



Article

# The National Target Program for New Rural Development in Vietnam: An Understanding of People's Participation and Its Determinants

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**Abstract:** This study proposes a participation scale of people in the national new rural program, namely the levels of know, discuss, implement, and monitor identifies participation and their determinants by employing Tobit regression models. From a dataset of 508 household respondents collected in seven regions across countries, we find that the highest level of participation is still at the level of know, while the lowest level is at the level of monitor. Additionally, in some areas of the program, people are mobilized to participate in certain activities, even though they do not have a good understanding nor thoroughly discuss how to carry it out. Considering the findings, we recommend increasing the active participation of the people in the bottom-up approach, associated with the practical needs of the people and the program's sustainability.

**Keywords:** new rural; participation; top-down; democracy



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## 1. Introduction

Vietnam has gained impressive results in economic growth and poverty reduction in recent years, despite the existing development gap between urban and rural areas [1]. To narrow the gap, initiatives such as the National Target Program (NTP) for New Rural Development have been introduced. After being piloted in 2008 in eleven provinces and cities, including Dien Bien, Bac Giang, Nam Dinh, Ha Tinh, Quang Nam, Lam Dong, Binh Phuoc, Tra Vinh, Kien Giang, Ha Noi city, and Ho Chi Minh City, the NTP for New Rural Development has undergone several phases with major modifications, including assessment criteria. In the period of 2009–2011, the program was piloted at the commune level, directly supervised by the Party Central Committee's Secretariat. During the next phase, the Government issued Decision 800/QD-TTg approving the National Target Program for New Rural Development for the 2010–2020 period and its being implemented nationwide. From 2010 up to now, NTP the criteria for New Rural Development have been adjusted and specific targets have been applied for each region of the country. After two decades from its birth, the program is planned to transform into the next phase. To provide valuable input for the following phase, it is crucial to review results, success stories, limitations, and setbacks in the previous phase with a strong emphasis on the role of stakeholders and the levels of people's participation in the program implementation.

As shown in the completed phase's report, the participation of the people is assessed by their specific contributions to the program activities. For example, a set of indicators were applied to quantify the resources mobilized by the people to implement the program [2], as clearly communicated at the wrap-up conference for the ten-year period chaired by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Like other community programs, besides the main contribution from the state budget, people's participation is both a direct source of contribution to the program and ensures

their involvement and the sustainability of the program. For this program, people's contributions can be expressed through specific activities such as donating land for traffic works and cash contributions for activities directly related to their households. Accordingly, during the 2016–2018 period, of the total mobilized amount of 820,964 billion VND nationwide, the contribution from the people accounted for about 6.9 percent (56,799 billion VND). In addition, the contribution of enterprises amounted to 4.81 percent. If the contribution from the enterprises is also combined, the contribution from the people would represent 11.71 percent [2], while the remaining contributions are from the state budget. In addition to the in-kind contribution, people's contribution is indirectly shown through their participation in other dimensions such as building socioeconomic infrastructure, production development, livelihood improvement of rural people, sociocultural development, environmental management, and the improvement of the political and defense–security system in localities.

From a research perspective, although there is still a debate about the impact of social capital and citizen participation on economic growth in terms of the economy as a whole [3], a number of studies have shown that citizen participation contributes to sustainable development in specific programs and projects [4]. For agricultural and rural development in Vietnam, the dynamic of the local government is an essential factor affecting the results of the new rural program development [5]. However, in most activities, people are still the main actors with direct rights and interests [6–8]. In the new rural program of Vietnam, the key role of the local community is essential, whereas the state plays the role of orientation, promulgates criteria, standards, policies, support mechanisms, staff training, and implementation guidance. Specific activities are democratically discussed, planned, and conducted by communities at village and commune levels. Based on the available theories and practices across the globe, Tran [9] proposed an analytical framework for sustainable rural development in Vietnam that can be employed to review the approach of the NTP for New Rural Development. The author argued that to ensure sustainable rural development, four pillars should be strengthened, including economics, society-culture, environment, and institution. In addition, the bottom-up approach, which considers the rural community as the driver of the development process, is a crucial element of sustainable development in combination with the direction of the government.

The participation of people in the new rural program also varies in each minor criterion or dimension. The levels of participation may include know (people are informed or known about new rural activities), discuss (people are involved in the process of discussion and planning for specific activities), implementation (people participate in implementation, contribute labor, land, and material for specific activities), and monitor (people participate in monitoring the implementation and results). In some localities, the participation of people at the know, discuss, implement, and monitor levels can positively affect their contributions [10]. For example, the study of Doan [11] showed that in some Northern mountainous areas, people took part in the program at various levels, from attending meetings (but not being allowed to make a decision), participating in the decision-making process, engaging in the implementation, to being involved in project management and maintenance. This finding indicates that people's participation positively impacts the quality and efficiency of resources mobilized for infrastructure construction because it helps to reduce the investment costs from the state, contributes to ensuring the quality of the program, and meets the needs of the locals.

However, in some other localities, the participation of people in the NTP for New Rural Development remains superficial compared with their potential. In localities where the program was piloted and received remarkable investment from the authorities at all levels, successful examples of the people's participation are reported. In the meantime, some localities have a high number of communes being unqualified for the standards.

The subjective role of farmers and the proactive strength of the grassroots communities have not been emphasized. Because the propaganda to mobilize the people has not been done well, the motto “farmer is the subject” has not been fully understood and implemented.

