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CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN VIETNAM: POLICY AND PRACTICE

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Abstract. *This study employs legal document analysis and data from the Viet Nam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI) to examine the evolution of citizen participation in local governance in Vietnam and the policy–practice gap. The legal framework has continuously expanded the scope of actors, participatory forms and levels, and mechanisms for exercising citizens' democratic rights. However, PAPI trends suggest that actual citizen participation remains limited and progress is slow, especially in terms of information transparency and local government accountability. A significant gap persists between policy and implementation: while participatory rights have expanded on paper, their enforcement in practice is often formalistic and has a low impact. The study contributes an integrated legal–empirical approach to assessing grassroots democracy (GRD) and offers empirically grounded implications for more effective and democratic local governance.*

Keywords: *citizen participation, local governance, PAPI, grassroots democracy, Vietnam.*

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *piliečių dalyvavimas, vietos valdymas, PAPI, visuomenės demokratija, Vietnamas.*

Introduction

Globally, citizen participation is regarded as a cornerstone of good governance, and initiatives such as the Open Government Partnership foster transparency and empower citizens (Giao and Thu 2020). In Vietnam, the longstanding motto "the people know, the people discuss, the people do, and the people supervise" reflects the government's emphasis on GRD. Since the late 1990s, the Vietnamese state has introduced policies on GRD aimed at strengthening citizen participation and preventing social conflict (Kwak 2019). Over the past two decades, the legal framework for grassroots democracy has been strengthened, most notably by the 2013 Constitution (which enshrined citizens' participatory rights) and the 2022 Grassroots Democracy Law (which further expands those rights and mechanisms). Meanwhile, since 2011, the annual PAPI survey has collected citizens' feedback on local governance, providing evidence to assess how sound policies translate into practice.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following questions:

(1) How has Vietnam's legal framework for grassroots democracy evolved in strengthening the three pillars of transparency, citizen participation, and accountability in local governance?

(2) To what extent do PAPI indicators reflect actual citizen participation, particularly with respect to transparency, grassroots participation opportunities, and local government accountability?

(3) What are the main gaps between the legal provisions and practice as evidenced by PAPI, and what policy implications could help substantively strengthen citizen participation?

This article integrates legal and empirical analysis to provide a comprehensive assessment of GRD in Vietnam. It provides an updated analysis through 2024, along with evidence-based policy implications, to help bridge the gap between formal regulations and practice.

Literature Review and Research Model

In contrast to top-down administration, modern governance approaches prioritize openness, transparency, and collaboration between authorities and citizens, treating citizens as active partners (Bajrami and Bajrami 2024). This orientation aligns with the "new governance" trend, emphasizing deliberation and stakeholder participation (Bingham et al. 2005).

Citizen participation is typically understood as any activity by private citizens aimed at influencing governmental decision-making (Huntington and Nelson 1976, 4). Arnstein's (1969) seminal "ladder of citizen participation" illustrates levels ranging from nonparticipation (manipulation) and tokenism (informing and consultation) to citizen power (delegated power and citizen control). She argued that without actual power redistribution,

participation becomes an "empty ritual," offering only symbolic involvement. Many later frameworks echo this point. Fung (2006), for example, proposed a "democracy cube" that classifies participatory mechanisms by the participants, the nature of discussions, and the impact of decisions on policy. Overall, a common challenge is moving beyond formalistic, one-way participation toward genuine power-sharing with citizens.

Studies suggest that citizen participation can yield significant benefits for governance, and a greater citizen voice is positively related to public sector performance (Neshkova and Guo 2012; Rivenbark et al. 2019). At the same time, participation is not a panacea: if poorly designed, it can impose high costs and frustration for both officials and citizens (Irvin and Stansbury 2004; Kwak 2019). Researchers have noted that in Vietnam, the government has become more open to consulting citizens and civil society organizations on policy issues, particularly since the 2000s (Kwak 2019). There has been an increase in community consultations on draft laws and local development plans (e.g., Bui 2013; Wells-Dang et al. 2015). However, citizen engagement remains largely shaped by local authorities' willingness to listen, and its depth is still limited by a centralized power structure (Nguyen and Nguyen 2021).

