

# SOCIAL CAPITAL AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN VIETNAM

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# **SOCIAL CAPITAL AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN VIETNAM**

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## **Introduction**

For the last few decades, we have come to understand the importance of social capital, alongside human, financial and physical capital, in explaining the economic and social progress of societies. Social capital has been nurtured by social relations and solidarity regardless of class, gender, religion, and geographical characteristics as an investment for not only individual benefits but a common good. It has also contributed to the improved performance of diverse groups, the expansion of entrepreneurial firms, the evolution of communities, and governance.

However, insufficient attention has been given to issues of local governance in the social capital literature. In response to indispensability of decentralization and emerging issues of local democracy, local authorities have been empowered and improved their capacity for governance. While effective governance building needs a broad social participation and civic engagement, which indicate a comprehensive participatory policy process by different organizations, the challenge is to develop the new institutions and activities that bring people together and foster trust and cooperation.

This paper, therefore, aims firstly to discuss the impact of social capital on the capability of local governments, in the perspective of governance in Vietnam. The paper is conceptual in nature and relies on a conceptual model that builds on and synthesizes the theoretical foundations of social capital (cognitive and structural) and good local governance. Secondly, it will explore the sources for better performance of local governance in Vietnam and to what extent this improvement is attributed to social capital.

The analysis of this paper will depend heavily on the Vietnam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI). This is the largest time-series national governance and public administration performance monitoring tool in Vietnam since 2009 and exclusively based on citizen experiences. In order to ensure the statistical significance of

the analysis, the time frame for this paper will be set in 2013-2017 for the appropriate sample size of PAPI.

In addition, provincial information such as area, poverty rate, etc. are taken from the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, and Provincial Competitiveness Index (PCI) provided by Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI).

### **What is Social capital?**

Social capital has recently gained enormous academic interest though it appeared to be in use hundreds of years ago. Social capital was irregularly mentioned since 1890s and first termed in a number of academic works, such as Dewey (1899) and Hanifan (1916) (1920), with regards to social cohesion and personal investment in community.

The term was used more frequently in 1960s-1970s, and its concept was clarified and developed in contrast with cultural, economic, and symbolic capital in Bourdieu (1972) (1986). From Bourdieu's perspective, social capital is considered as a resource in the context of social struggles for individual benefits. Coleman (1988), however, saw social capital in a form of cooperation between individuals to find better ways of making possible the achievement of certain ends.

Nevertheless, not until Putnam (1993) the concept of social capital gained its significant popularity. Putnam offered a definition of social capital as features of social organizations, such as networks, norms and social trust, which enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives (Putnam 1995). Trust, therefore, promotes reciprocity and forms voluntary associations, which in turn fortify and produce trust (Putnam, 1993). While this approach is in line with Coleman's, it is almost oppositional to Bourdieu's where trust does not stand for strengthening social values and solidarity but interest conflicts.

Sharing the commons with both the views of Putnam (1995) and Coleman (1988), Ostrom (1994) inheres theory of collective action considered trustworthiness as a form of social capital and the key element to facilitate collective action. In fact, all forms of groups aim to achieve cooperative ends. Collective actions are often analyzed as actions contribute to the development of the community in various domains – such as economic, education, or sanitation. From that viewpoint, participation to collective actions can be interpreted as a proxy for the degree of social integration within the community of the household.

In the same line of thought, social capital refers to the institutions, relationships and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interaction, according to World Bank

(UN 2006). Another definition, proposed by UNDP (1997) defined social capital as the features of social organization - such as networks and values, including tolerance, inclusion, reciprocity, participation and trust - that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Social capital inheres in the relations between and among actors.

The strength of Putnam's approach lies in the way in which it seeks to combine different aspects of the social capital, as social trust (Coleman, 1990 and Fukuyama, 1995), social networks (Bourdieu, 1986) and outcomes (Coleman, 1990). In *Bowling Alone*, while discussing the decline of social capital in the US, Putnam advocates a positive role for urban governance in promoting social capital (1995). With the Putnam's concept, the linkage between social capital and civil society is the key of the matter. Social capital as a factor of local development refers broadly to characteristics of social structures, and able to reinforce democratic engagement in public services, particularly in social and rural development (Putnam, 1993). Without social capital, civil society may be less possible to directly engage in or indirectly involve provision of public services.