In some cases, people have not become positively involved in the program but relied on the support of the state. In some places, there are signs of abuse of people's contributions and rights in carrying out public tasks [12]. A survey carried out by the IPSARD showed that only 68.1% of the households reported having the right to a voice on the new rural planning, plans, and schemes of the localities; only 55% of households said that they had the right to comment on the selection of works and projects; and 66.9% of the households said they had the right to supervise the implementation of new rural projects. There were cases where the interviewees in communes which were already qualified for the new rural standard did not know that the communes had met the new rural standard [13].

To summarize, the new rural program plays a very important role in rural development in Vietnam. The program has received massive investments from the budget and mobilizes the participation of the people in many different forms. However, the level of participation may differ from place to place, stemming from different characteristics. Therefore, it leads to challenges in the sustainability of the program. In this context, the participation of people, regardless of how diverse and significant it could be, would certainly be the determinant for the success of the program.

From the above-mentioned literature, this study is conducted to evaluate the participation of people in the NTP for New Rural Development in selected localities nationwide. The study also aims to understand the factors affecting the participation levels of the people and propose policies to enhance their participation toward the sustainability of the program.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

### 2.1. Participation Concept

Although the obvious role of participation in the development process has been recognized in history [14], there is no common definition of participation in studies and theories of participation. Since the concept of participation and empowerment is not clearly defined, it creates confusion about the expectations and assessment of the performance of participatory development processes. However, views seem to agree that participation relates to decision-making [15].

Based on a wide range of perspectives, Rifkin et al. [16] (p. 933) defined participation as "a social process whereby specific groups with shared needs living in a defined geographic area actively pursue identification of their needs, take decisions and establish mechanisms to meet these needs". White [17] (p. 3) argued that the basic requirement of participation is "by involvement of local population actively in the decision-making concerning development projects or in their implementation". Price and Mylius [18] (p. 6) emphasized the importance of participation at all stages and levels of participation as "Participation means the involvement of intended beneficiaries in the planning, design, implementation and subsequent maintenance of the development intervention. It means that people are mobilized, manage resources, and make decisions that affect their lives". Among the above definitions, we find that the following definition by Kelly et al. [19] is closely relevant to the context of this study. According to Kelly et al. [19] (p. 15), "participation is a range of processes through which local communities are involved and play a role in issues which affect them. The extent to which power is shared in decision-making varies according to the type of participation". In the NTP for New Rural Development in Vietnam, the local community includes many stakeholders such as the local government, organizations, businesses, and households. Their participation is reflected in the knowledge, discussion, implementation, and monitoring processes. From the Vietnamese government's point of view, the people are the subject of the program, together with the local government, to make democratic decisions in accordance with the needs of the local community, through diverse participation.

### 2.2. Types of Participation

Stakeholders can take part in each process of the program at various levels. Different approaches to identify different forms of participation exist. Arnstein [20] proposed the

idea of the Ladder of Citizen Participation, which depicted the various levels of citizen participation. This ladder is divided into eight levels, ranging from low to high levels of engagement, including (1) manipulation, (2) therapy, (3) informing, (4) consultation, (5) placation, (6) partnership, (7) delegated power, and (8) citizen control. The author argued that the level of participation changes and progresses with eight different levels, from passive participation through to manipulation (level 1) or therapy (level 2), to dominance in the decision-making process and having control. Furthermore, although people's voices are heard through informing (level 3), consultation (level 4), or placation (level 5), the right to dominate decision-making still belongs to powerful individuals. Only when participation reaches partnership (level 6) or higher, people's voices can influence decision-making and can be delegated (level 7) or at the level of citizen control (level 8).

Additionally, the wheel of participation is another approach proposed by Reed et al. [21], where stakeholder participation can be classified into four categories:

- (1) Top-down one-way communication and/or consultation: although this mechanism can involve public consultation and stakeholders, the organization retains the authority to make or simply communicate their decisions.
- (2) Top-down deliberation and/or co-production: a decision-making body initiates and leads participation as stakeholders engage in dialogues. Although this strategy encourages more stakeholder participation, initiating organizations still take responsibility for making decisions.
- (3) Bottom-up one-way communication and/or consultation: participation is initiated, led by stakeholders, and communicated with decision-makers through grassroots networks and social media to persuade them to open up the decision-making process.
- (4) Bottom-up deliberation and/or co-production: stakeholders facilitate and lead participation in a two-way decision-making mechanism.

Different interpretations and approaches to participation result in different levels of power-sharing among stakeholders. The types and levels of participation not only depend on the context of specific projects but also reflect the empowerment mindset of the decision-making organization.

The above approaches reflect and measure low to high participation levels and show that democracy gradually increases as people participate more in programs. In the NTP for New Rural Development in Vietnam, people's participation shows similar levels, as mentioned later, through the levels of know, discuss, implement and monitor in specific program activities.

### *2.3. Stakeholders of the NTP for New Rural Development in Vietnam*

In principle, the NTP for New Rural Development in Vietnam is implemented in a participatory process by which many stakeholders are involved. The state is responsible for guiding, leading, directing, and administering the implementation, as well as promulgating criteria and setting out policies and mechanisms. Economic organizations in rural areas, including agricultural cooperatives, play an essential role in promoting implementation and effectively mobilizing resources. The Farmer's Union, Women's Union, Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, and other sociopolitical organizations serve as catalysts to mobilize the people's participation in the program.

However, as Vietnam's economy is still dominantly agricultural, farmers remain the most important subjects in economic and rural development. In other words, the involvement and participation of the farmers should be prioritized in agricultural and rural development programs. According to Do and Nguyen [22], the key role of people or farmers in the New Rural Development programs in Vietnam is reflected through the following characteristics: (i) farmers are the forces who directly contribute to the construction, preservation, and protection of rural infrastructure; (ii) they also directly contribute to the development of institutions and local sociopolitical organizations; and (iii) farmers act as the primary subjects in all activities that improve the cultural and spiritual life in rural areas.