A prominent strand of governance and open government scholarship conceptualizes meaningful citizen participation as resting on an integrated set of conditions that combine transparency, opportunities for participation, and accountability. UNESCAP (2009) identifies participation, transparency, and accountability as core characteristics of good governance, while OHCHR (n.d.) frames them as mutually reinforcing safeguards underpinning anti-corruption and good governance. In the open government literature, the OECD (n.d.) defines open government as a governance culture that promotes transparency, integrity, accountability, and stakeholder participation, reinforcing the view that these elements function as an integrated package. Consistent with this logic, transparency can reduce information asymmetries that limit participation, while participation can generate demands for justification and response, thereby strengthening accountability. The World Bank explicitly describes this pathway from transparency to accountability via citizen engagement (World Bank 2017). Building on these perspectives, our research model structures the analysis around these three pillars, namely Participation at Local Levels, Transparency in Local Decision-Making, and Vertical Accountability Toward Citizens, to compare legal expansion with practical implementation as reported by citizens.

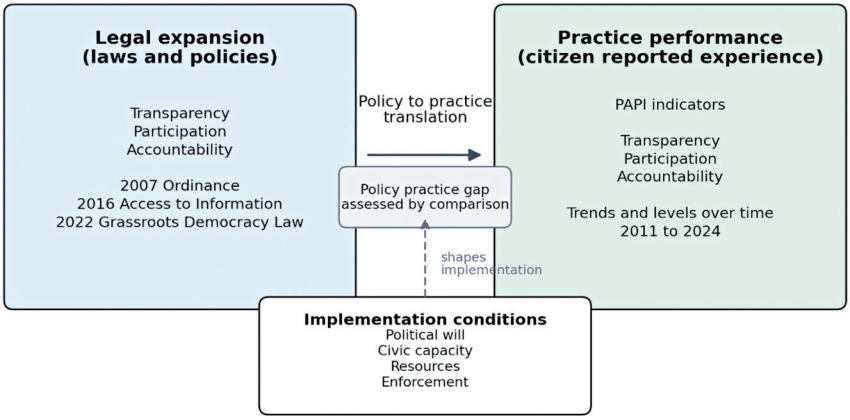

Figure 1. Analytical framework for examining citizen participation in local governance with respect to legal provisions and practical implementation.
Source: Developed by the authors based on relevant legal documents and the PAPI framework

Data and Method

To address the research questions, we employ two approaches: legal document analysis and PAPI survey data analysis. First, we review key legal documents that define citizen participation in Vietnam's local governance, including the 2013 Constitution and major grassroots democracy instruments—most notably the 2007 Ordinance on Grassroots Democracy and the 2022 Law on Grassroots Democracy Implementation—together with related implementation documents. These texts are analyzed to track changes in the range of participants, participatory forms and levels, and enforcement mechanisms for grassroots democracy.

Second, we examine annual data from the PAPI for the period 2011–2024. PAPI is a nationwide survey of citizens' experiences with local governance (CECODES et al. 2025). We use annual national average scores reported in the PAPI national reports and focus on three PAPI dimensions that closely capture participation-related practices: Participation at Local Levels, Transparency in Local Decision-Making, and Vertical Accountability Toward Citizens. Because accountability indicators were introduced later in the PAPI series, the analysis for Vertical Accountability Toward Citizens covers 2016–2024. For each analytical pillar, we use the corresponding PAPI dimension score as a proxy and, where relevant, reference selected sub-dimensions and illustrative indicators (e.g., access to budget and land-use information; perceived opportunities to participate; interactions with local authorities and grievance handling) to map observed practices onto specific legal provisions on grassroots democratic rights. We summarize patterns using descriptive trends and a simple linear time–trend regression, with the year as the predictor and the relevant PAPI

score as the outcome, to characterize the direction and pace of change. This strategy is descriptive and does not identify the causal effects of legal reforms. Because PAPI is perception-based and some survey items and aggregation may change over time, longitudinal comparisons should be interpreted cautiously. Accordingly, we present results as indicative of the policy–practice gap and triangulate them with the legal analysis.

Legal Foundations for Citizen Participation in Vietnam

Vietnam's Constitution provides the foundation for grassroots democracy. Article 28 of the 2013 Constitution guarantees the citizens' right to participate in managing the state and society, and it commits the state to create conditions for citizen input and to respond to their petitions. Other provisions (e.g., Articles 6 and 25) affirm direct democracy and ensure fundamental civil liberties (National Assembly of Vietnam 2013).