Fukuyama (1999) also argues that social capital is important to the efficient functioning of modern economies. The modern societies, by contrast with the traditional one, consist of a large number of overlapping social groups that permit multiple memberships and identities. In modern societies, there are more opportunities for what Granovetter (1973) calls "weak ties" among the segments.

The analysis of social networks as a form of social capital is essentially due to Bourdieu (1986) and largely recognize by Coleman (1990). The main ideas about social capital are that social networks have value and participation seems to be the key to creating the social capital within communities.

The methodology of this paper is rather based on the definition of the OECD, in which Social Capital is defined as "networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups" (OECD, 2001).

Although there have been different definitions of social capital, the common comprehension of concept is the arrangement of human resources to improve flows of future income, not only by the number or quantity of connections, but also by the quality of those connections and how they are utilized. There is consensus among scholars that social capital includes: 1) Cognitive elements: norms and values; and 2) Structural elements: rules and institutions. These elements are explored as below:

- Cognitive elements: norms of trust and reciprocity that make people to cooperate understand and empathize with each other. Trust is the community's shared expectation of regular, honest, and cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms. And reciprocity leads to more cooperative and well-functioning societies. Reciprocity is the supposition that individuals will repay what another person has provided them;
- Structural elements: formal and informal associations or organizations, as well as networks and relationships that facilitate coordination and cooperation.

Cognitive and structural forms of social capital are inter-connected and reinforcing each other. For example, participation in associations can facilitate the development of shared trust and reciprocity. In the other, shared norms and values support cooperation and coordination in the context may promote conflict or competition within association.

Scrivens and Smith (2013) proposed four distinct interpretations of social capital, as follows:

- Personal relationships: structure of people's networks and the social behaviors that contribute to establishing and maintaining those networks;
- Social network support: outcome of the nature of people's personal relationships, and refers to the resources that are available to each individual through their personal social networks;
- Civic engagement: activities and networks through which people contribute to civic and community life, such as membership and different forms of community action;
- Trust and cooperative norms: trust, social norms and shared values that underpin societal functioning and enable mutually beneficial cooperation.

### **Social capital in Vietnam**

This paper proposes an aggregated index of social capital built with regard to individual involvement in social activities. We instrument for social capital through the cognitive and structural forms of social capital that have been suggested above. The underlying theoretical hypothesis is that the combination of sources generates a complex social capital indicator.

- Interpersonal and relationships: time living in commune and/or district;
- Social network support: Participation in informal groups and activities (numbers of informal groups that people are member);

- Civic engagement: Participation in local governments and organizations, including 3 sub-dimensions: 1) member of the Party; 2) member of local council and 3) member of mass organizations;

- Finally: trust in presentative governance and institutions is including 4 sub-dimensions: 1) trust in economic status; 2) trust in local securities; 3) trust in community and 4) trust in governments;

The result is showed as follows:

**Table 1. Average social capital of households by year**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of observe</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard deviation</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>	<b>Median</b>
2013	13,803	47.04	9.01	10.00	79.93	47.40
2014	13,428	47.71	9.12	8.89	79.67	47.78
2015	13,760	48.00	9.81	5.56	79.93	47.78
2016	13,843	48.77	9.94	12.36	79.97	48.33
2017	13,839	50.59	9.29	11.67	79.94	50.83

*Source: Authors' calculations based on the PAPI data*

Table 1 show that both the mean and median scores increased over the period 2013-2017, from 47 to 50 in 100 scales. It reflects the accumulation of social capital in the society. However, the value is relatively low (under 50/100). Meanwhile, the increasing standard deviation (until 2016) also indicates the social capital gap is widening.

**Table 2. Dimensions of social capital**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Interpersonal and relationships</b>	<b>Social network support</b>	<b>Civic engagement</b>	<b>Trust</b>
2013	98.54	18.22	4.77	78.70
2014	98.72	21.18	5.38	78.83
2015	99.00	20.78	7.60	78.07
2016	98.87	24.45	7.67	78.74
2017	99.09	33.19	7.73	79.80

*Source: Authors' calculations based on the PAPI data*

As shown in Table 2, Civic engagement scored least amongst four dimensions, indicating that the participation in public governance and organizations is an insignificant contributing factor to the social capital of households. Nevertheless, it does not mean this dimension is not important but rather the small proportion of households having members holding leadership in government agencies.

