

Ngoc Minh, 2018

Volume 4 Issue 1, pp. 272-287

Date of Publication: 22nd March 2018

DOI-<https://dx.doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2018.41.272287>

This paper can be cited as: Ngoc Minh, W. T. (2018). How Vietnamese Understands About Decentralization: A Q- Methodology Study. *PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(1), 272-287.

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HOW VIETNAMESE UNDERSTANDS ABOUT DECENTRALIZATION: AN Q- METHODOLOGY STUDY

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Abstract

Nowadays, more and more countries move away from centralized governments institutions. Decentralized government institutions are doing more work of government both in developed and developing countries than ever before. The literature on decentralization are vast, but there is little agreement about what decentralization means. There are not many research about the conceptualization of the decentralization in Vietnam. Official decentralization in Vietnam began with Doimoi (economic innovation) in 1986 and rapidly accelerated in late 1990. How the citizens understand the decentralization to develop their power to construct a nation. The aim of this study is finding out what Vietnamese citizens comprehend about decentralization, especially the intellectual class because of the critical role of this class in society. This study's participants were a sample of 17 people from intellectual class who had education level at least bachelors' degree in Ho Chi Minh City – the largest, the developed city in South of Vietnam. Q- methodology, which was introduced by William Stephenson in 1935, was used for data collection and analysis. Four distinct viewpoints about decentralization were identified: (1)

democratization, (2) Public-private transfer, (3) