

# DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION OF CITIZENS IN THE NEW RURAL CONSTRUCTION PROGRAM IN HO CHI MINH CITY

Ngo Van Huan

PhD Candidate, Faculty of Sociology, University of Social Sciences and Humanities,  
National University, Ho Chi Minh City, (USSH-VNUHCM)

Lecturer, Ho Chi Minh Cadre Academy.

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**Abstract:** Based on quantitative data analysis from a survey of 460 households in rural Ho Chi Minh City, this article analyzes the current state of citizen democratic practice across five levels of participation: People are Informed, People Discuss, People Implement, People Supervise, and People Benefit within the New Rural Construction program. Subsequently, it evaluates the interrelationships between the participation levels. The results indicate a fairly high mean assessment score. Notably, the people benefit level attained the highest score, signifying that the residents perceived tangible benefits from the program. Analysis of the relationships revealed that the people are informed level exhibited a causal relationship, positively influencing both the people implement and people supervise levels.

**Keywords:** Citizen participation, Democratic practices, New Rural Construction.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The National Target Program on New Rural Construction has been implemented comprehensively nationwide, generating fundamental and comprehensive transformations in physical infrastructure, economic restructuring to enhance people's livelihoods, promoting cultural values, and protecting the rural environment. It mobilizes participation and safeguards people's right to mastery. In practical implementation at the grassroots level, New Rural Construction represents one of Vietnam's most holistic and integrated policies, embedded within local socio-economic development strategies. A core sustainable objective of the program is to ensure the people's right to mastery, positioning citizens as the central agents of policy, while enhancing the self-governance capacity of rural society.

Resolution No. 19-NQ/TW dated June 16, 2022, affirms that the New Rural Construction process must “promote the people's right to mastery at the grassroots level, creating conditions for citizens to actively participate in oversight and social criticism activities, contributing to building a transparent and strong Party and political system” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2022). This serves as both an objective and guiding principle for policy implementation, aligned with the execution of Law No. 10/2022/QH15 and Decree No. 59/2023/ND-CP dated August 14, 2023, which details the provisions of the Law on Grassroots Democracy Implementation.

In Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), the New Rural Construction program has been deployed systematically and proactively to modernize infrastructure systems, diversify the economic structure, and establish robust linkages between the agriculture, industry, and service sectors. This occurs alongside the preservation of traditional cultural values and the protection of the natural environment. After over 13 years of implementation, the program has yielded significant progress: stable agricultural

growth, accelerated application of science and technology, improved infrastructure, enhanced socio-cultural life, and strengthened capacity to ensure people's mastery of rights and participation.

To assess the substantive progress and impacts on beneficiary households in rural areas, this study addresses the following two research questions:

First, what is the current state of grassroots democratic practice across the five levels: (1) People are Informed (Dân biết), (2) People Discuss and Decide (Dân bàn và quyết định), (3) People Implement (Dân làm và thực hiện), (4) People Supervise (Dân kiểm tra giám sát), and (5) People Benefit (Dân thụ hưởng) in HCMC's New Rural Construction process from 2021 to 2025?

Second, to what extent does Level 1 (People are Informed) influence Level 3 (People Implement) and Level 4 (People Supervise) in HCMC's New Rural Construction during the 2021–2025 period?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The theory of participatory tiers, pioneered by Arnstein (1969) as “Arnstein's Ladder,” originally comprised eight rungs, as follows: Later adaptations by Pretty (1995) condensed these to seven levels, while Stelzle and Noennig (2017) further refined the framework into a streamlined, five-tier model. Concurrently, the OECD classification (Varwell, 2022) established three foundational levels: 1) information, 2) consultation, and 3) Active Participation.

In Vietnam, the most prevalent framework for citizen participation evaluates grassroots democratic practice (thực hành dân chủ cơ sở), first institutionalized through Resolution No. 45/1998/NQ-UBTVQH10 (February 26, 1998) under the principle “People are Informed, People Discuss, People Implement, People Supervise.” To establish legal foundations, the government issued Decree No. 29/1998/ND-CP (May 11, 1998) on the Implementation of Grassroots Democracy at the Commune Level, later superseded by Decree No. 79/2003/ND-CP (July 7, 2003).

