

People's participation in New Rural Development Programs in the Mekong Delta: Current Situation and Concerns

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Abstract: *Vietnam's National Target Program on New Rural Development is a critical policy directly associated with the rights, welfares and livelihoods of rural residents. It is therefore necessary to consider the people's participation in order to promote the role of rural residents. Based on the results of literature review and field surveys¹, this article discusses the current situation of the people's participation in developing new rural areas in the Mekong Delta region.*

Keywords: People's participation, New Rural Development, Mekong Delta

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the Mekong Delta people's participation in new rural development (NRD) process. The primary data and information were collected from field surveys in the rural areas of six provinces and one city in the Mekong Delta through 800 questionnaires for 500 residents and 300 officials and staff from the Fatherland Front Committees and civil organizations. The issues covered in questionnaires include (i) people's participation in the election for the village/hamlet development committees;

(ii) information transparency of local governments; (iii) people's participation through providing initiatives, discussion, comments and decision making for the formation of NRD programs, plans, projects; (iv) voluntary contribution of resources; (v) self-governance and safeguard in the NRD process; (vi) supervision over the implementation of NRD policies and projects; (vii) evaluation and feedbacks on the satisfaction of the NRD.

2. Mekong Delta people's participation in NRD: positives, limitations, and shortcomings

1. Positives

The survey results revealed some positive signs of people's participation in the NRD in the Mekong Delta.

¹ The article relies mainly on the survey results of the 2018-2019 ministry-level research project "Improving the people's participation in NRD process in the Mekong Delta" led by the author.

First, regarding election of the hamlet development committees, 76% of the surveyed people reported their votes in the election while 83.3% of them agreed on the publicness, transparency and democracy of the hamlet development committees.

Second, on information transparency to ensure the people's right to know, 78% of the officials and staff from the Fatherland Front Committees and civil organizations in the surveys knew about the National Target Program on NRD; 86% being aware of the NRD criteria; 87% knowing about the NRD programs and plans of their communes and districts; 45% noticing of the NRD planning at their communes; 42% knowing about NRD projects and the cost estimates and settlements. However, only 39% of the surveyed residents knew about the National Target Program on NRD.

Third, about providing initiatives, discussion, and comments in the NRD process, the Fatherland Front Committees and civil organizations had contributed their initiatives according to 36% of the surveyed people and had collected the people's comments on the drafts of NRD policies and plans as stated by 92%. The people in the surveys also reported many opportunities for them to participate in the discussion and raise their opinions of the commune's NRD plans (52%) and about the financial contribution to the NRD projects (68%). Nevertheless, only 59% of the people involved actually in the discussion and comments of both the NRD plans and financial contribution for NRD projects under the lead of the commune's administration (Nguyen Trong Binh, 2019).

Fourth, concerning voluntary contribution, 49.3% of the interviewed people admitted their provision of resources (in terms of land, labor, finance, materials, and so forth) for NRD projects, among those 23.3% donated land, 36% supplying labor, 19.3% funding the projects (in cash), and over 20% contributing in kind.

Fifth, about the people's supervision and monitoring, 68% of the survey respondents had watched and given opinions to local governments on NRD-related issues and the performance of concerned agencies. The Fatherland Front Committees and civil organizations also regularly contributed their ideas and comments to the Party's bodies and government agencies on the NRD as reported by 55% of the people in the surveys. The People's Inspection Committees and Community Supervision Units during the NRD process also delivered an effective performance according to 76% of the interviewed people.

Sixth, regarding the people's self-safeguard, there have been different effective modes of operation at the hamlet-level in the Mekong Delta that involved the people's participation, such as "the wooden tocsin sound" "the four pillars", security gates, crime report and prevention teams, family self-safeguard teams among the Khmer people, or the movement to preserve and build up green and clean riverscapes, and so forth. Also, as shown by the survey results, 54% of the people answered that they participated in the management of NRD works.

Seventh, for the people's valuation and satisfaction of the NRD results, while 62% of the surveyed officials and staff

from the Fatherland Front Committees and civil organizations reported their consultation with the people for their satisfaction of the NRD results, only 50% of the surveyed residents actually participated in the consultation for their valuation and satisfaction over the NRD results.

2. Limitations and shortcomings

Besides the aforementioned positives, there have been also the negatives and hindrances of the people's participation in the Mekong Delta's NRD.

