

# Implementing the Grassroots Democracy: Theoretical and Practical Perspectives

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**Abstract:** The implementation of democracy at the grassroots level is a method to promote the people's rights in Vietnam. It is essentially the execution of the motto "people know, people discuss, people undertake, people inspect, people supervise, people benefit" with the key role of the political system. In this regard, the principle that "the Party leads, the State manages, the People masters" plays an important part. From theoretical and practical perspectives, the paper examines the issues of implementing grassroots democracy. It also employs data collected by the national survey on the provincial governance and public administration efficiency index (PAPI) to assess the current situation of the implementation. The analysis results show that the development of appropriate mechanisms and proactive participation of the people in decision-making process are vital determinants of grassroots democracy. Policy recommendations include strengthening the Party's leadership and the state's role of management, building a team of state cadres with quality, morality, fairness in performing public tasks, improving the quality and efficiency, enhancing publicity and transparency, diversifying the format and mechanism of receiving critical opinions from the people, transferring from formal democracy to substantive democracy at the grassroots.

**Keywords:** (Grassroots) democracy, right to mastery, motto, PAPI, Vietnam.

**Subject classification:** Sociology.

## 1. Introduction

Democracy is a socio-political category that appeared early in human history, associated with social progress and justice through different eras and over social

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regimes. Nowadays, democracy becomes a universal value, and the state's power belongs to the people. It is also an inevitable means for people to achieve freedom and happiness and fully release the inherent abilities of each citizen. In a democratic society, the state must be the protector of citizens' rights. It also affirms that basic human rights can be fully realized and protected by laws.

In Vietnam, democracy is both the goal and an important factor for building a socialist rule-of-law state. It is one of the prerequisites for realizing the aspirations of a mighty and prosperous Vietnam. Fully aware of the important role of democracy, President Hồ Chí Minh viewed it as the driving force of national development, and the implementation of democracy is the key to solving all difficulties and problems. He pointed out the essence of democracy in Vietnam which is "people are the masters" and "people act as the masters"; "All interests are for the people. All power belongs to the people and rests in the people" (Hồ Chí Minh, 2011: 698). This is the core of Hồ Chí Minh's thought, reflecting the highest value of democracy, and concurrently demonstrating the people's legal highest status. President Hồ Chí Minh always emphasized the importance to respect and listen to the people: "Anything must be discussed with the people, with the opinions and experiences of the people consulted, and together with the people plans suitable to the local conditions are to be made" (Hồ Chí Minh, 2011: 288).

Today, implementing grassroots democracy is essentially the realization of the motto "people know, people discuss, people undertake, people inspect, people supervise, people benefit" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021) with the key role played by the political system. The grassroots level is mainly referred to rural communes, urban wards or townships where the democratic guidelines are directly carried out and affirmed. The implementation of grassroots democracy is usually associated with rural communities regarding land use, compensation for housing clearance and relocation, new rural construction, ranking poor households and cultural families, etc. These spheres have direct impacts on the people and community life, so they have the right to know and access information, discuss and participate in the decision-making process. Implementing democracy at the grassroots level is a method of promoting the people's mastery, so that the people can be informed and express their will and aspirations through discussion, participation in giving opinions, deciding, inspecting and supervising issues at the grassroots level according to the Constitution and laws.

This paper examines the issues of the implementation of grassroots democracy from both theoretical and practical perspectives. The analysis provides evidence and policy implications for promoting grassroots democracy in the new

context. The paper is structured in different sections. The next section of this paper will begin with the examination and discussion of theoretical basis of implementing grassroots democracy. It will be followed by a presentation on the current practice of grassroots democracy based on the latest results of the national survey on governance and public administration. In conclusion, some measures will be drawn upon to improve the implementation of democracy at the grassroots level.