This framework was elevated to ordinance status by the 11th National Assembly through Ordinance No. 34/2007/PL-UBTVQH11 (April 20, 2007) on Grassroots Democracy Implementation. Responding to institutional reform needs, the 15th National Assembly enacted Law on Grassroots Democracy Implementation No. 10/2022/QH15 (November 10, 2022), effective from July 1, 2023. This legislation marks a critical advancement in institutionalizing the people's right to mastery, expanding the scope of regulated entities and domains, and concretizing mechanisms for direct citizen participation, oversight, and social criticism in state management at the grassroots level.

Significantly, the law broadened participatory tiers in the development process: from the original four pillars to five, adding “People benefit”—while enhancing existing dimensions: “People discuss and decide” (granting decision-making authority); “People inspect and supervise.”

Thus, Vietnam's political and legal foundations for democratic practice emerged early from practical demands and have progressively evolved, advancing from the 1998 Government Decree to the 2007 National Assembly Standing Committee Ordinance, culminating in the 2022 Grassroots Democracy Law. This trajectory reflects substantive institutional maturation, particularly through the expansion from a four-tier framework (People are Informed, Discuss, Implement, Supervise) to a five-tier structure incorporating deliberative autonomy and benefit entitlement: People are informed, People discuss and decide, People implement, People inspect and supervise, and People benefit.

Concurrently, studies by Tung et al. (2022), (Thanh H. T. T. & Hoa, 2022), (Lịch & Dung, 2019), (Diệp Thanh Tùng & Hoàng Chí Cảnh, 2023) applied Arnstein's Ladder (Arnstein, 1969), Bagdi's (2002) PPI Index, and grassroots democracy theory (lý luận dân chủ cơ sở) in Vietnam, establishing four participation levels in the New Rural Construction. “Here, PPK, PPD, PPP, and PPC represent respondents' mean scores corresponding to each level: Information Awareness (K-Know), Discussion/Input (D-Discussion), Implementation (P-Performance), and Oversight (C-Control) across 19 New Rural Criteria. S<sub>j</sub> denotes the mean score per criterion among the 19 New Rural Criteria” (Diệp Thanh Tùng & Hoàng Chí Cảnh, 2023, p.4).

Subsequent studies (Võ Thanh Diệu, 2017; Diệp Thanh & Nguyễn Thị Thúy, 2024; Nguyễn Văn Giáp, 2019; Nguyễn Tuấn Anh & Nguyễn Trung Kiên, 2024) empirically applied the scale: People are informed, People discuss, People implement, People supervise, and People benefit to evaluate participation levels in New Rural Construction nationwide and in specific local cases.

Thus, the grassroots democracy scale has been utilized in multiple empirical studies, affirming that grassroots democracy theory constitutes the definitive theory of citizen participation in Vietnamese policy. Based on this, the present study applies the theory of citizen participation levels in New Rural Construction policies through five democratic practice tiers: (1) people are informed, (2) people discuss, (3) people implement, (4) people inspect and supervise, and (5) people benefit.

### 3. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

To assess grassroots democratic practices in New Rural Construction within Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), this study employs quantitative research, utilizing a survey questionnaire for data collection. The research site is HCMC (pre-merger), before administrative unit consolidation under Resolution No. 202/2025/QH15 (15th National Assembly, 2025) and commune-level rearrangement under Resolution No. 1685/NQ-UBTVQH15 (15th National Assembly, 2025). During the period 2021 to pre-July 1, 2025, HCMC implemented its New Rural Construction program alongside urbanization, classifying rural districts into two tiers: advanced new-style rural communes (xã đạt chuẩn nông thôn mới nâng cao) and model new-style rural communes (xã nông thôn mới kiểu mẫu). According to the HCMC People's Committee plan, the target is for  $\geq 50\%$  of communes (28/56 communes) to achieve advanced standards by end-2024, with all communes meeting this criterion by 2025 (HCMC People's Committee, 2024).