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1. Measure People's Participation

As mentioned above, the types and levels of participation proposed in the theory of the participation wheel by Reed et al. [21] or the Ladder of Citizen Participation by Arnstein [20] share similar perspectives, representing low to high levels of participation, from passive to active. In our study, we modify them to fit with the new rural context, consistent with the diversity of performance levels across regions in Vietnam.

To measure the levels of participation, Bagdi [23] introduced the People's Participation Index (P), which was then applied by Bagdi and Kurothe [24] in water resources conservation and management projects with the participation of people in the localities of India. In the context of these projects, the participation of people was divided into three levels: planning, implementation, and maintenance. To measure each level of participation, Bagdi and Kurothe [24] used a scale of 1, 2, and 3, respectively, to the lowest/never, moderate, and maximum levels. Then, the authors calculated the P by comparing the mean score for each household with the highest household score. The P was then classified into three levels for the entire dataset (high, medium, and low) based on the normal distribution assumption and the standard deviation of the survey data.

#### 3.2. Measure the Levels of Participation of People in the NTP for New Rural Development in Vietnam

In the NTP for New Rural Development, the motto used by the government to describe the levels of people's participation is "People know, people discuss, people implement, people monitor". This approach is similar to the theory of the participation wheel by Reed et al. [21] or the Ladder of Citizen Participation by Arnstein [20]. These frameworks, however, were designed to evaluate people's participation in specific projects and at specific project phases. Meanwhile, the NTP for New Rural Development in Vietnam has a higher degree of complexity as it includes a broader range of major criteria and sub-criteria for various fields.

Since 2016, the government has issued Decision No. 1980/QĐ-TTg regulating nineteen major criteria for the NTP for New Rural Development at the commune level. These criteria reflect quite comprehensively different rural fields, including (1) planning, (2) transportation, (3) irrigation, (4) electricity, (5) schools, (6) cultural facilities, (7) rural commercial infrastructure, (8) information and communication, (9) residential housing, (10) income, (11) poverty, (12) labor and employment, (13) production, (14) education and training, (15) health, (16) culture, (17) environment and food safety, (18) political system and access to law, and (19) defense and security. Then, these nineteen major criteria are concretized into forty-nine sub-criteria.

With the given differences and complexity, we propose to combine the above approaches and categorize them into four levels to measure the participation index, namely know, discuss, implement, and monitor (hereafter referred to as PPK, PPD, PPI, and PPM). These four levels are applied to each sub-criterion. Corresponding to each participation level, a Likert 5-point scale is employed to measure the actual level of each sub-criterion. The scale for each criterion is 0 for non-participation and 1 to 5 for the lowest and highest levels of participation, respectively.

Then the participation index is calculated as follows:

$$P = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^N P_i}{N} \quad (1)$$

$$P_i = \frac{PPK_i + PPD_i + PPI_i + PPM_i}{4} \quad (2)$$

$$PPK_i = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^{19} S_{ij}}{19} \quad (3)$$



$$PPD_i = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^{19} S_{ij}}{19} \quad (4)$$

$$PPI_i = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^{19} S_{ij}}{19} \quad (5)$$

$$PPM_i = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^{19} S_{ij}}{19} \quad (6)$$

where  $P_i$  is the average score achieved by respondent  $I$  corresponding to all know, discuss, implement, and monitor levels;  $PPK_i$ ,  $PPD_i$ ,  $PPI_i$ , and  $PPM_i$  are the average scores of respondent  $i$  corresponding to each of the know, discuss, implement, and monitor levels in nineteen major criteria;  $S_{ij}$  is the average score achieved by respondent  $i$  of each major criterion  $j$ .  $S_{ij}$  is calculated by sub-criteria on the scale shown above.

### 3.3. Measure the Factors Affecting the Participation of People in the NTP for New Rural Development in Vietnam

As indicated by the literature, the factors affecting people's participation in specific programs and projects are diverse, reflected through their socioeconomic characteristics, a determinant for their behavioral participation tendency. This may explain why, despite increasing awareness, the actual participation of people in developing countries remains low [25]. Mougéot [26] and UNDP [27] argued that rural people's participation in social organizations is determined mainly by their socioeconomic status. As a result, three key aspects of household socioeconomic characteristics are identified, including household demographic characteristics, household economic status, and household social capital.

#### 3.3.1. Household Demographic Characteristics

Household demographics such as household size, education, gender, and the age of the household head play an important role in the extent to which a household participates in programs or organizations. Household size or the number of household members is expected to have a positive effect on participation. That means households with a larger number of members seem to find it easier to participate in projects because other family activities will be able to be shared. Furthermore, each adult member of the household may be a source of knowledge or a beneficiary in agricultural projects. As the household size increases, a higher likelihood of coming into contact with an agricultural project [28,29]. The study of Dolisca et al. [30] also found that household size has a positive impact on household participation in forest protection programs from a social perspective; however, in terms of economics and environment, there was no significant impact. In contrast, Nxumalo and Oladele [31] found no significant relationship between household size and a farmers' participation in an agricultural project. The gender of the household head may have a negative or positive impact on their decision to participate in a project. In agricultural projects, male farmers often have more access to and influence over the resource, so they often play the role of decision-makers [31]. Nnadi and Akwiwu [28] and Etwire et al. [29], on the other hand, found no significant relationship between gender and a farmers' participation in agricultural projects. In most research, the age of the household head is often considered as a significant variable. Young people are usually willing to take chances and enjoy creating and discovering new things [32–35]. In contrast, some authors have observed a positive relationship between age and participation in an agricultural project [28,31]. In addition, education levels are also an important characteristic affecting people's participation. Education reflects the quality of human capital and often encourages participation [36,37]. According to Agbamu [38], formal education allows farmers to obtain useful information from the news, agricultural newsletters, and other sources. Farmers would be more likely to participate if they had better access to the relevant information and recognized the project's benefits.