Vietnamese law has progressively strengthened and expanded transparency requirements in local governance. The 2007 Ordinance on Grassroots Democracy obliges commune authorities to publicly disclose a broad range of information, including land use plans, local budgets, and the financing of development projects, to ensure that citizens are informed about decisions affecting their communities (Standing Committee of the National Assembly of Vietnam 2007). The 2016 Law on Access to Information further institutionalizes the citizens' right to request information from public authorities and requires agencies to proactively disclose specified categories of information, thereby deepening the transparency regime (National Assembly of Vietnam 2016). Further to these developments, the 2022 Law on Implementation of Grassroots Democracy reinforces transparency by requiring public disclosure of official decisions within five working days and by mandating that local authorities report back to citizens on how their opinions and complaints are handled (National Assembly of Vietnam 2022).

Vietnamese law has progressively expanded the channels for citizens to participate in local governance. The 2007 Ordinance affirms citizens' rights to directly discuss and decide certain local matters, such as contributions to public works or the election of village leaders, and it requires authorities to consult citizens on other matters before making decisions (Standing Committee of the National Assembly of Vietnam 2007). The 2022 Grassroots Democracy Law further broadens participatory opportunities by recognizing the residential community as a collective actor alongside individual citizens, thereby enabling community-wide deliberation and decisions on local affairs. It also expands participation beyond traditional village meetings, allowing citizens to provide feedback via electronic portals, social media, and regular dialogue conferences with local officials (National Assembly of Vietnam 2022). This modernization is intended to lower barriers to participation and encourage broader citizen input.

Vietnamese law has progressively strengthened mechanisms to hold local authorities accountable to citizens through representative oversight, grievance redress, and social

monitoring. The 2015 Law on the Organization of Local Government bolsters the People's Councils' oversight through supervisory activities, the questioning of key officials, and confidence voting, and it requires competent bodies to consider voters' recommendations and report on follow-up actions, thereby reinforcing electoral accountability (National Assembly of Vietnam 2015). The Law on Complaints requires state agencies and competent persons to receive and resolve complaints lawfully and promptly, address violations, and implement resolution decisions, strengthening remedial accountability (National Assembly of Vietnam 2011). Most recently, the 2022 Law on the Implementation of Grassroots Democracy affirms citizens' rights to supervise, make recommendations, complain, denounce, and initiate lawsuits; obliges commune authorities to organize and report on the implementation of residential community decisions; and provides administrative, disciplinary, or criminal sanctions for violations or obstruction of petitions and complaints (National Assembly of Vietnam 2022).

Figure 2 summarizes these legal developments by depicting citizen participation as a graduated set of levels. It highlights the expansion from the 2007 Ordinance's focus on being informed, discussing and deciding, giving opinions, and monitoring to the 2022 Law's broader framework, which adds citizen inspection and the principle that citizens enjoy benefits from policy outcomes.

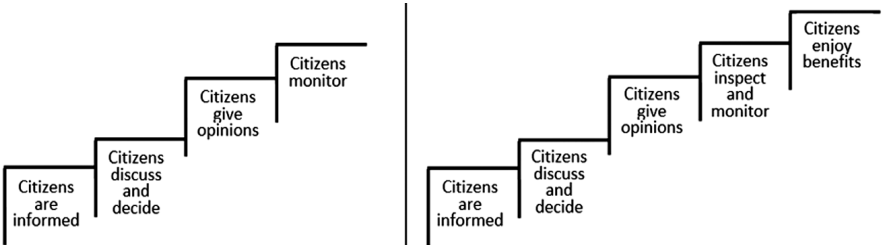

Figure 2. The expansion of levels of citizen participation from Ordinance No. 34/2007 (left) to the Law No. 10/2022/QH15 (right).
Source: Compiled by the authors based on Ordinance No 34/2007/PL-UBTVQH11 and Law No. 10/2022/QH15

In summary, Vietnam's legal framework for citizen participation is relatively coherent and comprehensive. The Constitution outlines fundamental principles and rights, while substantive laws establish an enabling institutional environment for public participation. Table 1 synthesizes the principal legal instruments and their provisions.

Table 1. Key legal instruments governing citizen participation

Year	Legal Instrument	Key Provisions (Transparency, Participation, Accountability)
2007	Ordinance on Grassroots Democracy	**T:** mandatory disclosure of key local information (e.g., budgets, land-use plans); **P:** "people know–discuss–do–supervise," direct decision-making on selected local matters; **A:** community oversight/monitoring arrangements
2011	Law on Complaints	**A:** formal channels and procedures for citizens' complaints and responses by authorities (grievance handling)
2013	Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (2013)	**P:** right to participate in state and social management; **T/A:** openness, state duties to receive and respond to citizens' petitions
2015	Law on Organization of Local Government	**T:** public sessions of People's Councils, openness of council activities (with limited closed sessions); **P:** citizen attendance at open council sessions, voter contact, channels to raise opinions/petitions via elected representatives; **A:** strengthened oversight role of People's Councils, questioning/interpellation with required responses; supervision of People's Committees
2016	Law on Access to Information	**T:** right to request information, proactive disclosure obligations for public authorities
2022	Law on Implementation of Grassroots Democracy	**T:** strengthened disclosure requirements; **P:** expanded subjects and channels of participation (including resident communities); **A:** clearer responsibilities and report-back/feedback expectations

Source: Compiled by the authors from the Constitution and related legal instruments

To demonstrate the link between the legal framework discussed above and the empirical assessment that follows, Table 2 provides an illustrative mapping of selected legal anchors to the PAPI proxy measures for transparency, participation, and accountability.

Table 2. Mapping selected legal provisions to PAPI proxy indicators (illustrative)

Pillar	Selected Legal Provisions (Examples)	Expected Practice	PAPI Proxy (Dimension; Illustrative Indicators)
Transparency	GRD instruments (2007 Ordinance; 2022 Law; 2016 Law on Access to Information)	Timely public disclosure and easier citizen access to key local information	Transparency in Local Decision-Making (e.g., access to budget information, access to land-use information/plans)
Participation	GRD instruments (2007 Ordinance; 2022 Law)	More meaningful opportunities for residents to engage in local affairs (discussion, input, monitoring)	Participation at Local Levels (e.g., perceived opportunities to participate)

Pillar	Selected Legal Provisions (Examples)	Expected Practice	PAPI Proxy (Dimension; Illustrative Indicators)
Accountability	GRD instruments (2022 Law) and the Law on Complaints (2011)	More responsive interactions and more effective grievance handling	Vertical Accountability Toward Citizens (e.g., interactions with local authorities, grievance handling/responsiveness)

Note: PAPI measures in this table are illustrative proxies based on annual national average scores reported in the PAPI national reports. Because PAPI is perception-based and items and/or aggregations may change over time, longitudinal comparability is limited.

Citizen Participation in Local Governance: PAPI Evidence (2011–2024)

To evaluate how these policies have been realized in practice, we analyze trends in relevant PAPI indicators from 2011 to 2024. We focus on three dimensions capturing core aspects of citizen participation: (i) Transparency in Local Decision-Making; (ii) Participation at Local Levels; and (iii) Vertical Accountability Toward Citizens. Figure 3 presents the national average PAPI scores for these dimensions over time.

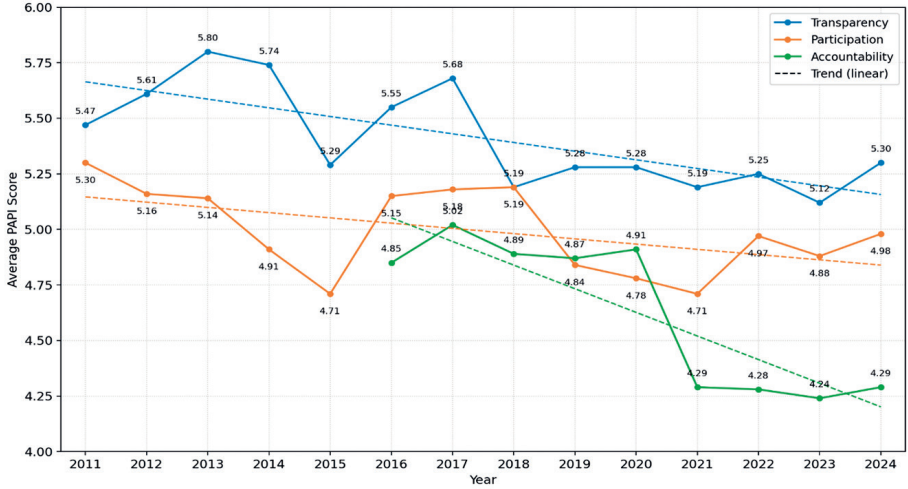

Figure 3. Average PAPI Scores for Transparency in Local Decision-Making (2011–2024), Participation at Local Levels (2011–2024), and Vertical Accountability Toward Citizens (2016–2024) in Vietnam. *Source: Authors' calculations based on PAPI national reports, 2011–2024*

Transparency in Local Decision-Making remains modest and has declined slightly over the past decade. The national transparency score peaked at 5.61 out of 10 in 2012, declined to 5.19 in 2018, and then rose to 5.30 in 2024 (CECODES et al. 2020; CECODES et al.