## **2. Theoretical basis of implementing grassroots democracy**

Grassroots democracy is a new step in the theoretical development and practical review of democracy in Vietnam. In the process of execution of the power of the Party and the state, the grassroots level plays an important role because this is the one directly interacting with the people and implementing policies and laws. It is also the level where the people's right to mastery needs to be exercised fully and extensively. Democracy at the level serves as a bridge between the people and the state. During the process of implementation, the people can find out limitations and inadequacies in the guidelines, policies and laws, and they can help propose timely adjustments. President Hồ Chí Minh especially appreciated the role and initiative of the people in state management, pointed out that "A hundred times it is easier, but without people, it is to give up; a thousand times it is harder, but with people, it is done". State cadres and civil servants must have the trust of the people and rely on the people to perform their tasks. In order to have the people's trust, it is necessary to practice democracy extensively, and always take care of the interests of the people. Many difficulties in the development process have been effectively resolved by the people, such as the problems of land donations for constructing public infrastructures, charity giving, environmental protection, natural disaster relief, etc.

Looking back to the onset of the *Đổi mới*, or Renovation, process in 1986, the 6<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Party set out the motto "people know, people discuss, people undertake, and people check (or can be translated as "inspect")" to provide a mechanism for implementing grassroots democracy. This is not only a goal but also a motive to arouse people's strength and mobilize potential resources for national building. The Party's Platform affirmed: "Socialist democracy is the essence of our regime, both the goal and the driving force of the national development; The people exercise their right to mastery through the operation of the state, the entire political system and the forms of direct democracy and representative democracy" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2011a). In other words, socialist democracy is essentially serves as both the aim and the driving force of

development. The principle of the state's operation requires close connections with the people, protect the people's rights, respect and listen to the people's opinions. The Vietnam Constitution clearly stipulates: "The state shall ensure and promote the people's rights; recognize, respect, protect and ensure citizens' rights and human rights" (National Assembly, 2013). The state's power is the one entrusted by the people. It serves as a means for exercising the people's right to mastery in managing the society. The people establish the state to exercise the power on their behalf for building of a state ruled by the people and for the people on the basis of the Constitution and laws.

The directions on grassroots democracy have clarified the requirement that the People's Councils and the People's Committees at the grassroots level must publicly post information on their activities for the people to know and make comments in accordance with law. The publicity of information takes many flexible and appropriate forms such as the postings at the village's cultural house, residential area, the commune office. Through neighbors, radio systems, websites, the people can know about the policies, regulations and give opinions before reaching a consensus decision. Through this mode, the people's active participation can be mobilized, from directly related matters to the community such as reducing poverty, social protection to indirectly related matters such as new rural construction, environmental protection and cultural development.

The grassroots democracy must be fully implemented for ensuring the people's participation in all stages of decision making related to their interests. The Party's leadership plays a decisive role in organizing and promoting the people's right to mastery. The 12<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Party (2016) affirmed: "Democracy must be fully and really implemented in all spheres of life to ensure that people can participate in all stages of the decision-making process related to their interests and lives. People can initiate, contribute to discussions, debates, and monitor the policy implementation process" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2016). It is vital to promote grassroots democracy to ensure that all state power belongs to the people. The people absolutely follow the Party's leadership to realize the aspirations of freedom, happiness. They elect and authorize state cadres, civil servants to exercise power entrusted on their behalf. Therefore, in order to ensure that public agencies, cadres and civil servants do not abuse or overuse the power, it is required that the people must supervise the exercise of that power.

The 13<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Party (2021) continued to inherit the previous Congress, adding the contents of "people supervise" and "people benefit" to the motto "people know, people discuss, people do, people inspect" (Communist

Party of Vietnam, 2021: 88-89). This new content helps create favorable conditions and provides legal bases for implementation and expansion of democracy and promoting the people's right to mastery at the grassroots level, while strengthening publicity, transparency and accountability. The two phrases "people supervise" and "people benefit" demonstrate a very new development in the Party's theoretical awareness - that is, economic growth, culture and education, social protection, etc. must bring benefits to all people, leaving no one behind.

In order to comply with the 2013 Constitution and institutionalize the Party's Resolution, in October 2022, the 15<sup>th</sup> National Assembly passed the Law on the Implementation of Democracy at the Grassroots Level (Law No.10/2022/QH15) to replace the Ordinance on Grassroots Democracy No.34/2007/PL-UBTVQH. The Law includes six chapters and 91 articles regulating the content and methods of implementing grassroots democracy, the rights of mastery and obligations of citizens as well as the responsibilities of public agencies, organizations, and carders in ensuring the implementation of democracy at the grassroots. Decree No.59/2023/ND-CP of the Government has detailed a number of articles of the Law, effective from August 15, 2023. The Law provides an important legal basis to perfecting socialist democracy in general and grassroots democracy in particular, thereby contributing to building democratic institutions. The people's rights to mastery at the grassroots level are specified in Article 5 as follows:

- + To publicize information and request the provision of adequate information, accurately and promptly in accordance with law.
- + To propose initiatives, participate in the discussion and decision-making on the contents of grassroots democracy in accordance with law.
- + To examine, supervise, propose, reflect, complain, denounce and place lawsuits against decisions and actions of violating the law on the implementation of grassroots democracy in accordance with law.
- + To be recognized, respected, protected and guaranteed with legitimate rights and interests in the implementation of grassroots democracy in accordance with law.

Concurrently, Article 6 requires the people's obligations in the implementation of grassroots democracy:

- + To comply with the provisions of the law on the implementation of democracy at the grassroots level.
- + To participate in providing opinions on the contents put forward for consultation at the grassroots in accordance with the Law on Implementation of Democracy at the Grassroots Level and other relevant provisions of law.
- + To obey the decisions of the community, local authorities, agencies and organizations.

- + To promptly propose, report and denounce to competent agencies when detecting violations of the law on the implementation of democracy at the grassroots level.

- + To respect and ensure social safety and order, the State's interests, the legitimate rights of organizations and individuals.

The Law has institutionalized and created a legal corridor for ensuring the execution of the people's rights to mastery in economic, political, cultural and social realms. It prescribes mechanisms to ensure the implementation of grassroots democracy. Responsibilities and supervising roles of grassroots-level Vietnam Fatherland Front and mass organizations are clearly stipulated.

To implement grassroots democracy requires publicizing the local authority's information for people to know, discuss and decide directly or make comments for authorized agents to make decisions. The phrase "people know" is the concretization of a basic right recognized in the Constitution – the right to access information. In a democratic society, people have the right to know about policies and legal documents for understanding and compliance. When people know, they can be able to protect their own rights and interests, avoiding infringement by other organizations and individuals. "People know" is the first basis for exercising the related rights such as the phrases "people discuss", "people undertake" and "people supervise". The Law on the Implementation of Democracy at the Grassroots Level stipulates the right of all people to be informed about the policies and laws as well as issues directly related to their lives at the grassroots level. The authorities must promptly and fully inform the people through public postings and electronic information portals.

The people's rights to discuss, debate and give opinions on related issues is the pinnacle of the people's right to mastery, expressed in their own decisions on the direction and way of handling community work. Through organizing people to give opinions, plans and projects are built to be more suitable to reality, attracting people to take advantage of their wisdom, thereby making them understand and care about local economic and social issues.

The people's right to discuss and decide is exercised in different formats. It can be the organization of meetings with participants including the village head, head of the residential group, representatives of households and the grassroots-level Fatherland Front. It may include voting ballots and collecting opinions from each household. The decision is passed when more than half of the total number of households approve, which is to ensure the feasibility and effectiveness of the community's decisions.

The phrase "people inspect" applies to the contents discussed, agreed and decided. This helps promote the participation of each person in inspecting cadres,

civil servants and public agencies, detecting corruption and negative behaviors. That does promote grassroots democracy. People “supervise” the implementation of policies and laws by the authority, cadres, civil servants at the commune level, and even residential groups. They can directly conduct inspection and supervision or indirectly through the People’s Inspection Board and the Community Investment Supervision Board, the People’s Council delegates, and through the Vietnam Fatherland Front and mass organizations of which they are members at the grassroots level. Citizens can even provide opinions and recommendations to, complain about or made denouncements to competent agencies.