First, the people's proactiveness in the election of hamlet development committees remained weak. Regarding the voting right, 24% of the surveyed people did not vote for the hamlet development committees. On the organization of the election, 53.68% of the answers revealed that there were at least two people nominated for the hamlet development committees while 83.48% reported the voting was held through secret ballots. The results of election for the chairperson and members of the committees were later publicized according to 74.34% of the respondents. In particular, 22.85% of the surveyed people said local government did not propose the nominations for the election.

Second, the information access was still limited for the responses of the residents, the Fatherland Front Committees and civil organizations. The residents had restricted information about NRD. Only a number of people answered that they knew about the NRD planning, NRD projects, and NRD budget revenues and expenditures with the respective proportions of 20%, 7% and 5.3%. Moreover, 64% of the survey

respondents reported that the Fatherland Front Committees and civil organizations did not initiate any NRD policies. On the contrary, a lot of them had limited or no opportunities to raise their voices on the commune's NRD planning and plans (48%), to propose NRD projects (44%), and to discuss their financial contribution to NRD projects (32%). Also, 42.7% of the people said their families did not receive invitation for the NRD consultation meetings.

Third, social criticism by the people, Fatherland Front Committees and civil organizations has not been strongly promoted. According to 44% of the surveyed people, they were not given opportunities to criticize NRD projects proposed by local governments. The people's right of decision making over NRD key issues was also limited. The priorities of NRD projects were set by the NRD Steering Committees at district and commune levels solely as reported by 65% of the respondents. Only 11.3% of them thought the people was actually the decision makers through the hamlet-level meetings. Similarly, 72% and 28% of the respondents believed that the level of the people's contribution to the NRD projects was decided by local governments and by the people themselves respectively.

Fourth, there was still inadequate execution and effectiveness of the people's supervision during the NRD process. The survey results revealed that 25.9% of the people had sent their complaints, denunciations and recommendations to local governments while 46.7% did not pay attention to the NRD projects and activities

at all. Only 21.89% of the people answered that local authorities had responded to their complaints satisfactorily. Besides, the performance of the Supervision Boards for the Investments by Communities and the People's Inspection Boards remained ineffective as said by 42% of the survey respondents.

Fifth, the people's voluntary contribution to NRD projects was still restricted. The capital investment by the people in 2011-2015 accounted for only 14.82% the total capital investment for NRD, comparatively low compared with the people's contribution for the 1970-1980 movement of new villages in South Korea which made up of 49% on average and 78% as the highest peak (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 1980). The contribution of the people, moreover, was still involuntary to some extent when 13.3% of the respondents said they were impelled by local authorities to do so.

Sixth, the self-governance and self-safeguard at the village and commune levels was ineffectual. While the formulation of the village conventions was aimed at promoting the self-governance among communities, the participation of the people was limited. The survey results showed 34% of respondents did not involve in the formulation of village conventions. The people's self-awareness in following the village conventions remained inadequate as reported by 40% of the survey respondents while 46% of the surveyed people did not participate in any self-safeguard groups or teams.

Seventh, collecting the people's comments and feedbacks on NRD was rather

formalized, which was reflected through: (i) the limited number of feedback channels; (ii) the weak proactiveness of the Fatherland Front Committees in collecting the people's comments and feedbacks on the NRD results before they were officially recognized; and (iii) the people's comments and feedbacks were only collected before the NRD recognition procedures for the and abandoned after the communes were NRD-recognized.

In brief, despite the positives, there remained the negatives and hindrances of the people's participation in NRD process in the Mekong Delta. According to Sherry Arnstein's evaluation scale (1969), the Mekong Delta people's participation in NRD process currently might be at the first level (where the governments play the leading role) or the second level (where the people's participation has weak policy-influence), not at the first level yet (where the people's participation really influences the policy making and results).

3. Concerns over the people's participation in the NRD process in the Mekong Delta

Through desk and field studies, some concerns over the Mekong Delta people's participation in NRD process could be raised as follows:

First, there is incompatibility between the required promotion of the people's participation as required and the people's participation in reality. The Resolution of the 7th Congress of the 11th Central Committee of Vietnam's Communist Party has indicated regarding agriculture, farmers and rural areas that "farmers play the central role for the relations among agriculture, farmers, and rural areas" (The

Communist Party of Vietnam, 2008). The NRD in Vietnam requires the people's participation since they are the contributors of the resources, the motivators and also beneficiaries. The people's participation in the Mekong Delta's NRD, however, has not been strongly promoted. How to promote and improve the effectiveness of the people's participation in NRD therefore is the key question.