The quantitative method utilized a structured questionnaire survey with quota sampling allocated by the commune. The total sample comprised 460 rural households across 12/56 communes in 5 suburban districts of HCMC (pre-merger): Cu Chi district: 120 cases (3/20 communes); Hoc Mon district: 80 cases (2/10 communes); Binh Chanh district: 120 cases (3/14 communes); Nha be District: 60 cases (2/6 communes); Can Gio district: 80 cases (2/6 communes). The sampling procedure and distribution mechanism are illustrated in the diagram below.

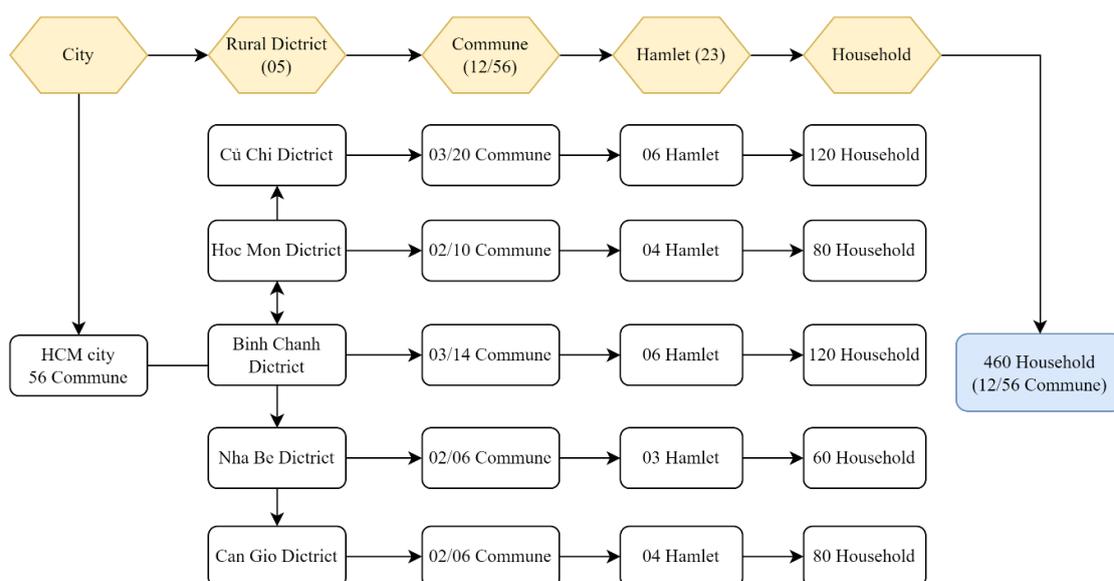


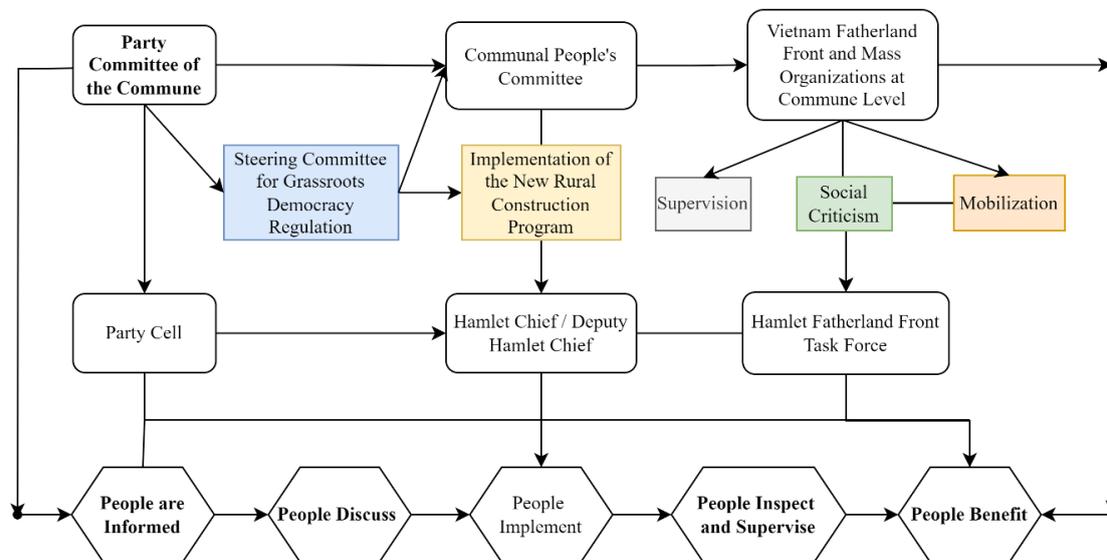
Figure 1: Survey sampling process and distribution structure.