The phrase “people benefit” emphasizes the ideology of viewing “people as the root”, respecting and trusting people, so that people can be shared with the Renovation’s achievements and socioeconomic development. They can enjoy social security and participate in studying, working, producing, running business, improving the quality of life of their families and the community. Citizens are protected and guaranteed by the law to exercise their rights to mastery and, human rights in political, economic, cultural, and social domains, in accordance with the provisions of the Law on the Implementation of Democracy at the Grassroots Level and other related laws.

The process of implementing grassroots democracy has today brought about many achievements. The promotion of both direct and indirect democracy has become more and more effective in life. The relationship between the people and the Party, the State, the Vietnam Fatherland Front and mass organizations has been strengthened at the grassroots level. The people’s engagement with authority has been increasingly recognized and respected, effectively contributing to the implementation of grassroots democracy and creating social consensus in the community. The most obvious benefit that grassroots democracy has brought about is the transparency and publicity in the discussion and decision-making process. As people are the direct executors of grassroots democracy, they need to clearly understand their rights and responsibilities toward regulations and the issue of implementing democracy. Grassroots democracy can help raise people’s awareness of law compliance, improving accountability, fairness, and social consensus. In reality, when democracy is well implemented at the grassroots-level, social well-being and safety are ensured, contributing to the socio-economic development.

Nonetheless, besides the results achieved, the implementation of grassroots democracy in some localities still has limitations, being superficial (i.e. not real, not substantive). The dissemination and thorough understanding of policies and laws related to grassroots democracy should be more effective.

If the Law on the Implementation of Grassroots Democracy is not effectively implemented, it will not be able to mobilize the people’s resources and the

community's strength, and thus will not create a driving force for socioeconomic development. It can lead to the waste of resources and infringements of democracy, decreasing social cohesion. In some localities, the problems of corrupted bureaucracy, cadres' arrogance and harassment, causing difficulties or troubles, taking advantage of position in performing public duties have not been promptly prevented. They even have a lack of understanding of legal provisions and or have not complied with these regulations themselves.

As the 12<sup>th</sup> Party Congress pointed out "a part of cadres, party members, civil servants and public employees have not respected and listened to the people's opinions and aspirations. They have not settled the people's rights and legitimate interests" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2016: 157-158). Consequently, the people's rights to know, discuss, decide and supervise local activities are limited. The phenomenon of prolonged lawsuits and those lodged to a level higher than their corresponding ones in many localities is rooted to the people's mistrust of the local leaders. The numbers of complaints and denunciations are still high, while that of those settled remains modest. The people's opinions and aspirations through the Fatherland Front and mass organizations have not been paid due attention to. These institutions operate as administrative agencies, while their function of representing the people is limited.

There are many factors influencing the effectiveness of grassroots democracy, such as the society's awareness, traditional customs, cultural values, legal system, social ethics as well as management mechanism. One of the salient factors is the lack of necessary institutions and effective sanctions in the implementation of democracy at the grassroots level. The next section of the paper will present some results of the latest social survey in Vietnam that can reflect the current situation of grassroots democracy.