### 3.3.2. Household Economic Status

The total income of the household may have a positive effect on the level of the household participation [39]. Households with a better economic status are more likely to participate voluntarily than those with a lower economic status [40]. The study of Swapan [25] showed, for example, that communities in Bangladesh ranked household economic condition as the most important factor influencing their participation in urbanization expansion projects.

In addition, the household's diversity levels of income or non-agricultural income sources also influenced the level of participation of household members. Defrancesco et al. [41] and Wossink and Wenum [42] highlighted the difficulty of participating in an environmental agriculture program when household income was completely dependent on agriculture. In comparison, Wynn et al. [35] found no evidence that non-farm income had a substantial effect on household participation. The cultivated land area is usually considered as another variable that reflects the economic status of rural households. However, its impact on participation differs from program to program, particularly in agricultural or rural development. Several studies on people's participation in environmental-linked agricultural programs in Greece [43], England [34], Spain [44], and Switzerland [45] showed that the larger the area of agricultural land, the higher the participation rate of the household. However, other studies [31,35,36,42] have not found any significant relationship between farm size and participation in agricultural projects.

### 3.3.3. Household Social Capital

Social capital is a concept that has been defined differently over time [46]. In the current context, the social relationships of individuals, families, and communities become complicated. The OECD [47] (p. 4) defined social capital as the networks, norms, values, and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups. According to the UNDP [48], social capital refers to networks of social connections, both formal and informal, that people use to pursue their livelihood goals. Vertical (hierarchical) or horizontal (between individuals with shared interests) links, as well as broader resources such as political and social resources, make up these networks. Strong civil society groups may also assist people in participating in the policy-forming process, increase their access to resources such as capital, labor, and information, as well as promote an effective use of assets. Relationships with friends/neighbors, the level of access to knowledge, and having family members active in local organizations are all examples of social capital [49]. Families with strong relationships with other farmers are more likely to engage in farmer self-managed organizations, according to Ofuoku and Agbamu [40]. Ofuokeu et al. [50] also found that farmers involved in various groups of farmers would have better access to extension services, credit, and the exchange of ideas and experiences. Communication with other farmers on a more regular basis has had a significant impact on their thoughts and attitudes toward farmer organizations. Given the broad concept of social capital, within the scope of this study, we want to emphasize the relationship between the family and local political organizations as one of the important aspects of social capital. From the Vietnamese government's point of view, the implementation of the new rural program is a political task of local governments and the people. Therefore, we assume that if family members are involved in local political organizations, there may be an influence on their participation in the new rural program. The social capital variable means that the family has relatives participating in local organizations (government, associations, and political party organizations), and it is expected to have a positive effect on the participation of the family.

From the literature reviewed above, the factors affecting people's participation in programs and projects are various, depending on the nature of the projects, but can be grouped under three key characteristic groups of households, including household demographic characteristics, household economic status, and household social capital. Then, the hypotheses of this study are that the elements of the three key factors have affected

the level of people's participation in the NTP for New Rural Development. The research question is which factors influence participation levels, and the policy implications should be drawn as a result of this.

In the approach of this study, P and the four constitutive classes of P are used as dependent variables, with respective values at a lower bound of 0 (no participation) and an upper bound of 5 (highest participation). This characteristic of the dependent variable allows employing a Tobit regression, also known as a censored regression model, to measure the influence of the above factors on people's participation. Tobit regression is designed to estimate linear correlations between variables when the dependent variable is either left- or right-censored [51] (p. 242). The Stata software, version 15, was employed to calculate the values of P, its elements, and perform the regressions.

### 3.4. Data Collection

To have a sample that represents all economic regions of the country but focuses on various experiences of localities in the NTP for New Rural Development, we conducted a survey in seven provinces in seven economic regions across the country, including Bac Giang (Northeast), Nam Dinh (Red River Delta), Ha Tinh (North Central Coast), Quang Nam (South Central Coast), Lam Dong (Central Highlands), Binh Phuoc (Southeast), and Kien Giang (Mekong River Delta). The communes were selected based on the following steps: (i) select one representative province in each socioeconomic region and (ii) select two representative communes in each province, including one commune that previously piloted the program and another commune with a lower level of satisfaction in terms of the number of criteria it met. The reason for this selection is that we first prioritized the provinces and their respective pilot communes selected by the Central Government for the pilot period of the new rural program in Vietnam. We used a semi-structured questionnaire to interview representatives of households who were selected by convenient sampling. This sampling approach is intended to ensure that the respondents, not necessarily the head of the household, are knowledgeable about the family and activities related to the NTP for New Rural Development. The primary data were collected at the end of 2020 with an approximate estimate of 35–40 households per commune, for a total of 14 communes. As a result, 508 households responded fully to the information on the questionnaire.

For secondary data, this study gathered relevant information such as the implementation of the results of the NTP for the New Rural Development by region and province through reports from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the New Rural Coordination Offices of the selected provinces, and the relevant documents and policies. The primary data, on the other hand, was gathered through in-depth interviews with local government officials, as well as semi-structured questionnaires and focus-group discussions with households.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Descriptive Statistics for the Survey Sample

In a dataset of 508 household respondents collected in seven provinces across the countries, we identified some common characteristics as follows:

In terms of demographic characteristics, the average age of the respondents was 56 years old, with 89 percent of them being male. The total number of people in a household was around four people, with approximately two people of working age. Regarding educational attainment, the respondents' average educational level was grade nine of the twelve-year system. Of all interviewees, 2.36 percent were illiterate, 7.0 percent completed the elementary level, 42.12 percent finished the secondary level, and almost half completed the high school level. Furthermore, up to 71.65 percent of the respondents did not engage in advanced training, 8.86 percent completed short and long-term vocational training courses, 18.7 percent attended intermediate schools and/or universities, and 0.79 percent have a master's degree.