### 4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

#### 4.1. Current State of Grassroots Democratic Practice Among Rural Residents in New Rural Construction in Ho Chi Minh City (2021-2025 Period)

New Rural Construction represents a holistic integrated policy that constitutes a regular political task at the grassroots level. In recent years, the program has been implemented through integration within comprehensive socio-economic development policies at local levels. Resolution No. 19-NQ/TW (June 16, 2022) affirms that the New Rural Construction process must “promote the people's right to mastery at the grassroots, creating conditions for citizens to actively engage in oversight and social criticism, contributing to building a transparent and robust party and political system” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2022). This serves as both an objective and guiding principle for policy implementation, concurrently integrated with the execution of Law No. 10/2022/QH15 and Decree No. 59/2023/ND-CP (August 14, 2023) detailing the provisions of the Law on Grassroots Democracy Implementation.

To elucidate the grassroots democracy implementation process in commune-level New Rural Construction policy execution, it may be visualized as follows:



**Figure 2: Schematic of the grassroots democracy implementation process at the commune level in New Rural Construction**

**Source:** Author's conceptualization.

Regarding leadership and direction, the principle of concentrated democracy is one of the important and consistent principles in the leadership of the Party organization at all levels. The Fatherland Front at all levels plays a role in participating in criticism, supervision, and mobilizing the masses to ensure that the implementation of the main policies for rural development consistently meets people's goals. People are informed, People discuss, People implement, People inspect and supervise, People benefit.

At the grassroots level, villages and hamlets are not administrative units but rather community self-management organizations, functioning like a “miniature administration,” with three branches of functional tasks: the Party cell, the hamlet leader, and the Front working committee, along with various mass organizations.

Research shows that although the Hamlet organization is not officially at the government level, it is structured like an administration and has a two-way influence on the government. On the positive side, this tightly organized system allows the state to stay closely connected to the people, following the principle of a “door-to-door approach,” which facilitates the swift and smooth implementation of policies. However, a long-term limitation of this approach is that it fosters a passive mentality of “the state will provide,” which affects the self-management and proactive ownership of the people themselves.

To assess grassroots democracy practice in New Rural Construction, the study conducted a survey using a Likert-scale questionnaire ranging from 1 to 5, measuring indicators of the practice scale. Survey results evaluated implementation levels across policy dimensions on this 5-point scale. The value range per level was calculated as follows: (maximum value – minimum value)/number of levels = (5-1)/5 = 0.8. The mean score interpretation was thus defined as follows: 1.0–1.8: Do not know; 1.81–2.60: Know little/somewhat know; 2.61–3.40: Moderately know; 3.41–4.20: Know quite clearly; 4.21–5.0: Know very clearly.

Composite variables were created from the mean values of the five constituent variables listed in Table 1. Specifically, People are informed (eight constituent variables), people discuss (eight constituent variables), people implement (ten constituent variables), people inspect and supervise (seven constituent variables), and people benefit (eight constituent variables).

A comparative analysis of the five tiers – People are informed, People discuss and decide, People implement, People inspect and supervise, and People benefit – was conducted using mean scores and standard deviations, as presented in the table below.

**Table 1. Summary of Grassroots Democratic Practice**

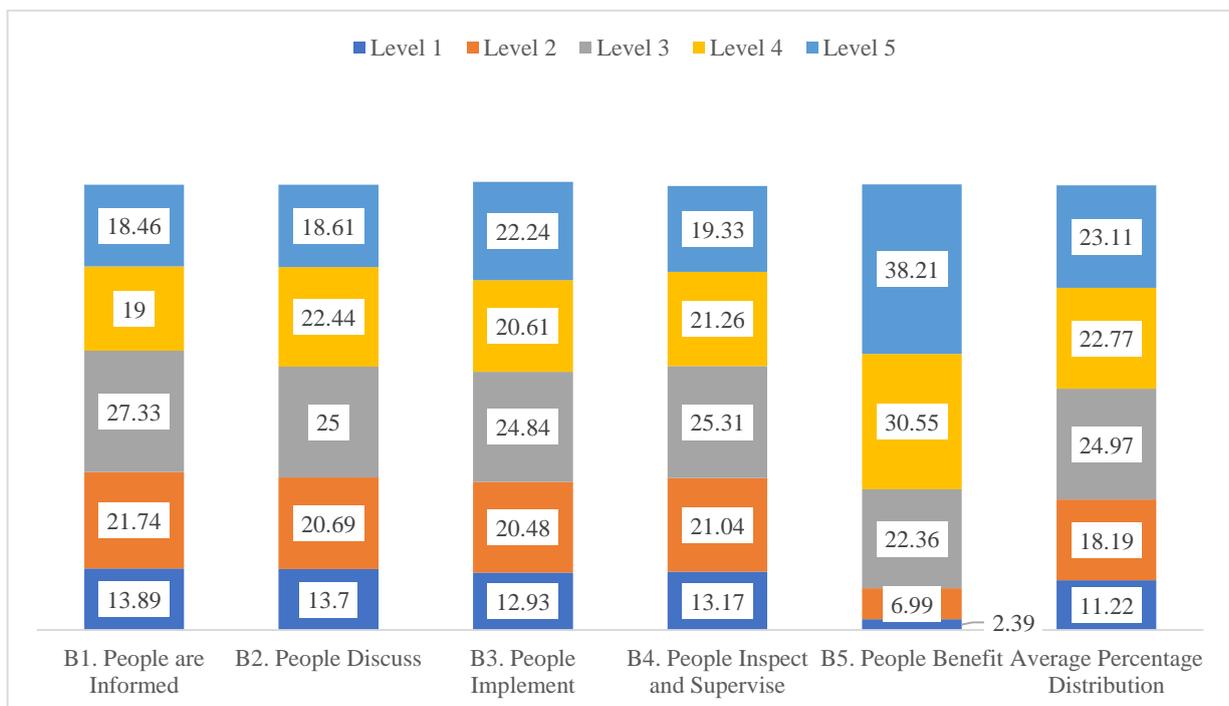
Level of grassroots democratic practice	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. People are informed	460	3.07	1.153
2. People discuss and decide	460	3.12	1.163
3. People implement	460	3.21	1.031
4. People inspect and supervise	460	3.13	1.165
5. People benefit	460	3.96	0.902
Overall mean	460	3.30	0.981

**Source:** Questionnaire survey results, June 2025.

The data table reveals that the People are informed level has the lowest mean score (3.07), followed by People inspect and supervise (3.12), and People discuss and decide (3.13). In contrast, the People benefit dimension registered the highest score (3.96) with the lowest standard deviation, indicating the most positive evaluation of residents' gains from New Rural Construction.