On the contrary, the greatest contribution to the enhancement of social capital is interpersonal and relationships. Also, the participation in informal groups and activities tends to increase both in value and in its significance to social capital but its absolute value remains low.

Trust is a component that contributes significantly to social capital but the value tends to fix. This reflects the fact that the confidence factor among the Vietnamese households is stable. Therefore, this dimension will be of the focus in the following section.

**Table 3. Components of “trust”**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Trust in the family economic security</b>	<b>Trust in local security</b>	<b>Trust in community</b>	<b>Trust in governments of all levels</b>	<b><i>Trust</i></b>
2013	74.84	87.57	45.65	85.25	<i>78.64</i>
2014	75.82	89.03	42.00	85.05	<i>78.73</i>
2015	72.96	89.66	45.31	83.34	<i>77.93</i>
2016	75.36	89.98	41.06	83.08	<i>78.57</i>
2017	75.20	91.06	45.61	83.21	<i>79.61</i>

*Source: Authors’ calculations based on the PAPI data*

Information on the components of “trust” is provided in Table 3 where trust in local security and trust in governments are the top scorers. Nevertheless, there is an adverse tendency in the development of these two components. While there was higher level of belief in local security, the confidence of people in governments seemed to decrease.

The confidence in the household economic security remained stable over time, contributing an average of 1.9 points to the total score of trust. The trust in community, on the other hand, scored least at 1.1 points on average.

The next step is to analyze the factors affecting social capital at household level.

The household characteristics include 1) living area (urban/rural); 2) household living (or not) under poverty and 3) occupation of the respondents.

**Table 4. Factors affecting social capital at household level**

	<b>Score of social capital</b>
Rural	-1.743 (21.15)**
Poor	-3.625 (30.56)**
Year (base: 2013)	
2014	1.032 (9.37)**
2015	0.786 (5.80)**
2016	2.512 (21.43)**
2017	4.943 (44.54)**
Ethnic of head household (Base: Non-Kinh)	
Non-Kinh	-0.889 (8.37)**
Gender of head household (base: Male)	
Female	-0.778 (9.81)**
Job of Head household (Base: Skilled job)	
Owned business	-2.202 (19.68)**
No job or non-income job	-0.057 (-0.53)
Hanoi	-0.248 (-1.32)
_cons	51.923 (525.09)**
F statistic	437.2
Adjusted R-squared	0.06

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$



The regression results show the residence does affect social capital although there is not really significant difference between urban and rural areas. Under the same conditions with the confidence level of 95%, the social capital of rural households scored 1.7 points lower than that of urban households.

Social capital is also subjected to the economic status of households. At 0.01 significance level, a poor household scored on average 3.62 point less than a non-poor household.

The occupation of the household head is another factor affecting the household social capital. With skilled job as base, the household head having owned business scored a social capital index relatively lower.

Social capital is also affected by other characteristics of the household head such as ethnicity and sex. Regression results show that 99% households of ethnic minority have lower social capital than Kinh households. Similarly, households with female head have lower social capital than male head.

The coefficients of the dummy variables (Year) are statistically significant, with 2013 as the basis, for subsequent years all have larger slope ratios. This implies that, along with the development of the country, the social capital of the household is increasingly improved over time.

Since Hanoi is distinguished with special features being the capital city of the country, it is important to evaluate whether they have impact on social capital or not using dummy variable. The model results show that the slope of this variable is statistically significant at 0.248 but negative (-). However, this coefficient is not statistically significant in the model, so it is impossible to conclude whether or not the difference between Hanoi and other localities in social capital.

Finally, the variables in the model account for about 6% of the variation in social capital at the individual level. This rate is quite low because there are many other factors affecting the social capital of a household that were not included in the model due to the absence of statistics. Nevertheless, the rate is still acceptable.

### **Social capital and Local governance in Vietnam**

In its 1997 policy paper, UNDP defined governance as “the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country’s affairs at all levels. It comprises the mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their

interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences” (UNDP 1997).