Regarding occupation and household economic status, income from agricultural activities and related activities is still the primary source of income for 66.73 percent of respondents. This result is different from the data from the NTP Steering Committee [52], where the agricultural income of households was reported to be about 22 percent of the total income. However, we note that income from agriculture in our study includes income from agricultural activities and related sources (such as income from wage employment, but in the agricultural sector). Although their income is mainly from agricultural activities, poor households account for a small percentage, with a mere 1.38 percent of poor households and 2.56 percent of perceived poor households, compared to a total 5.9 percent of poor households in the report of the NTP Steering Committee [52]. Furthermore, 98.82 percent of households have electricity, 27.95 percent have access to treated water from water plants, and 68.50 percent have access to the internet (via home installation or mobile networks). These are favorable conditions for people to access economic and social information in general and the information about the NTP for New Rural Development in particular in the commune.

In addition, data on the respondents' social capital was collected and analyzed to understand whether social capital impacts household participation. Of all 508 respondents, the percentage of households who have a member employed at a local government agency, organization, or a political party committee are 28.94 percent, 47.05 percent, and 19.29 percent, respectively.

#### *4.2. Participation Levels of People in the NTP for New Rural Development in Vietnam*

To measure people's participation in the new rural program, we evaluate the level of participation in each criterion. However, we discover that, among nineteen criteria, there are certain criteria that people cannot participate in or can only participate in at certain levels. For example, in the first criterion of "Planning", people can only participate at the know or discuss level because actual "Planning" is implemented mainly by official units (implementation), and the state units are in charge of the management (monitoring). Similarly, for criteria 4 (electricity) and 5 (schools), whose certain standards are imposed by the government, people may participate at the know and discuss levels but not at the implement or monitor levels. In the new rural program, criteria related to electricity and schools must comply with the state's standards. For example, people can discuss the installation location of power lines that cross their land, but people are not involved in the electrical installation implementation. These activities must be guaranteed by a qualified party, meeting state standards. School criteria are similar. The construction of the school must ensure it meets the national standards and be constructed by a qualified party. Health criteria, however, are different. This criterion includes not only the construction of standard health units but also the direct participation of the people at all levels. For example, people decide to buy voluntary health insurance. As a result, the implementation and monitoring levels for criteria 1, 4, and 5 are extracted. Accordingly, the mean value representing the people's participation in each major criterion is summarized in Table 1.

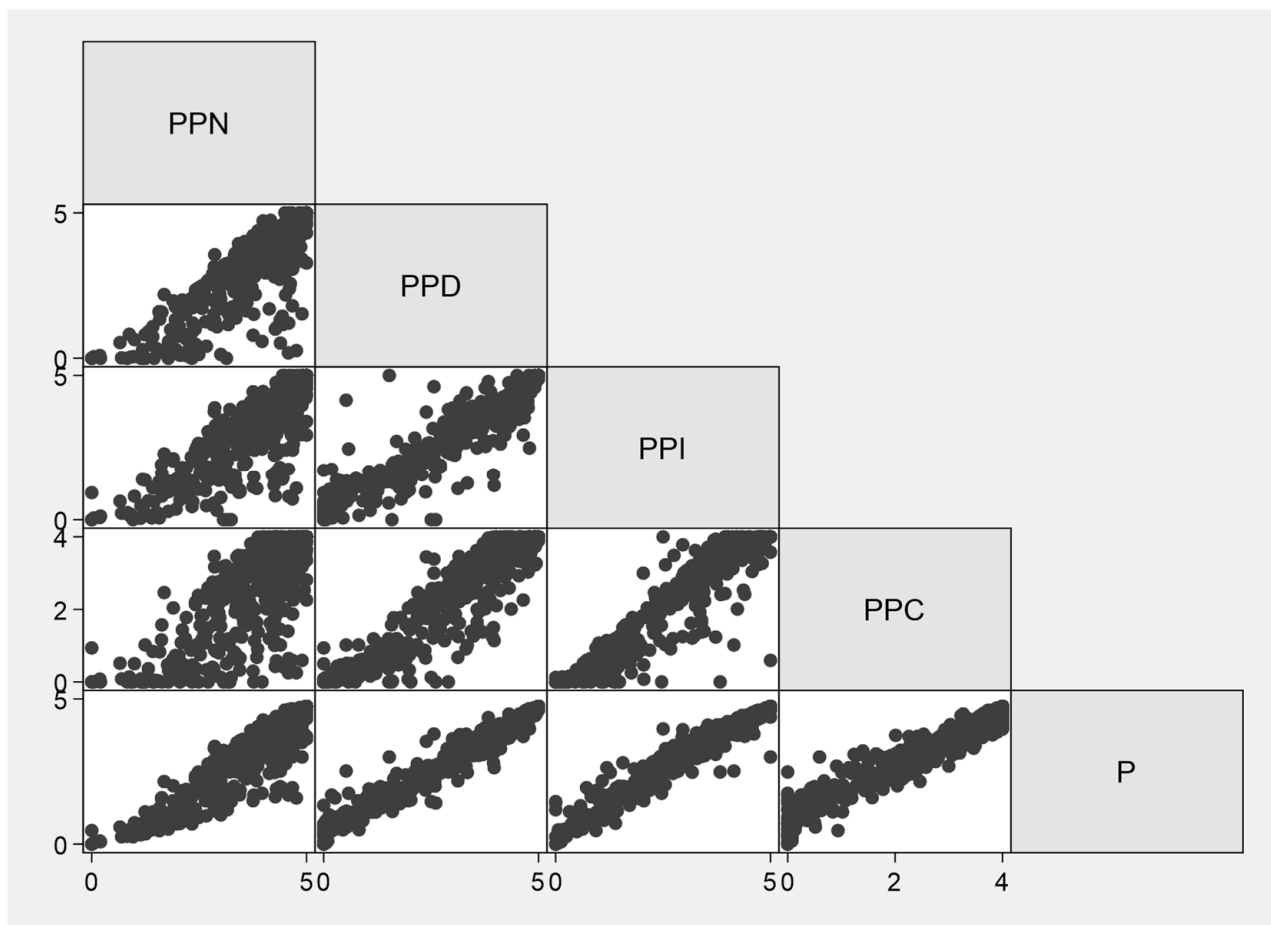
The most noticeable feature in Table 1 is that the mean values of know, discuss, implement, and monitor decrease in most criteria. This finding is consistent with the participatory theory of Arnstein [20]; the degree of participation changes and progresses from passive participation (through advocacy or persuasion) to dominant in the decision-making process and control. Although P and the P components are correlated, as shown in Figure 1, a few exceptions need attention.

