- Crook, R. and J. Manor (1994) *Democracy and Decentralisation in South Asia and West Africa: Participation, Accountability and Performance*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

- Dalton, R. and N.N.T. Ong (2001). 'The Vietnamese Public in Transition: The World Values Survey: Viet Nam 2001'. Centre for the Study of Democracy, Irvine, California.
- Devas, N. and U. Grant (2003) 'Local Government Decision-Making - Citizen Participation and Local Accountability: Some Evidence from Kenya and Uganda'. *Public Administration and Development*, 23: 307-316.
- Dixon, C. (2004) 'State, Party and Political Change in Viet Nam' in McCargo, D. (ed.) *Rethinking Viet Nam*. Routledge Curzon, London.
- Đỗ Trung Hiếu (2004) *Một số suy nghĩ về xây dựng nền dân chủ ở Việt Nam hiện nay*. NXB Chính trị quốc gia, Hà Nội.
- D-ông Xuân Ngọc (2000) *Quy chế thực hiện dân chủ ở cấp xã; Một số vấn đề lý luận và thực tiễn*. NXB Chính trị quốc gia, Hà Nội.
- Estrella, M. and J. Gaventa (1997) 'Who Counts Reality? Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation: A Literature Review'. Institute of Development Studies Working Paper, Brighton.
- Estrella, M. and N. Iszatt (eds.) (2004) *Beyond Good Governance: Participatory Democracy in the Philippines*. Institute for Popular Democracy, Quezon City.
- Fritzen, Scott (2000) 'Institutionalizing Participation: Lessons Learnt and Implications for Strengthening Viet Nam's National Programmes'. United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Capital Development Fund, Canadian International Development Agency, Ha Noi.
- Fung, A. and E.O. Wright (2001) 'Deepening Democracy: Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance'. *Politics and Society*, 29: 5-41.
- Gaventa, J. (2002) *Towards Participatory Local Governance: Six Propositions for Discussion*. Institute of Development Studies, Brighton.
- Ginsburgs, G. (1962) 'Local Government and Administration in North Viet Nam, 1945-1954'. *China Quarterly*, 10: 174-204.
- Goetz, A.M. and J. Gaventa (2001) 'Bringing Citizens' Voice and Client Focus into Service Delivery'. Working Paper 138, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton.
- Gomiero, T. et al. (2000) 'Vietnamese Uplands: Environmental and Socio-Economic Perspective of Forest Land Allocation and Deforestation Process'. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, 2: 119-142.
- GTZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft fuer Technische Zusammenarbeit) (2003) 'Grassroots Democracy and Decentralised Planning: Proceedings of the National Workshop in Ha Noi'. GTZ and Central Institute for Economic Management, Ha Noi.
- Ha Noi Medical University et al. (2003) 'A Literature Review of Decentralisation in Health Care in Viet Nam with Focus on Children'. Ha Noi Medical University and Save the Children Sweden, Ha Noi.
- Heller, P. (2001) 'Moving the State: The Politics of Democratic Decentralisation in Kerala, South Africa, and Porto Alegre'. *Politics & Society*, 29: 131-163.
- Hickey, S and G. Mohan (eds.) (2005) *Participation – From Tyranny to Transformation? Exploring New Approaches to Participation in Development*. Zed Books, London.
- Hoàng Chí Bảo (2004) *Hệ thống chính trị ở cơ sở nông thôn nước ta hiện nay*. NXB Chính trị quốc gia, Hà Nội.
- Institute of Economics, Ha Noi (2003) 'Action Research on Impacts of the Grassroots Democracy Decree'. Institute of Economics and Oxfam Great Britain, Ha Noi.
- Kaufmann, D. et al. (2005) *Governance Matters IV: Governance Indicators for 1996-2004*. World Bank Institute, Washington.
- Kerkvliet, B. (2004) 'Surveying Local Government and Authority in Contemporary Viet Nam' in Kerkvliet, B. and D.G. Marr (eds.) *Beyond Ha Noi: Local Government in Viet Nam*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.