### **3. Practical issues of implementing grassroots democracy: PAPI survey results**

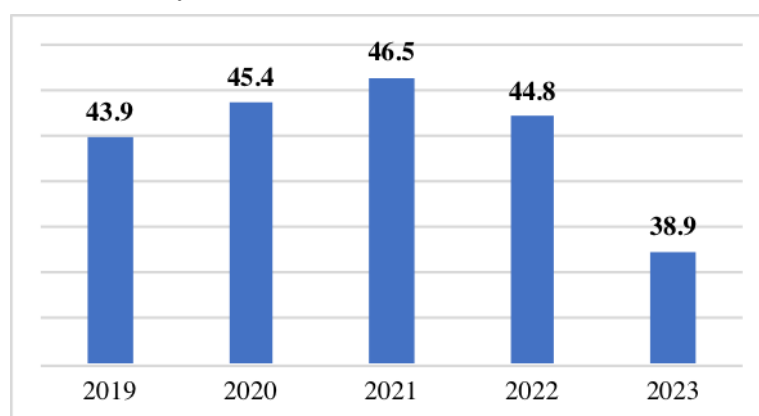
As reflected in its name, PAPI (provincial governance and public administration efficiency index) serves as a quantitative tool to help monitor the processes of policy implementation and supervision of public services related to the people's rights and life. PAPI aims to assess the administration, policy implementation, and provision of public services based on people's evaluations and experiences. It is the large-scale national survey conducted yearly in Vietnam, from 2009 until now, with the participation of 197,779 respondents (aged 18 and over).



The PAPI survey was conducted by the Center for Community Development Research and Support (CECODES) of the Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Vietnam, with the support of the Vietnam Fatherland Front. The latest PAPI survey was carried out in 2023 with 18,940 people (53.2% were women and 47.8% were men). Although it does not directly survey the topic of implementing grassroots democracy, the results can help assess the people's participation in implementing and supervising of public policies and laws. The following analysis is some results of the survey directly relating to the implementation of grassroots democracy.

Publicizing budget revenues and expenditure reports is an important task of commune-level authorities, stipulated in the 2015 Law on the State Budget and the 2022 Law on Implementation of Democracy at the Grassroots Level. The public posting of budget revenues and expenditures will contribute to preventing corruption and negative behaviors. Figure 1 shows a relatively low percentage of people in 2023 reporting that the local authorities had publicly posted the commune's budget revenue and expenditure (39%). For the period 2019-2022, between 44% and 47% of people reported that the budget revenue and expenditure statements of the communes where they live are publicly posted. Notably, this level decreased in 2023 to the lowest in the past five years, showing limitations in exercising the people's right to be informed and known about the activities of the local authority (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** Percentage of People Reporting that the Local Budget Revenue and Expenditure Is Publicly Posted



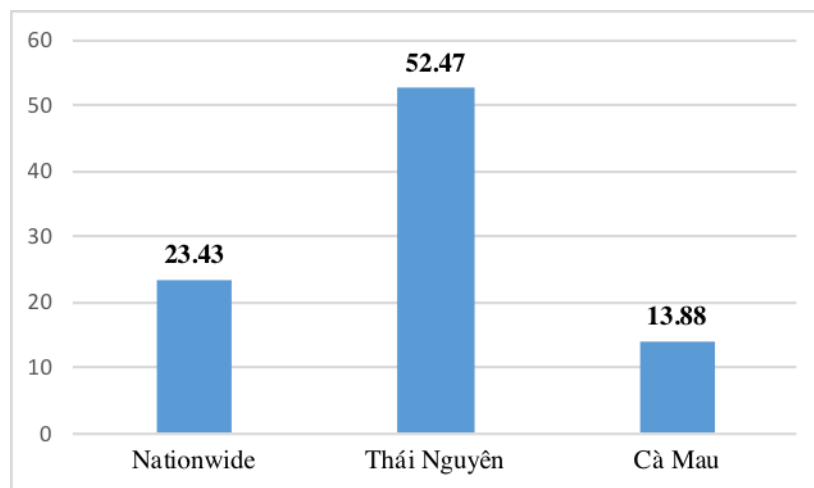
*Source:* PAPI survey data 2019-2023.

The above problem is also revealed by another indicator regarding the

Community Investment Supervision Board which is established by the commune-level Fatherland Front to carry out the investment supervision of programs and projects in the community. The Board has inspected construction works such as paved roads, irrigation systems, intra-rice field ditches, etc., thereby promptly detecting technical errors related to the quality of works and to recommend management agencies to promptly remedy the errors. The Board also has the bridging role of receiving information, comments and suggestions by the people, forwarding them to management agencies, and then informing of the results to the people.