Hence, local governance is a practical field for citizen participation. It is clearly to see the expansion of social capital as part of the rationale for designing institutions to enhance participation. By providing opportunities for participation, the institutional design of local governance may influence prospects for the formation of new groups and new stocks of social capital. In reverse, development of social capital is an effective way to strengthen local governance. Social capital perspective reports that civil society has sufficient resources or capabilities to effectively implement the civic engagement. Notion of social capital make local governance more practical in reinforcing civil society organizations performance.

In Vietnam, like other traditional Asian societies, influenced by Confucian culture, the importance of social capital was early recognized, even before the concept gained popularity in the West. However, the traditional idea of social capital emphasizes mostly on the individual aspect rather than the collective one. It is often understood in terms of the social resources within social networks that one can access and utilize. Until recently that the collective level of the social capital has caught little attention.

On literature, the benefits of social capital in Vietnam are focus rather on its economic function than political. The economic function of social capital is to reduce the transactions costs associated with markets, hierarchies and networks in the society. However, its political function in a modern democracy related to civil society issue. According to Fukuyama (1999) by citing *Democracy in America* (Tocqueville, 1835), only by coming together in civil associations that weak individuals became strong. Through associations, people could participate in political life.

The literature on social capital describes the importance of networks, relationships and trust in encouraging cooperation; however, it has rarely examined whether social capital impacts the performance of governance institutions. According to Putnam (2000), “citizens in civic communities... demand more effective public service, and they are prepared to act collectively to achieve their shared goals... On the supply side, the performance of representative government is considerably facilitated by the social infrastructure of civic communities and by the democratic values of both officials and citizens”. Trust, a form of social capital, can increase citizen participation in groups and networks that help them identify common priorities and more effectively voice their demands. When citizens are able to clearly articulate their demands, they are better able to target, advocate for and monitor the improvement of government services, increasing accountability. At the local levels, building

relationships and trust leads to increased citizen engagement and more responsive governance.

Social capital helps individual first act collectively and begin to develop a voice. Then, bridging social capital amplifies citizen voice when several groups aggregate together. And finally, linking social capital connects citizen voices with government officials and others who can influence decision-making.

The quality of local governance at the provincial level is usually measured by the Local Governance Performance Index (LGPI). The LGPI is a tool that aims to help countries collect, assess, and benchmark detailed information around issues of local and public sector performance and service delivery to citizens and businesses. The LGPI is based on the premise that local governance matters, and that the drivers that explain local level variation may differ from those that operate at higher levels. The Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI)<sup>1</sup>, which was implemented in Viet Nam, also inspired development of the LGPI. Along the same line of work, PAPI used experiences with such issues as corruption, participation, transparency and service delivery to develop governance indices aggregated at the provincial level.

Factors influencing the quality of public administration management in Vietnam include variables that reflect local characteristics such as area, population, local GDP and, as noted above, social capital is also a factor affecting the quality of local public administration. In addition, empirical evidence (annual PAPI survey results) shows that the quality of public administration is improved over the time, so the Year variable is also included in the model.

To increase the practical significance of the model, the authors use the rgdp and population ranking instead of the usual logarithm. With the database available for the period of 2013-2016, on the national scale, the total number of observations is 250.

The regression results are as follows (table 5):

Social capital has a positive impact on the quality of public administration at the provincial level. With a coefficient of 11.27 (statistically significant at 99%), on average, a 1 point increase in social capital would increase the quality of governance by nearly 0.49 point, which is a significant impact.

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<sup>1</sup>CECODES, VFF-CRT & UNDP (2012-2018) The Viet Nam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI): Measuring Citizens' Experience. URL: [www.papi.org.vn](http://www.papi.org.vn).

**Table 5. Estimation of impact factors on local governance**

	<b>PAPI</b>
sci	0.488 (11.27)***
rank_pop	0.010 (1.82)*
rank_rgdg	-0.024 (3.64)***
ln_area	-0.114 (0.77)
poor	-0.042 (2.04)**
Year (base: 2013)	
2014	-0.722 (3.41)***
2015	-1.661 (6.97)***
2016	-2.465 (5.29)***
_cons	14.991 (5.92)***
F statistic	24.7
Adjusted R-squared	0.475

\* p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

The rank\_pop variable has a positive effect on the quality of public administration at the local level with the significance of 90% and a slope coefficient relatively small (0.01). This implies that provinces with larger population size have better administration than provinces with sparsely population. This is quite understandable given the condition of Vietnam, where the population is often concentrated in the delta, rather than mountainous areas.