2025). Overall, the 2024 level remained below that of the early 2010s, and the linear trend is negative (β = -0.039 per year, $p < 0.01$). Sub-indicators point to persistent shortcomings. The budget transparency score declined from about 1.74 out of 2.5 in 2016 to 1.31 out of 2.5 in 2023 (CECODES et al. 2017; CECODES et al. 2025). Transparency in land-use planning is also low: 16 to 20 percent of citizens report awareness of local land-use plans, and only 4 to 5 percent report being invited to contribute to related decisions. Consistently, the land use plan disclosure score declined from 1.77 out of 2.5 in 2016 to 1.35 out of 2.5 in 2024 (CECODES et al. 2017; CECODES et al. 2025). Even the strongest indicator, publication of the list of local poverty beneficiaries, declined from 2.17 out of 2.5 in 2015 to 1.72 in 2024 (CECODES et al. 2017; CECODES et al. 2025). Together, these patterns suggest that grassroots transparency is often more formal than substantive, with information channels remaining largely symbolic and underused.

Participation at Local Levels also appears stagnant. Nationally, the index was 5.30 in 2011 and 4.98 in 2024 (CECODES et al. 2017; CECODES et al. 2025), with fluctuations but no clear upward trend. The estimated decline over 2011–2024 ($\beta = -0.024$ per year, $p = 0.064$) is not statistically significant, indicating a broadly stable long-term pattern at a moderate level. Detailed data points to several barriers. Civic knowledge remains limited: in 2024, about 65 percent of citizens reported some awareness of current local policy, and around 40 percent could name a key local leader (CECODES et al. 2025). Opportunities for direct involvement are also limited. A sub-index capturing participation opportunities in local organizations and decision-making declined from 1.88 out of 2.5 in 2011 to 1.39 in 2024, placing it in the low and declining category (CECODES et al. 2017; CECODES et al. 2025). Only about 15 percent of respondents report membership in local voluntary associations, and turnout in village leader elections remains modest at around 65–70 percent (CECODES et al. 2025). By contrast, perceived election quality remained relatively high, at around 1.4 to 1.5 out of 2.5, from 2011 to 2024 (CECODES et al. 2012; CECODES et al. 2025). Community contributions show a slight improvement, with the contribution index increasing from 0.85 to 1.08 out of 2.5 between 2011 and 2024 (CECODES et al. 2012; CECODES et al. 2025), indicating a low but upward trend. Overall, however, PAPI evidence suggests that substantive grassroots participation has not improved significantly over the past decade.

Vertical Accountability Toward Citizens is the weakest of the three pillars and has deteriorated in recent years. After averaging 4.8–5.0 from 2016 to 2019 (CECODES et al. 2020), the accountability score declined sharply during the COVID-19 period, reaching a low of 4.24 in 2023 before rising slightly to 4.29 in 2024 (CECODES et al. 2025). The estimated linear trend over 2016 to 2024 is negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -0.106$ per year, $p < 0.01$). The indicator capturing citizen interaction with local authorities, such as attending meetings or contacting officials, during 2016–2019 averaged about 2.0 out of 3.3, roughly 61 percent of the maximum possible score, and has remained relatively stable (CECODES et al. 2017; CECODES et al. 2025). In contrast, the handling of complaints and petitions is highly ineffective, as evidenced by a decline in the average grievance-resolution score

from 1.47 to approximately 0.47 out of 3.3 between 2016 and 2022 (CECODES et al. 2017; CECODES et al. 2025). In 2018, approximately 26 percent of citizens reported lodging a complaint or recommendation (CECODES et al. 2020); by 2024, this figure had declined to 20.6 percent, and among those who did so, fewer than 20 percent were satisfied with the response (CECODES et al. 2025). Access to justice, measured from 2018 to 2024, remained at around 1.8 out of 3.4 (approximately 55 percent of the maximum possible score), with no statistically significant change over time (CECODES et al. 2020; CECODES et al. 2025). The pronounced decline in accountability during 2020 and 2021 may reflect pandemic-related pressures that led local governments to prioritize top-down control over citizen engagement. Overall, accountability to citizens remains the most problematic pillar of local governance, with low levels persisting and, in several key areas, deteriorating.

Discussion

The findings reveal an apparent disconnect between Vietnam's policy framework and the reality of citizen participation. On one hand, the legal framework for GRD has expanded significantly over the past two decades across all three pillars (broadening who can participate, how they can participate, and how authorities must facilitate participation). On the other hand, PAPI data (2011–2024) show that citizens' actual involvement in local governance remains constrained: participation and transparency scores hover around only 5 out of 10, and accountability scores are even lower, at roughly 4.5 out of 10. Voter turnout in local elections is high but has gradually declined, and beyond voting, citizens have few effective avenues to voice their concerns. Core elements of grassroots democracy include open access to information, regular consultation, and responsive grievance handling, yet show little substantive progress. Transparency in local planning and budgeting remains weak, and complaint resolution mechanisms perform poorly, contributing to public dissatisfaction. Meanwhile, certain other aspects of governance have improved (e.g., control of petty corruption and public service delivery), indicating that administrative reforms have advanced more rapidly than democratic reforms. In effect, local governance has become somewhat more efficient but not much more participatory or responsive to citizens.

A substantial gap thus persists between an increasingly "open" participatory framework in theory and a "limited" level of participation in practice. In Arnstein's (1969) terms, citizen involvement in Vietnam often remains at the lower rungs of participation, primarily informing and consulting, rather than advancing to partnership or delegated power, where citizens wield genuine influence. Many participatory processes remain top-down and one-way. Likewise, from Fung's (2006) perspective, Vietnamese citizens typically lack two crucial elements for meaningful participation: complete information and genuine authority to affect outcomes. In short, much of current participation is tokenistic or symbolic.

Conclusions

1. This study finds a two-sided picture of grassroots democracy in Vietnam. On the one hand, the legal framework for citizen participation has expanded significantly since 2007, with an increasing emphasis on openness, transparency, and accountability. On the other hand, PAPI data for 2011–2024 show that actual participation levels remain low with only marginal improvement. The gap between policy and practice is evident: although the law formally confers participatory rights, citizens have not become much more engaged, and local authorities have shown little change in responsiveness to public input. Persistent bottlenecks in transparency, inclusive consultation, and accountability mechanisms help explain why grassroots democracy has not fully realized its potential.
2. To address these bottlenecks and narrow the gap between formal rights and practical engagement, the policy implications highlight three complementary measures to strengthen meaningful participation. First, enhance civic education and public awareness through schools and community programs to improve citizens' knowledge of participatory rights and build trust with local authorities. Second, reinforce accountability by enforcing the 2022 GRD Law, including sanctions for non-compliance, and incorporating citizen feedback into the performance evaluations of local officials. Third, diversify participation channels by strengthening face-to-face community meetings and the representative role of mass organizations, such as the Vietnam Fatherland Front, while expanding digital platforms, including online portals and social media, to broaden opportunities for public feedback.

Data Availability Statement

The data used to support the findings of this research are available from the corresponding authors upon request.

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PILIEČIŲ DALYVAVIMAS VIETOS VALDYME VIETNAME: POLITIKA IR PRAKTIKA

Santrauka. *Šiame tyrime, remiantis teisinių dokumentų analize ir PAPI duomenimis, nagrinėjama piliečių dalyvavimo vietos valdyme Vietname raida ir politikos bei praktikos atotrūkis. Teisinė sistema nuolat plėtė veikėjų, dalyvavimo formų ir lygių bei piliečių demokratinių teisių įgyvendinimo mechanizmų ratą. Tačiau PAPI tendencijos rodo, kad tikrasis piliečių dalyvavimas išlieka ribotas, o pažanga lėta, ypač informacijos skaidrumo ir vietos valdžios atskaitomybės srityse. Tarp politikos ir įgyvendinimo išlieka didelis atotrūkis: nors dalyvavimo teisės teoriškai išsiplėtė, jų įgyvendinimas praktikoje dažnai yra formalus ir turi mažą poveikį. Tyrimas pateikia integruotą teisinį-empirinį požiūrį į vietos demokratijos*

(GRD) vertinimą ir pateikia empiriškai pagrįstas išvadas dėl veiksmingesnio ir demokratiškesnio vietos valdymo.

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