Figure 2 shows that only 23.43% of the respondents know the activities of the Supervision Board. The locality with the highest percentage of people knowing is Thái Nguyên province (52.47%) and the lowest is Cà Mau province (13.88%). The indirect supervision of people in the implementation of public investment projects is still limited, requiring a more appropriate and effective supervision mechanism in localities today.

**Figure 2:** Percentage of People Knowing the Activity of the Community Investment Supervision Board, 2023

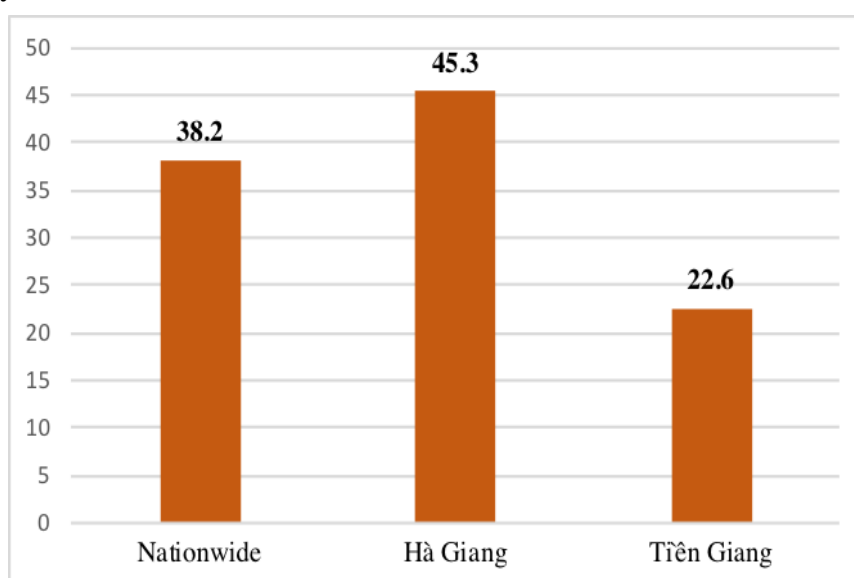


*Source:* 2023 PAPI survey.

A relatively low proportion (38.2%) of the people know the Law on the Implementation of Democracy at the Grassroots. There are also significant differences between localities. Figure 3 shows that Hà Giang is the province with the highest rate (45.3%) while Tiền Giang province is characterized by the lowest rate (22.6%) of all the 63 provinces and cities in Vietnam. The Law on the Implementation of Democracy at the Grassroots Level was enacted in 2022, but many people might be still unaware of it in 2023. However, the majority of people

are unaware of important legal documents such as the Law on Access to Information of 2016 and the Law on Corruption Control of 2018 even though these laws were promulgated many years before.

**Figure 3:** Percentage of People Knowing the Law on Grassroots Democracy, 2023

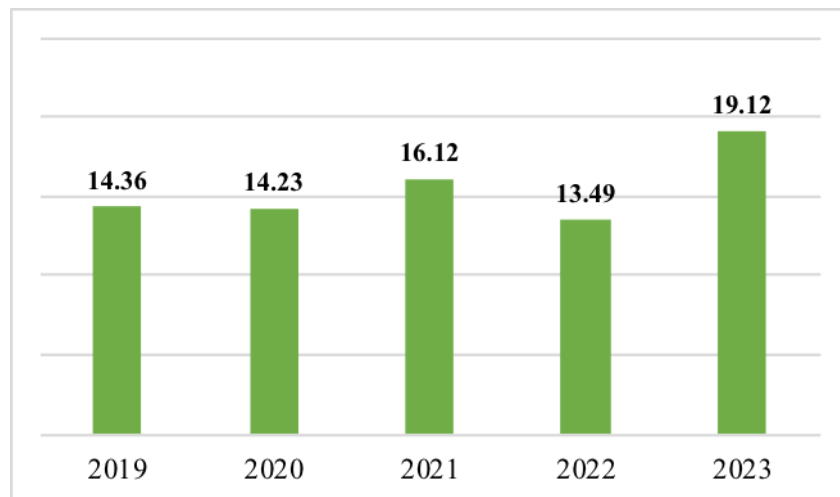


*Source:* 2023 PAPI survey.