- Koh, D. (2004) 'Urban Government: Ward-Level Administration in Ha Noi' in Kerkvliet, B. and D.G. Marr (eds.) *Beyond Ha Noi: Local Government in Viet Nam*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.

- Lê Bá Trình (2004) 'Fatherland Front Report'. Paper presented in the workshop 'Enhancing constituents' awareness towards function, tasks and activities of provincial MP Delegation, MPs and local office of MP Delegation', 14-15 July, 2004, Hue.
- Lê Minh Quân (2003) *Xây dựng Nhà nước pháp quyền đáp ứng yêu cầu phát triển đất nước theo định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa ở Việt Nam hiện nay*. NXB Chính trị quốc gia, Hà Nội.
- Li, L.J. (1999) 'The Two-Ballot System in Shanxi Province: Subjecting Village Party Secretaries to a Popular Vote'. *The China Journal*, 42: 103-118.
- Li, L.J. (2002) 'The Politics of Introducing Direct Township Elections in China'. *China Quarterly*, 171: 704-723.
- Li, L.J. (2003) 'The Empowering Effect of Village Elections in China'. *Asian Survey*, 43: 648-662.
- Logolink website: <http://www.ids.ac.uk/logolink>.
- London, J. (2004) 'Rethinking Viet Nam's Mass Education and Health Systems' in Duncan McCargo (ed.) *Rethinking Viet Nam*. Routledge Curzon, London.
- Malarney, S.K. (1997) 'Culture, Virtue, and Political Transformation in Contemporary Northern Viet Nam'. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 56: 899-920.
- Manion, M. (1996) 'The Electoral Connection in the Chinese Countryside'. *American Political Science Review*, 90: 736-48.
- Manor, J. (1995) 'Democratic Decentralisation in Asia and Africa'. *IDS Bulletin*, 26: 81-88.
- Manor, J. (2004) 'Democratisation with Inclusion: Political Reforms and People's Empowerment at the Grassroots'. *Journal of Human Development*, 5: 5-29.
- Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) and Viet Nam-Sweden Mountain Rural Development Programme (MRDP) (2002) 'Proceedings of the National Workshop on Commune and Village Managed Funds for Poverty Alleviation in Disadvantaged Areas'. Youth Publishing House, Ha Noi.
- Markanday, A. (2004) 'Scaling up IFAD's Experience with Decentralised and Participatory Rural Development and Poverty Reduction in Viet Nam'. International Fund for Agricultural Development and Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Ha Noi.
- McCormick, B. (1998) 'Political Change in China and Viet Nam: Coping with the Consequences of Economic Reform'. *The China Journal*, 40: 121-143.
- McElwee, P. (2004) 'You Say Illegal, I Say Legal: The Relationship between 'Illegal' Logging and Land Tenure, Poverty, and Forest Use Rights in Viet Nam'. *Journal of Sustainable Forestry*, 19: 312-351.
- McGee, R. (2003) 'Legal Frameworks for Citizen Participation: Synthesis Report'. Logolink, Brighton.
- Meyer, W. *et al.* (2003) 'One-Stop-Shops in Viet Nam for Improved Delivery of Administrative Services'. Swiss Development and Cooperation Agency, Ha Noi.
- Minh Nhựt D-ông (2004). 'Grassroots Democracy in Vietnamese Communes.' Centre for Democratic Institutions, Australian National University, Canberra.
- Ministry of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2004) 'Taking Stock, Planning Ahead: Evaluation of the National Targeted Programme on Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction and Programme 135'. MOLISA and UNDP, Ha Noi.
- National Assembly (2004) 'Ý kiến của Chủ tịch Quốc hội về tình hình thực hiện quy chế dân chủ ở cơ sở'. National Assembly, Hà Nội.
- Nawaz, R. (2004) 'Decentralised Management of Commune and Village Infrastructure Budgets: Principles and Approaches: Project on Capacity Building for Integrated Rural Development'. Paper prepared for conference on Partnership to Assist the Poorest Communes, November 2004.
- Neefjes, K. (2004) 'Participation and Empowerment in the HEPR Programme: Report of a Desk Study'. Ministry of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs, Ha Noi.