Second, there is also the incompatibility between the requirements of activities for the participation of the people and the actual activities that involved the people, both in terms of quantity and quality. From the public policy perspective, people might join in various NRD activities. However, the local authorities at all levels in the Mekong Delta have not considered the role of the people in many activities. There were a limited number of activities for the people to participate while the mechanisms for the interactions between the people and local authorities have not been developed yet. Thus, how to diversify the activities for stronger people's participation is another issue to consider.

Third, the inadequacies were also observed in the establishment of transparent administrative bodies as well as the professional skills and responsibilities of civil servants in promoting the people's participation. The operation of some administrative agencies in reality was not really transparent enough. The transparency as well as the fulfillment of the public duties of the public employees are necessary for the promotion of the people's participation in NRD. The field studies revealed that the people were not centered as the key actor

during the NRD process. The transparency of information remained weak while the social power was not yet shared with the people. Government authorities retained significantly its powerful role in the NRD process. The situation posed the question of how to set up a more transparent administrative model to promote better the people's participation.

Fourth, the requirement and the reality of creating the institutions for the people's participation seemed incompatible. Over the periods of development, the democratic institutions in Vietnam has been constantly improved. However, there were still inadequacies in the establishment of institutions for promoting and improving the effectiveness of the people's participation in NRD process. Those inadequacies were noticed in some following aspects: (i) the people's participation was not yet considered an important criterion for the NRD recognition; (ii) the information transparency is not included in the criteria for NRD assessment; (iii) there is still the absence of regulations on the people's participation in the NRD process; (iv) some activities that require the people's participation stated in the Ordinance on the Implementation of Democracy at the commune and township level are no longer suitable in the context of changes as well as to meet the need of stronger people's participation; (v) the legal provisions are not complete regarding the democratic election, democratic decision making, democratic governance, and democratic supervision at the village and hamlet level.

Fifth, there is the incompatibility between the people's awareness and "civic spirit" and their capacity for democratic practice in reality. As argued by Gabriel A. Almond (1987), it is necessary for the people to have "the political culture of the participants" rather than "the political culture of the villagers". The current political culture of the people in the Mekong Delta in general remains "the political culture of the villagers", which is indicated through the following key aspects: (i) a part of the surveyed population were not fully aware of their rights; (ii) a part of the surveyed population had not involved actively and voluntarily in the NRD process; (iii) owing to some reasons, a part of the surveyed population were not concerned about the interests of the communities nor raising their voices regarding improper behaviors of officials and civil servants. Thus, another issue needs to be addressed is how to build "the political culture of the participants" in rural communities in order to promote better the people's participation in the NRD process.

Sixth, the e-governance inadequacies in the rural Mekong Delta areas limited the improvement of e-governance in the region. The development and application of information technology in governance (or e-governance) is expected to promote further the people's participation. However, the current issues face the rural Mekong Delta include the backwardness of information technology and low efficiency in the application of e-governance. According to the Vietnam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI)

2018, the Mekong Delta provinces earned very low scores, ranging from 2.1 to 3.08 only (PAPI, 2018). The electronic portals have been set up at almost districts in the Mekong Delta, but not been considered as an effective channel to involve and interact with the people yet. Whereas, the portals are not popular at the commune level. This situation has affected negatively the people's access to information and the interaction between the people and the local authorities regarding the NRD process.

Seventh, the underdevelopment and poor proactiveness of the Fatherland Front Committees and civil organizations has not yet met the requirements for these organizations. In order to improve the people's participation, it is required to develop and promote the proactiveness of civil organizations during the NRD process. There currently exist various civil organizations who present different groups of people, such as the Fatherland Front Committees, Youth Unions, Women's Unions, Veterans Unions, but they are not proactive enough. Thus, how to develop those organizations in order to serve better the public interests in the rural areas is another issue of consideration.

4. Conclusion

The people's participation in the NRD process in the Mekong Delta has brought positive results. Nevertheless, there are still limitations and shortcomings. Based on the field surveys, the study concludes seven issues to be resolved in order to improve the people's participation and ensure better their role in the NRD process □

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