The PAPI survey results reveal the shortcomings to be overcome in law propagation of law in general and of the Law on Implementation of Democracy at the Grassroots Level in particular. The people are still less proactive in learning about relevant laws and policies. Only 19% of the respondents actively seek information about state policies and laws (Figure 4). However, compared to previous years, this rate increased showing a positive tendency in raising people's awareness on their rights.

Ensuring the people's right to know is a premise to exercise their right to mastery through the implementation of information disclosure so that people can discuss and supervise. The fact that people have access to information will help improve their understanding and awareness, proactively and voluntarily implement policies and laws. Based on adequate information, people can promptly reflect and make suggestions to local authority and administrative agencies. These cannot stop at providing limited information in the way "say what we know", but it is always accompanied by the accountability. The authority's in-charge leading person must be responsible when information is not accurately or fully provided in accordance with law.

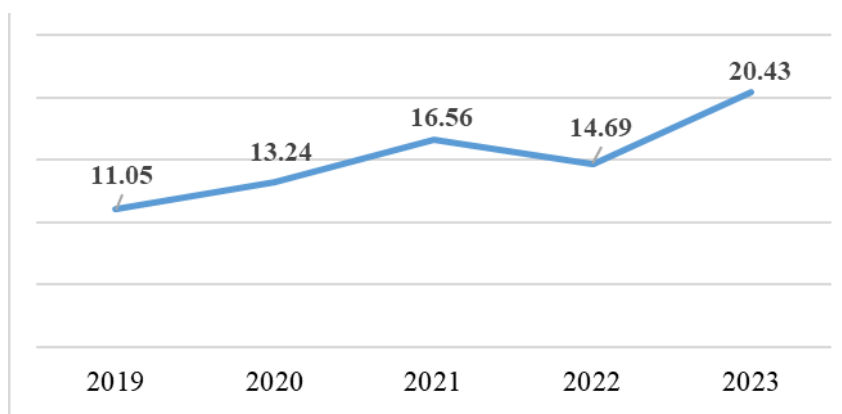
**Figure 4:** Percentage of People Actively Searching Online for Policies and Laws



*Source:* PAPI survey data 2019-2023.

Over the last years, e-government has been making an important step in Vietnam's administrative reform, enabling people to access and use public services irrespective of temporal and spatial distance. This provides an important basis for effective public administration, reducing cumbersome procedures, and promoting openness and transparency in the relationship between the public authority and the people.

**Figure 5:** Percentage of People Accessing Electronic Forms of Authentication on the Public Service Portal



*Source:* PAPI survey data 2019-2023.

The PAPI data show that the percentage of respondents who have access to electronic forms of authentication on the Public Service Portal tended to increase in recent years, albeit at a modest level (Figure 5). It is also essential to expand access to information, create opportunities for people to participate in a proactive and

effective way. Given the majority of people's access and connect to the internet at home or workplace, it is believed that in the upcoming years, the process of digital transformation and wide application of online public services will accelerate the administration reforms, giving great benefits to the people in Vietnam.

#### **4. Conclusion**

President Hồ Chí Minh pointed out: "Our country is a democratic country, the highest status belongs to the people because the people are the masters" (Hồ Chí Minh, 2011: 463). The importance of this viewpoint has been affirmed throughout the Party's Congresses. The Party's leadership plays a decisive role in organizing and promoting the people's right to mastery. The grassroots level is where people directly express their will and exercise their mastery. The level is also where the Party's directives and the State's policies are directly connected to the people. Grassroots democracy is a reflection of the people's position at the grassroots level, where they reside, live and exercise their rights to mastery and legitimate interests.