Comparative analysis of response rates and overall means (3.30) demonstrates a trend: higher participation tiers (Arnstein, 1969) correlate with increased engagement levels, as evidenced by People are informed (3.07), People discuss and Decide (3.12), and People implement (3.21). This aligns with nationwide findings by Thanh et al. (2023), where implementation scores exceeded deliberation scores. The authors attribute this to residents' relatively passive participation in local governments' pre-arranged frameworks. These results substantiate two critical observations: Despite prioritized communication efforts and over a decade of implementation, the lowest "informed" score (3.07) exposes substantive deficiencies in rural residents' genuine empowerment. The program's overly administrative structure promotes performative compliance and scripted implementation through a top-down approach, fostering the mentality that "understanding isn't required to execute tasks". This constitutes the foremost challenge to enhancing the quality, holistic development, and sustainable outcomes of New Rural Construction.

To provide a comprehensive overview, average percentages were calculated across the five tiers of democratic practice. The results are presented in the following chart. While each variable in democratic practice has distinct level labels, all expressions consistently indicate a scale ranging from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest).

**Figure 3: Average percentage distribution of democratic practice levels (%)**

**Source:** Processed from questionnaire survey results, June 2025.

The proportional analysis reveals that Level 3 (moderate/neutral level) predominates across all variables, with a mean prevalence of 24.97%, indicating that most respondents perceive their participation in New Rural Construction activities as moderate. Among these, variable B5 (people benefit) exhibited the most pronounced differentiation. Specifically, Level 5 reached the highest proportion at 38.21% (Level 1: 2.39%), indicating strong local endorsement of the program's benefits. Conversely, variables B1 to B4 demonstrate relatively similar distribution patterns: Level 3: Ranges from 24.84% to 27.33%, Level 1: Ranges from 12.93% to 13.89% (corresponding to  $\approx 1/8$  of respondents not participating or not yet practicing democracy regarding being informed, discussion, implementation, and supervision). This demonstrates socio-demographic stratification, creating systemic policy-access gaps.

An observable reality is that Ho Chi Minh City's rural landscape has rapidly improved in recent years. However, given the accelerated urbanization of HCMC's rural areas, these infrastructure and livelihood enhancements stem not solely from the New Rural Construction program but from multifaceted socioeconomic drivers. Within the framework of this study, the benefits attributable specifically to New Rural Construction policies cannot be isolated. Consequently, these scores fundamentally reflect the comprehensive transformation of rural society amid HCMC's broader regional development.

To assess inter-variable relationships, the Pearson correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) analysis was conducted. The significance threshold was set at  $p < 0.05$  for statistically meaningful correlations. The correlation coefficient  $r$  ranges from -1 to 1, with interpretations as follows: approaching 1: strong positive correlation (variables move in tandem); approaching -1: strong negative correlation (inverse relationship);  $r = 0.7$ : strong correlation;  $r = 0.3-0.7$ : moderate correlation; and  $r < 0.3$ : weak correlation (Cohen, 1988).

**Table 2: Analysis of relationships among democratic practice variables**

Level of grassroots democratic practice						
		People are informed	People discuss and decide	People implement	People inspect and supervise	People benefit
People are informed	r	1	0.894**	0.808**	0.814**	0.623**
	p		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	460	460	460	460	460
People discuss and decide	r	0.894**	1	0.827**	0.855**	0.662**
	p	0.000		0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	460	460	460	460	460
People implement	r	0.808**	0.827**	1	0.800**	0.716**
	p	0.000	0.000		0.000	0.000
	N	460	460	460	460	460
People inspect and supervise	r	0.814**	0.855**	0.800**	1	0.657**
	p	0.000	0.000	0.000		0.000
	N	460	460	460	460	460
People benefit	r	0.623**	0.662**	0.716**	0.657**	1
	p	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	
	N	460	460	460	460	460

**Note.** \*\*  $p < 0.01$

**Source:** Questionnaire survey, June 2025.

The results indicated that all variables exhibited statistically significant correlations ( $p < 0.05$ ), with correlation coefficients ( $r$ ) ranging between 0 and 1, confirming uniformly positive directional relationships. Comprehensively, the  $r$ -values ranged from 0.62 to 0.89, demonstrating robust inter-variable correlations. Specifically, People are informed shows strong correlations with People implement ( $r = 0.808^{**}$ ), People discuss and decide ( $r = 0.894^{**}$ ), and People inspect and supervise ( $r = 0.814^{**}$ ). People benefit exhibits moderate correlations with other variables ( $r = 0.627^{**}$  to  $0.716^{**}$ ), substantiated by  $p < 0.01$  significance.