The average P score is at 3.170, while the know, discuss, implement, and monitor levels vary respectively from 3.714, 3.239, 3.164, and 2.563. These values are slightly higher than the average value of the scale, from 0 (no participation) to 5 (highest participation). Criteria 2 (transportation), 15 (health), 16 (culture), and 19 (defense and security) have relatively high levels of participation, but there are variations in the levels of people's participation.

**Table 1.** People's participation in the new rural program.

Criteria	Know	Discuss	Implement	Monitor
(1) Planning	3.880	3.289	-	-
(2) Transportation	4.046	3.519	3.403	2.697
(3) Irrigation	3.512	3.142	2.976	2.476
(4) Electricity	3.873	3.264	-	-
(5) School	3.640	3.094	-	-
(6) Cultural facilities	3.776	3.241	3.096	2.547
(7) Rural commercial infrastructure	3.201	2.628	2.423	2.063
(8) Information and Communication	3.286	2.998	2.732	2.325
(9) Residential Housing	3.499	3.013	2.880	2.432
(10) Income	3.563	3.128	2.986	2.510
(11) Poor Household	3.823	3.380	3.179	2.669
(12) Labor and Employment	3.270	2.890	2.772	2.299
(13) Production	3.102	2.709	2.569	2.144
(14) Education and Training	3.810	3.343	3.249	2.638
(15) Health	4.105	3.561	3.686	2.839
(16) Culture	4.252	3.726	3.803	2.939
(17) Environment and food safety	3.986	3.506	3.618	2.772
(18) Political system and access to law	3.897	3.562	3.704	2.834
(19) Defense and Security	4.051	3.555	3.548	2.828
Average	3.714	3.239	3.164	2.563

Source: Author's calculation.

**Figure 1.** Correlation matrix of participation levels. Source: author's calculation.

In criteria that reflect people's economic conditions such as criterion 12 (labor and employment) and criterion 13 (production), the average scores are relatively low. More specifically, a sub-criterion "building production linkage models to boost the consumption of key agricultural products" in criterion 13 has the lowest average score compared to all the sub-criteria of the nineteen major criteria. The mean scores of the know, discuss, implement, and monitor levels of this sub-criterion are only 3.012, 2.657, 2.496, and 2.104, respectively, which are close to or below the average. This reflects the real-life challenge to the long-term sustainability of the program, as well as rural economic growth in general.

Specifically, by participation levels and firstly for the know level, all 19 criteria yield an average value of 3.714. People can access relatively complete information about the new rural program and its specific activities. However, the level of know is still at the level of passive information reception. The people's rights have not been clearly expressed at this level.

At the discuss level, it can be seen as the first form of active participation of the people in the new rural program. At this level, the mean is 3.239, which is lower than the know level. It should be noted again that criteria 12 (labor and employment) and 13 (production) have relatively low average values. These two criteria are directly related to the economic life of the household. The low values may reflect that the households decide on issues related to production and labor and employment relatively independently. The role of discussions between households and local authorities in production planning and labor and employment is not high. This, in some ways, shows the autonomy of households in production decisions, but at the same time it reflects fragmented and unorganized production.

The average value of the implement level is reasonably lower than the value of discuss, as mentioned above. Nonetheless, the mean score of some certain criteria for the implement level is slightly higher than that of the discuss level. This fits the context of the NTP for New Rural Development in Vietnam. Our in-depth interviews with the locals indicate that, in certain cases, people are motivated to implement the activities of the new rural program, even though they do not fully know or discuss it. In some criteria, the high level of participation is at the implement stage, but compared with the participatory theory of Arnstein [20], the level of participation is still passive. According to what we learned from the local people, if their know and discuss levels are high, the implement level can shift from passive to active participation, leading to increasing the sustainability of the program.

Finally, the people's participation at the monitor level was relatively low, reaching 2563. People mainly act as monitors for activities that are empowered by local authorities. Again, according to Arnstein [20], this is a form of passive monitoring.