- Nguyễn Cảnh Nam (2004) 'Assessment of Performance Capacity of Commune People's Councils: Summary Report on Capacity Assessment Results'. United Nations Development Programme and the Standing Body of the Thua Thien-Hue People's Council Development Advisory Services, Ha Noi.
- Nguyễn Cúc (2002) *Thực hiện quy chế cơ sở trong tình hình hiện nay; Một số vấn đề lý luận và vật thực tiễn*. NXB Chính trị quốc gia, Hà Nội.
- Nguyễn Minh Hoà (2003) 'A Comparative Study of Community Participation in Developing Policies for Urban Housing in Metro Manila, the Philippines and Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam'. *Viet Nam Social Sciences*, 1: 57-64.
- Nguyễn Quốc Pham (2000) *Hệ thống chính trị cấp cơ sở và dân chủ hoá đời sống xã hội nông thôn miền núi, vùng dân tộc thiểu số*. NXB Chính trị quốc gia, Hà Nội.
- Nguyễn Thị Thu (2005) 'Thực hiện Quy chế Dân chủ ở các phường Quận 5 - thành phố Hồ Chí Minh hiện nay - Thực trạng và giải pháp'. Học viện Chính trị quốc gia, Hồ Chí Minh.
- Nguyễn Tiến Phồn (2001) *Dân chủ và tập trung dân chủ: Lý luận và thực tiễn*. NXB Khoa học Xã hội, Hà Nội.
- Nguyễn Văn Sáu and Hồ Văn Thông, (eds.) (2002) *Thực hiện Quy chế dân chủ và xây dựng chính quyền cấp xã ở nước ta hiện nay*. NXB Chính trị quốc gia Việt Nam, Hà Nội.
- Office of the National Assembly (ONA) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2004) 'Strengthening the Capacity of People's Elected Bodies in Viet Nam'. Workplan for UNDP Project VIE/02/007, Ha Noi.
- Painter, M. (2003) 'Public Administration Reform in Viet Nam: Problems and Prospects'. *Public Administration and Development*, 23: 259-271.
- Phan Xuân Sơn (2002) *Các đoàn thể nhân dân với việc bảo đảm dân chủ ở cơ sở hiện nay*. NXB Chính trị quốc gia, Hà Nội.
- Plein, L. et al. (1998) 'Organic Planning: A New Approach to Public Participation in Local Governance'. *Social Science Journal*, 35: 509-523.
- Plummer, J. and J.C. Taylor (eds.) (2004) *Community Participation in China: Issues and Process for Capacity Building*. Department for International Development, GHK International and Earthscan, London.
- Poverty Task Force (2002) 'Ensuring Good Governance for Poverty Reduction.' Poverty Task Force, Ha Noi.
- Poverty Task Force (2003) 'Hà Giang: Participatory Poverty Assessment'. Poverty Task Force, Ha Noi.
- Poverty Task Force (2004) 'Participatory Poverty Assessment: Synthesis Report on Participation, Public Administration and Environment'. Poverty Task Force, Ha Noi.
- Puddington, A. and A. Piano (2005) 'The 2004 Freedom House Survey: Worrisome Signs, Modest Shifts'. *Journal of Democracy*, 16: 103-109.
- Saxena, N. et al. (2004) 'Participation in Development Programmes in Viet Nam'. United Nations Development Programme Project VIE/02/001, Ha Noi.
- Schonwalder, G. (1997) 'New Democratic Spaces at the Grassroots? Popular Participation in Latin American Local Governments'. *Development and Change*, 28: 753-770.
- Shanks, E. et al. (2003) 'Community Driven Development in Viet Nam'. World Bank and Ministry of Planning and Investment, Ha Noi.
- Shelley, B. (2000) 'Political Globalisation and the Politics of International Non-Governmental Organisations: The Case of Village Democracy in China'. *Australian Journal Of Political Science*, 35: 225-238.
- Socialist Republic of Viet Nam (2000) 'Stances and Guidelines of the Party and the State of Viet Nam on Public Administration Reform'. Government Steering Committee for Public Administration Reform, Ha Noi.