Consequently, it was concluded that information dissemination and awareness enhancement play pivotal roles, significantly influencing outcomes such as implementation, deliberation, and supervision. This underscores the imperative to innovate communication strategies for New Rural Construction policies, ensuring that citizens not only know but also comprehend and internalize policy content. These findings provide critical insights: clarifying policy understanding catalyzes multi-tiered participation. However, elevating awareness, particularly citizens' proactive engagement, requires improving the quality of participatory practices: contribution (deliberative input), implementation (execution autonomy), oversight (monitoring efficacy), and benefit realization (tangible outcomes). When substantive democratic practices are institutionalized across policy implementation, consultation, and supervision, citizens autonomously pursue knowledge and enhance their capabilities. This evidence reveals that the five tiers of democratic practice—people are informed, discuss/decide, implement, inspect/supervise, and benefit operate not as a linear sequence but as a dialectically integrated system with mutually reinforcing interactions.

#### 4.2. Influence of the “People are Informed” Level on “People implement” and “People inspect and supervise” in New Rural Construction in Ho Chi Minh City

The tiers of grassroots democratic practice exhibit a sequential causal relationship in which higher-level participation emerges from the foundational stages. To empirically validate this, we propose the following hypothesis: *H<sub>0</sub>: Enhanced public awareness and understanding of New Rural Construction policies causally increase citizen implementation and supervision actions.*

To test this hypothesis, regression models were executed between specified independent and dependent variables: independent variable: policy awareness (people are informed); dependent variables: implementation level (measured through contribution modalities and supervision intensity).

**Table 3: Regression analysis of the impact on people of the implementation and people inspect/supervise**

Dependent variable	B	Beta ( $\beta$ )	t	P	Adj. R <sup>2</sup>
People implement	0.723***	0.808	29.341	0.000	0.652
People inspect/supervise	0.823***	0.814	30.004	0.000	0.662

Note. \*\*\* p < 0.001

Source: Survey data, June 2025.

The regression analysis results examining the relationship between the independent variable, People are informed, and the dependent variable, People Implement (measured through forms of contribution), indicate a statistically significant model. The ANOVA test yielded a p-value of 0.000, which was less than the significance level of 0.05. The Durbin-Watson statistic is 1.591, falling within the acceptable range of 1.5 to 2.0, confirming the suitability of the regression model. The adjusted R-squared (R<sup>2</sup>) value is 0.652, signifying that the independent variable People are Informed accounts for 65.2% of the variance in the dependent variable People Implement. The standardized beta coefficient ( $\beta$ ) is 0.808, which implies that a one-unit increase in the People are informed variable corresponds to a 0.808-unit increase in the People implement variable. This demonstrates that the state of the People Being Informed has a significantly positive impact, enhancing the level of implementation through contributions.

Similarly, when examining the relationship with the People inspect and supervise variable, the adjusted R<sup>2</sup> is 0.662, and the standardized beta coefficient is 0.814. This indicates that People are informed, and also exert a strong, positive, and direct influence on People inspect and supervise. In other words, a one-unit increase in People are Informed leads to a 0.814-unit increase in People inspect and supervise the project.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the level of public knowledge and awareness positively influences and brings about substantial changes in the degree of implementation and supervision by the people in the context of New Rural Construction.

In conclusion, the findings from the quantitative regression analysis and the qualitative thematic analysis converge to support the hypothesis that a higher level of public awareness positively influences the capacity for implementation and practice of supervision in local New Rural Construction.