The rank\_rgdg has a negative impact on the quality of public administration, implying that provinces with more active economic activity (represented by larger rgdp) will face to more challenges in term of local governance.

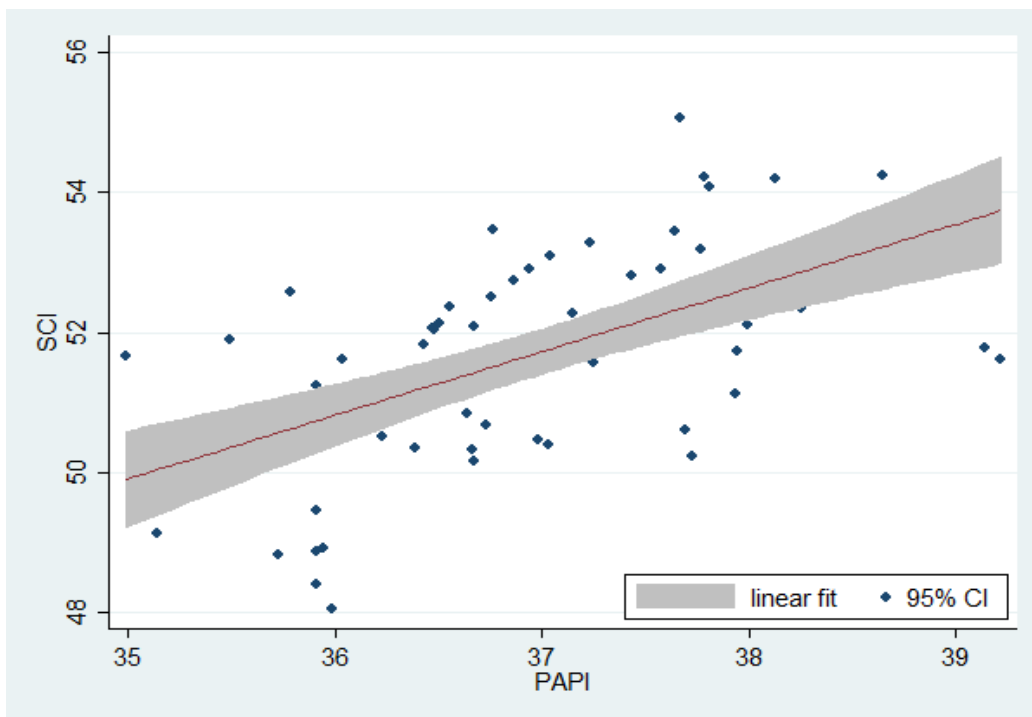
Unlike the two factors above, the model does not show the effect of local area on the quality of public administration because the coefficient of  $\ln\_area$  variable is not statistically significant.

Poverty affects the dependent variable at 95% of signification but vice versa. The implication of this coefficient is that localities with a high percentage of poverty tend to have better quality public administration. This may have other implication that the poverty reduction effort will give the local government better recognition of the people.