- Socialist Republic of Viet Nam (2002) 'The Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy.' Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, Ha Noi.
- Socialist Republic of Viet Nam (2004) 'Báo cáo kết quả 5 năm thực hiện Quy chế dân chủ ở cơ sở (1998-2003)' Hà Nội: Báo cáo của Chính phủ số 1154/CP-V.III, Hà Nội.

- State Inspectorate of Việt Nam (2004) *Cơ chế giám sát, kiểm toán và thanh tra ở Việt Nam*. NXB T- pháp, Hà Nội.
- Stromseth, J. (2003) 'Business Associations and Policy-Making in Viet Nam' in Kerkvliet, B. *et al.* (eds.) *Getting Organised in Viet Nam: Moving in and around the Socialist State*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.
- Thurston, A.F. (2003) 'Elections and Democracy in Greater China'. *China Journal*, 50: 187-189.
- Trần Thị Thu Trang (2004) 'Local Politics and Democracy in a Muong Ethnic Community' in Kerkvliet, B. and D.G. Marr (eds.) *Beyond Ha Noi: Local Government in Viet Nam*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.
- Trịnh Trọng Quyền (2003) 'Thanh Hoá Exercising People's Right to Mastery and Implementing Regulations on Grassroots Democracy'. *Tạp chí Cộng sản* 44: 1.
- Tuổi Trẻ* (2004) 'Hội nghị toàn quốc tổng kết 6 năm thực hiện quy chế dân chủ cơ sở', *Tuổi Trẻ* online, 29 Sept, Hà Nội.
- Turk, C. (1999) 'Voices of the Poor: Synthesis of Participatory Poverty Assessments'. World Bank and Department for International Development (DFID) in Partnership with Action Aid Viet Nam, Oxfam (GB), Save the Children (UK) and Viet Nam-Sweden Mountain Rural Development Program, Viet Nam.
- United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) (2003) 'Giving Life to Grassroots Democracy in Viet Nam: The UNCDF Approach to Local Development'. UNCDF, Ha Noi.
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2004) 'Access to Justice in Viet Nam: Survey from a People's Perspective'. UNDP, Ha Noi.
- Viet Nam Solutions and Action Aid Viet Nam (2003) 'Participatory Poverty and Governance Assessment Dak Lak Province'. Asian Development Bank, Ha Noi.
- Viet Nam Solutions *et al.* (2003) 'Participatory Poverty and Governance Assessment Central Coast and Highlands Region'. Asian Development Bank, Ha Noi.
- VietNamNet (2004) 'National Assembly Shows Its Supervising Might and Weaknesses'. *VietNamNet online*, March 23, <http://vietnamnet.vn>.
- Viet Nam News (2002) 'Newly Elected National Assembly Chairman Interviewed'. *Viet Nam News*, July 23, <http://vietnamnews.vnagency.com.vn>.
- Viet Nam News (2005a) 'National Assembly Outlines 2005 Supervisory Tasks'. *Viet Nam News*, January 15, <http://vietnamnews.vnagency.com.vn>.
- Viet Nam News (2005b) 'Union Highlights Improvement of Vietnamese Women's Position'. *Viet Nam News*, April 11, <http://vietnamnews.vnagency.com.vn>.
- Voice of Vietnam (2004a) 'Polling Again in Eight Localities'. *Voice of Vietnam online*, May 9, <http://www.vov.org.vn>.
- Voice of Vietnam (2004b) 'Sau 5 năm thực hiện Quy chế Dân chủ cơ sở: Liệu có khắc phục được tình trạng dân chủ hình thức?'. *Voice of Vietnam online*, 13 September, <http://www.vov.org.vn>.
- Vũ Thanh Xuân *et al.* (2004) 'Báo cáo khảo sát xây dựng quy trình thực hiện dân chủ ở xã và phác thảo một số câu hỏi về quy chế dân chủ ở xã.' Helvetas, Cao Bằng.
- Zingerli, C. (2004) 'Politics in Mountain Communes: Exploring Vietnamese Grassroots Democracy' in McCargo, D. (ed.) *Rethinking Viet Nam*. Routledge Curzon, London.