This outcome reaffirms the significance of participation levels in policymaking. The conclusion drawn from this hypothesis further reinforces the theoretical foundation of the People are informed, People discuss, People implement, People inspect and supervise, and People benefit framework, demonstrating the interconnectedness of these stages. It posits that establishing a solid foundation at lower levels of participation is crucial for promoting engagement at higher levels.

## 5. CONCLUSION

1. Regarding the practice of democracy under the framework of People are informed, People discuss, People implement, People inspect and supervise, People benefit: to position citizens as the driving force, objective, and central actors in the New Rural Construction process, local authorities and the political system have facilitated conditions for the people's exercise of democratic practices. Overall, the rural populace demonstrates a commendable level of awareness, informed through diverse channels, with traditional, direct channels retaining a pivotal role. Citizens engage in deliberations and discussions based on information that is publicly and transparently disclosed across various domains. They are involved in discussing and deciding on numerous items related to New Rural Construction, through which a degree of power and democratic mechanisms is actualized. However, a degree of formalism persists in certain cases and localities, particularly concerning financial matters and funding sources for New Rural Construction. Regarding implementation (people implement), residents in the localities of Ho Chi Minh City actively and proactively participate in New Rural Construction by contributing opinions, labor, land, architectural plans, and financial resources. Furthermore, local authorities create institutional spaces for community self-governance, such as allowing residents to plan, develop, and construct small alleyways independently. Concerning the practice of supervision (people inspect and supervise), two primary channels exist: direct supervision through various forums, such as people's conferences, voter meetings, and citizen receptions, and indirect supervision through institutional bodies, such as the people's Inspectorate Board and Community Supervision Groups. These mechanisms are highly accessible to the public and receive feedback through multiple channels. Consequently, citizens rated their ability to practice supervision at a commendable level, which was among the highest average scores recorded.

Finally, the enjoyment of benefits (people's benefit) is both the goal and the result of the policy process; thus, it is considered a key metric for development success. The self-assessed score from citizens for this dimension was at a 'good' level, equivalent to 4 out of 5. This indicates that the populace has a positive perception of the benefits they have enjoyed from policy outcomes in recent periods.

2. An examination of the levels of democratic practice revealed a significant positive correlation among them, with overall engagement rated at a commendable level. Among these, the People dimension exhibited the strongest positive correlation with the other dimensions. This suggests that further strengthening citizens' knowledge and capacity regarding New Rural Construction will elevate other forms of participation, most notably the level of implementation (People implement).

3. Based on hypothesis testing, it can be affirmed that a causal relationship exists among the tiers of grassroots democratic practices. Specifically, an increase in the People are informed tier, encompassing citizens' awareness and knowledge of New Rural Construction, causally promotes and enhances direct participation through contributions (the People implement' tier) and the supervision of program components (the People inspect and supervise' tier).

## 6. DISCUSSION

The primary arguments of this study highlight that while mechanisms and representative institutions are in place to guarantee the central, agentic role of citizens in implementing rural development policy in Vietnam, thereby enabling them to exercise their sense of ownership, a significant challenge persists. The administrative structure, heavily characterized by its political-administrative nature, has inadvertently eroded the community's inherent autonomy and self-governance, which is a valuable asset of Vietnamese society. This is evident in the limited and underutilized role of traditional institutions within the New Rural Construction process. This reality presents a clear policy implication: the necessity of expanding and ensuring substantive self-governance for village and hamlet models, which function as sub-commune units, particularly within the current context of implementing a two-tiered local government system.

Furthermore, the results from the research hypothesis testing, which support the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ), help clarify and supplement the theoretical foundations of the participation ladder. It reinforces the principle that the stages within the People are informed, People discuss, People implement, People inspect and supervise, People benefit framework are interconnected. Crucially, it demonstrates that establishing a solid foundation at the lower tiers of participation is essential for fostering engagement at higher levels.

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