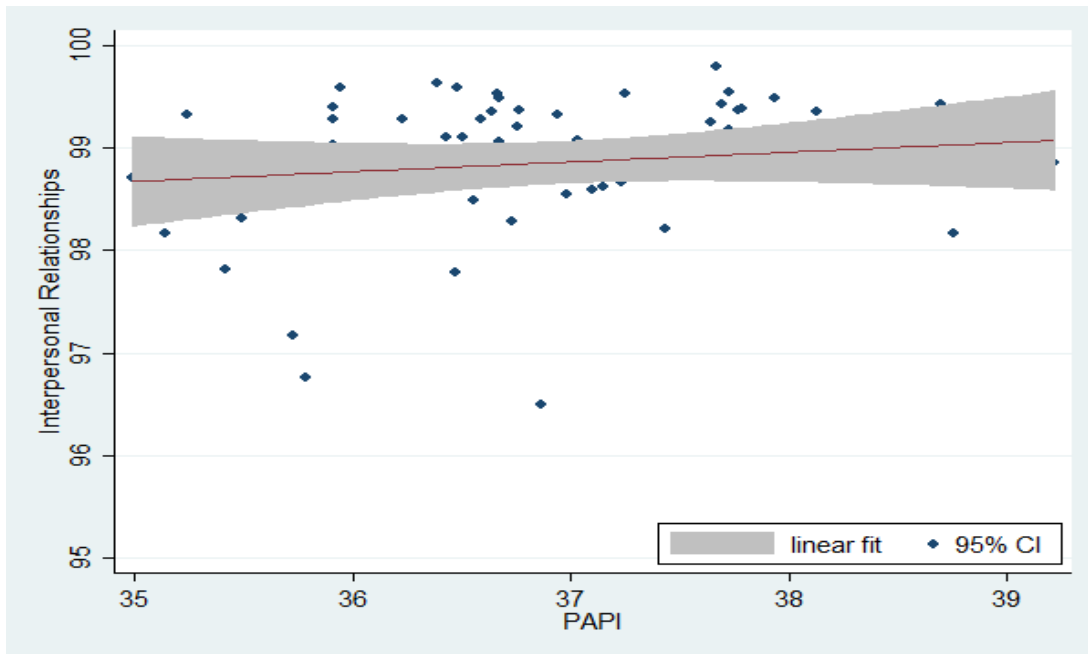
Finally, dummy variables (year) are statistically significant with negative slope coefficients with increasing magnitudes. This implies that the quality of public administration in Vietnam has actually improved over time. This shows that the government has really made efforts to improve the quality of work.

The following figures show the correlation between PAPI index and social capital index and its components:

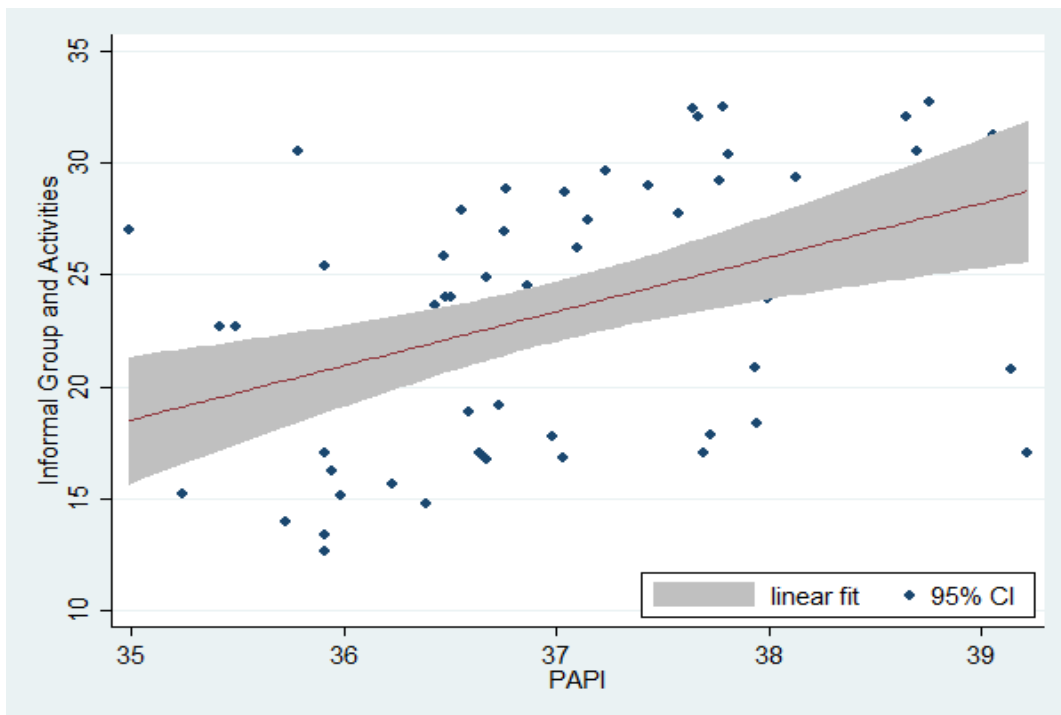
**Figure 1. Correlation between PAPI and SCI**



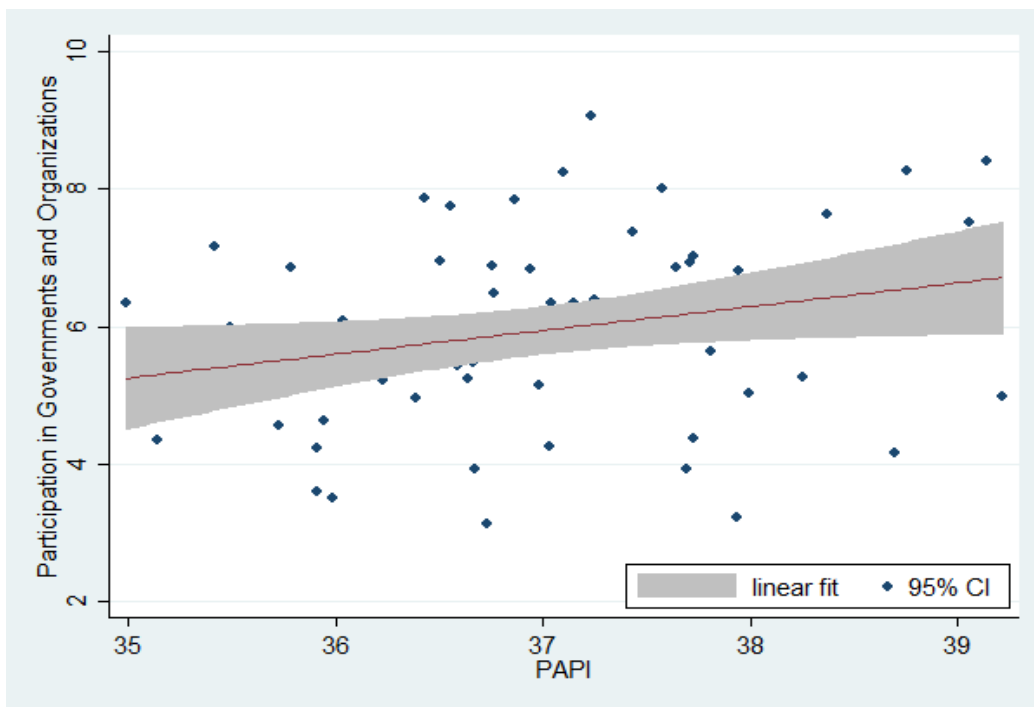
**Figure 2. Correlation between PAPI and Interpersonal relationships**



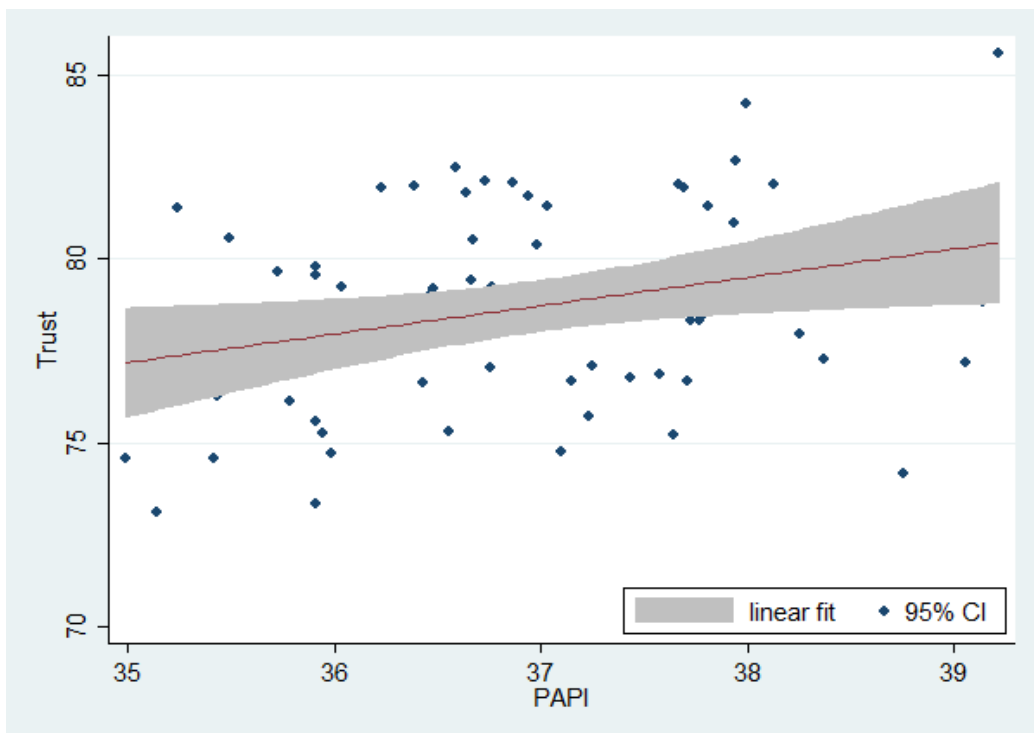
**Figure 3. Correlation between PAPI and Social network support**