In addition, when assessing people's participation in the New Rural Development activities across the regions, we find that the Southeast region has a relatively low level of people's participation. In contrast, other regions show a more active participation of people in new rural activities. Using a one-way ANOVA test, we find significant differences ( $p < 0.01$ ) in all types of participation among the regions, as shown in Table 2. As a result, the highest level of participation in all regions is still at the level of know (PPK), while the lowest level is at the level of monitor (PPM). For all types of participation, the Southeast region has a lower average level of participation than others across the country. This result indicates that during the implementation of central policies, including the NTP for New Rural Development, there is a need to share experiences to increase the people's participation and promote effective resource mobilization models among localities. In addition, regional differences in people's participation in the new rural program may also be reflected in regional culture. Through in-depth interviews with people in some regions in the central and northern areas, we have noticed a number of cases where workers who migrated from the north and central regions to work in the south, generate income, send money back home, and support the new rural activities of the village voluntarily or when they have been mobilized by the local government.

**Table 2.** People’s participation in the new rural program by region.

Region	P	PPN	PPD	PPI	PPM
Mekong River Delta	3.76	4.16	3.94	3.77	3.18
Southeast	2.79	3.28	2.79	2.88	2.21
Central Highlands	2.40	3.27	2.30	2.29	1.73
South Central Coast	3.04	3.71	3.11	2.98	2.34
North Central Coast	3.73	4.09	3.87	3.72	3.25
Red River Delta	3.62	3.98	3.71	3.74	3.05
Northeast	3.25	3.78	3.40	3.18	2.64
F	14.87	9.09	15.66	14.01	14.86
Prob > F	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000

Source: Author’s calculation.

#### 4.3. Factors Affecting People’s Participation in the NTP for New Rural Development in Vietnam

As previously mentioned, in this study, people’s participation is measured and classified into different levels: overall participation (P) being pooled based on four levels of participation, and the know (PPK), discuss (PPD), implement (PPI), and monitor (PPM) levels. These participation levels have upper and lower bounds of 0 to 5, respectively, corresponding to the non-participation to the highest participation levels. These dependent variables are then regressed using Tobit regression. The determining factors that are expected to influence people’s participation in the program can be divided into three categories, including household demographic characteristics, household economic status, and household social capital. In addition, in each regression model, regional variables are also used as dummy variables to examine the influence of geographical regions on people’s participation in the NTP for New Rural Development. Regression results can be found in Table 3.

For the group of variables reflecting household demographic characteristics, we find statistically significant positive effects of the marital status of the household head (married) and the household head’s education level on the overall participation of the household and the discuss level. Similarly, qualifications of the household head also affect all levels of participation, with unskilled household heads limiting their participation in program activities. Additionally, households with a large number of dependents also have a lower level of participation than smaller-sized households. Furthermore, non-religious households have a higher level of participation than religious ones. In certain localities, the close linkage between local government and religious organizations plays a more influential role in mobilizing people’s participation. However, this feature is not common in all surveyed localities. Additionally, households far from the commune center are more likely to engage in New Rural Development activities. This might be because those activities are targeted to people in rural areas, aiming to close the socioeconomic gap between rural and urban areas. People in rural areas, therefore, are more influenced by the New Rural Development activities and are encouraged to engage directly in these activities.

For groups of variables reflecting the economic status of the household, the research findings identify two variables that have a statistically significant impact on people’s participation, including the total area of annual cropland of the household and the main occupation of the household. Particularly, households with large agricultural land or their income being dominated by agricultural activities would be more likely to participate in New Rural Development activities. This finding is no doubt true because the program has many criteria associated with agricultural production. In addition, the construction of rural infrastructure also favors those with large agricultural land areas. The value of land requisitioned for infrastructure construction is often reimbursed by the state. However, in some cases, people are willing to donate land without compensation to contribute to these public works.

**Table 3.** Factors affecting the participation of people in the new rural program.

Variables	P	PPK	PPD	PPI	PPM
Characteristics of the household					
Marital status of head of household (dummy, 1 if married)	0.351 *	0.262	0.392 *	0.397 *	0.468 **
Education level of the head of household (0 to grade 12)	0.034 *	0.027	0.044 **	0.030	0.029
Qualifications of the head of household (dummy, 1 if no professional)	−0.251 **	−0.274 **	−0.269 *	−0.278 *	−0.268 **
Number of dependents in the household	−0.054	−0.069 *	−0.059	−0.064	−0.038
Religion of head of household (dummy, 1 if no religion)	0.418 *	0.456 *	0.403	0.433	0.504 *
Distance from home to commune centre (kilometer)	0.068 ***	0.055 **	0.099 ***	0.075 **	0.072 **
Households have access to clean, treated water (dummy, 1 if yes)	0.181	0.230 *	0.217	0.128	0.232 *
Economic status of the household					
Total area of annual cropland of the household (thousand-meter square)	1.786 *	1.494 *	1.408	2.173 **	2.123 **
Main occupation of the household (dummy, 1 if agriculture)	0.205 *	0.204 **	0.236 *	0.219 *	0.175
Social capital of the household					
Number of household members participating in associations	0.076	0.054	0.116 *	0.103	0.082
Number of household members who are party members or work in the local government	0.434 ***	0.454 ***	0.582 ***	0.569 ***	0.429 ***
Mekong River Delta	1.038 ***	0.583 ***	1.275 ***	1.127 ***	1.158 ***
Southeast	0.245	−0.150	0.295	0.438 **	0.346 *
South Central Coast	0.378 **	0.152	0.482 **	0.368 *	0.385 *
North Central Coast	1.081 ***	0.550 **	1.249 ***	1.165 ***	1.292 ***
Red River Delta	0.950 ***	0.436 **	1.103 ***	1.136 ***	1.113 ***
Northeast	0.513 ***	0.136	0.662 ***	0.477 **	0.615 ***
_cons	1.273 ***	2.358 ***	0.973 **	1.170 **	0.386
Log likelihood	−754.468	−715.141	−835.563	−826.698	−808.674
LR chi2	140.070	108.610	138.950	122.080	132.060
Prob > chi2	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Pseudo R2	0.085	0.071	0.077	0.070	0.076

\* Significant at 10% level; \*\* significant at 5% level; \*\*\* significant at 1% level. Source: author's calculation.