Implementing grassroots democracy is always associated with people's right to mastery. Over the past years, grassroots democracy has been expanded and improved. The people can discuss and decide on important matters associated with their rights and legitimate interests. Grassroots democracy has been expanded to ensure fairness and equality for the people. Throughout the revolutionary periods of Vietnam, our Party has always been deeply aware that it is a great mission to build a socialist democracy because democracy is both the goal and the driving force to realize the national target of making Vietnam a rich people, a strong country, a society of democracy, fairness and civilization. The cause of national development requires a full promotion of the people's right to mastery. If it is successfully done, democracy will become a universal key to solve all difficulties.

Implementing the people's right to mastery at the grassroots is actually to execute the motto "people know, people discuss, people undertake, people inspect, people supervise, people benefit". It is a method of promoting the people's right to mastery in accordance with the Constitution and law. The Party's leadership is a key factor for ensuring the people's power. Given the important roles of the grassroots, democracy must be implemented at the grassroots-level. The Law on Implementation of Democracy at the Grassroots Level promulgated in 2022 by the National Assembly meets the people's will and aspirations. It provides an important legal base to strengthen democratic institutions at the grassroots level and realizes the people's right to mastery, specifying the provisions of the 2013 Constitution on the people's right to mastery.

The Law on the Implementation of the Grassroots-level Democracy contains many new points, which can be perfected by doing and learning from practice. It is therefore important to research, apply and implement the Law effectively in the time to come. The motto “people know, people discuss, people undertake, people supervise” continually requires further specific guidelines to timely overcome shortcomings in the implementation of democracy at the grassroots level. The PAPI survey results revealed that the information from public authority was not well informed of, and the people’s proactive participation is still limited. The transparency and consultation with the people have not been improved in the domains of land use, environmental protection, and public expenditure. The Fatherland Front and mass organizations not only have the tasks of mobilizing their members, but also must do a good job of representing the people’s legitimate interests.

It is of utmost importance to strengthen the Party’s leadership and the State’s role of management in the implementation of grassroots democracy so that power really belongs to the people. All policies must really come from the people’s aspirations, rights and legitimate interests. In addition, it is necessary to build a team of state cadres with quality, morality, and fairness in performing public tasks. In the years to come, the quality and efficiency of the People’s Councils and People’s Committees must be improved to promote the people’s right to mastery through grassroots democracy. Agencies and individuals who infringe democracy, hamper the people’s right to mastery, or take advantage of democracy to undermine socio-political stability must be strictly punished.

Implementing grassroots democracy is an urgent task today. Enhancing publicity and transparency is a necessary condition for implementing grassroots democracy to promote social consensus, helping the people exercise their right to mastery in all domains of life. It is primary to diversify the format and mechanism of receiving critical opinions from the people. This includes expanding the spheres of information access, and providing opportunities for the people to participate in the public affairs in a proactive, practical and effective way. It is necessary to strengthen inspection and supervision in implementing grassroots democracy, effectively promote the role of the Fatherland Front and mass organizations, closely coordinate with the authority to mobilize the people’s participation in the supervision activities. In order to effectively implement grassroots democracy, it is very necessary for the Fatherland Front and mass organizations to hold dialogue with the authority to react and respond to the people’s opinions and legitimate requests. By focusing on critical, sensitive or pressing issues right at the grassroots level, the Fatherland Front and mass organizations will be able to represent the people and undertake supervision role at the grassroots.

It is concurrently crucial to transfer from superficial (i.e. not substantive) democracy to substantive democracy at the grassroots to promote the people's right to mastery in a substantive way. In particular, the people can exercise their right to mastery to supervise public agencies, cadres and civil servants in the performance of their duties, preventing corruption and abuse of power. This requires to build a transparent, responsible, fair and honest civil service and a team of professional cadres, civil servants and public employees with ethics, diligence, thrift, integrity, impartiality and selflessness. In the context of digital transformation and artificial intelligence (AI) technology, it is needed to actively promote e-government, openness and transparency, strengthening the dialogue between the government and the people.

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