**Figure 4. Correlation between PAPI and Civic engagement**



**Figure 5. Correlation between PAPI and Trust**



The figures reflect that all 4 components of social capital index have positive correlation with PAPI, but only SC1 and SC4 components have relatively strong correlation (Figure 2 and 5).

## **Local governance and local participation in Vietnam**

The section above showed the lowest score of participation in both formal and informal organizations components into the social capital index. This section tends to develop this issue for more in detail.

The concept of local governance relates to democratic value by emphasizing the partnership between local government institutions and other non-state actors such as civil society organizations, for the purpose of participatory, transparent, accountable and equitable service delivery and local development. Civil society is a vital component of governance and decentralization. It should be noted also, however, that while civil society is an independent agent, it does not necessarily have to be in opposition to the State, especially if the latter practices good governance (UN 2006).

The rising global trend toward democratization has increased the demand of civil society organizations' involvement in the policy formulation process. In developing countries, civil society organizations play an important role in the implementation of the policies that are formulated by the local government, especially those that deal with rural development and poverty alleviation.

According to UN (2006), civil society organizations take on various roles and responsibilities, among them supplementing the functions normally performed by political parties such as interest articulation and popular mobilization, recruiting and training new political leaders and disseminating information and holding Governments accountable.

The involvement of civil society organizations in policy issues will increase the grassroots democracy and making local government accountable. Their involvement is necessary since they can provide information that is needed for the development of policies. On the contrary, they play a vital role in strengthening local capacities and structures for public participation. This involvement is to ensure not only those policies are appropriate to the needs of the people, but also that policies are enacted and implemented.

For a very long time, Viet Nam had not recognized civil society as an independent sphere from the party-state. Only after massive reforms in 1980s (known also as *Doi Moi*) which marked a new period of opening-up and tremendous foreign investment, international and non-government organizations (NGOs) began their operations in the country. Vietnamese local NGOs have also existed, although they are only a small part of the civil society.



It is important to keep in mind that as a single-party ruling state, civil society in Vietnam remains a sensitive issue, on which domestic publications are limited or likely found absent. The only sources for the debate of civil society organizations in Vietnam is related studies from abroad and from international institutions and none-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The legal framework for all types of civil society organizations is the Grassroots Democracy Decree No.29 in 1998, and latter upgraded to Ordinance No.34 in 2007, which aim to enable participatory development processes with the inclusion of the local population. Under GDO, four main democratic dimensions are addressed: people have the right to be informed; to discuss; to monitor and to supervise certain policies or programs at the local level. Several studies explore the role of civil society in encouraging people to participate in socioeconomic and development policies and programs (Wischermann 2010; Kerkvliet et al. 2008).

Nonetheless, except the party-state affiliated organizations, other civil society organizations have a minimal impact on local governance, while mass organizations have strong grassroots links and large memberships.

It is noteworthy also that mass organizations are not fit within some definitions of civil society because they are party-state sponsored and its membership can come through public sector employment. Through the mass organizations, the party and the state conducted people's mobilization. However, mass organizations have become increasingly independent since the renovation.

## **Conclusion**

Given evidence that social capital contributes to economic advancement and social cooperation, this research has shown that it also improves the quality of the local governance. In order to improve the social capital at household level, the participation into organizations (both formal and informal) should be promoted.

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