For the variables reflecting the social capital of the households, we consider the participation of household members in the activities of organizations, including local associations (the farmers' unions, women's unions, youth unions, etc.), political organizations, and local governmental agencies. Membership in associations has a negligible impact on most levels of participation. Social capital expressed through peer-to-peer networks and associations does not significantly affect people's participation in the program, except for a less statistically significant effect at the discuss level. This result is also consistent and found in cases at the community level [53], or even the influencing factors are external factors of the community [54]. On the other hand, household members' participation in political organizations or employment in local government significantly positively affected all types of participation. Several studies emphasized the positive role of community representatives in designing community-related activities, creating consent and promoting citizen participation [55], and the social and political connections of the households with government officials [56,57]. In our study, one of the factors increasing households' participation in the NTP for New Rural Development was the presence of household members in government-related bodies. We argue that this impact has both potential and the ability to be a challenge for participating in this program. On the one hand, the role of government-related participants helps to promote their households' participation, or people are motivated by participative leadership [58]. On the other hand, this also reveals unsustainability when incentives for community participation are influenced by some individuals in the government system. The program's sustainability can only be ensured when participation comes from the volun-



tariness of the communities and local people. In other words, although this result reflects the pioneering role of households with particular characteristics, it implies a risk to the program's sustainability. Households who are not representatives of political organizations or local governments would participate at a lower level.

## 5. Discussion

The main findings of the study emphasize the level of people's participation in the NTP for New Rural Development at the four levels of know, discuss, implement, and monitor. These participation levels varying by level have gradually decreased but at the same time changed from passive to active forms, consistent with the theory of Arnstein [20]. Given the characteristics of NTP in Vietnam, the study shows that, in some specific cases, the top-down approach in implementing policies and activities results in a higher level of implement than the know and discuss levels. For example, in rural road construction programs, in some cases, people have not been actively involved in the planning process. However, they still participate by voluntary land donation or compulsory land acquisition [59]. For some criteria related to households' production, the participation of people is relatively limited. There still seems to be a gap between the production plans oriented by the local government and the actual needs of the people. For instance, in many agricultural production areas in Vietnam, people are not allowed to convert from rice land to other more efficient crops to ensure the government's rice area planning [60].

In addition, the difference in people's participation in the NTP for New Rural Development between regions also poses policy challenges to achieve equitable development across regions in the country. The difference in the level of people's participation raises the issue of communicating and mobilizing the activities of the NTP for New Rural Development. It is necessary to say that, with the same criteria across regions of the country, some localities have a more effective way of mobilizing the participation of stakeholders, especially the people. Accordingly, localities that promote democracy and the role of the people from the first steps in new rural activities are often associated with better participation and advocacy effectiveness. Although public consultation is necessary for the success of community-based programs, sometimes hierarchy and authority prevented learning from "below" [61]. Since the activities of the NTP for New Rural Development are closely related to people's livelihoods, policy makers have to learn from the people, understand the needs of the people, and then encourage people to participate in the design and implementation of program activities.

## 6. Conclusions

The NTP for New Rural Development is a very large-scale program of Vietnam, in terms of the national scale, investment level, and stakeholder participation. Among the stakeholders, the people are both the key subject and beneficiary, as well as the most important player in determining the program's sustainability. In addition to the achievements mentioned by the reports on the NTP for New Rural Development, the findings of this study also point to issues that need attention. The people's participation is just around the average level and it steadily declines as they progress through the levels of know, discuss, implement, and monitor. The participation levels of people also vary among the nineteen new rural criteria, in which the production organization criteria receive a lower average score than that of all other criteria. This is an alarming limitation in light of the great success of the program. In addition, people's participation also varies across different regions of the country. From this feature, the activities of the new rural program are not necessarily the same across localities. Instead, activities should derive from the actual needs of people in different regions and localities.

Regarding the factors affecting people's participation in the new rural program, the research findings indicate that three groups of factors, including household demographic characteristics, household economic status, and household social capital, affect people's participation at different levels. Factors related to household demographic characteristics

and household economic status have more influence on participation. Meanwhile, the impact of social capital on participation is mainly reflected in the political connections between household members and local authorities.

To improve the new rural program's sustainability, the following points are crucial. First, special attention should be paid to improving the criteria associated with the economic status of rural people, such as poverty, labor, employment, production organizations. Second, it is also important to gradually change the approach in implementing the New Rural Development activities to increase people's active participation by promoting democracy by engaging people in the stages of the program. Third, since the NTP for New Rural Development is a nationwide program, the state's investment in the program should be distributed effectively through the regions. Among these three points, the first and third can be influenced by the state's investment. By contrast, the second point, associated with institutions and methods of implementation, is a challenging but decisive factor for ensuring the success and sustainability of the program, contributing to the socioeconomic renewal of the people in rural areas nationwide.

For the current NTP for New Rural Development, in addition to the criteria for new rural communes, the government has implemented the criteria for advanced new rural communes, typical new rural communes and new rural district-level criteria. Although these criteria share the same main points as the new rural commune criteria, the requirements are at a higher level. This continues to pose greater challenges for localities. From here, further studies need to consider integrating the assessment of the participation of people in the new higher rural standards, contributing to achieving the goal of sustainable rural development.

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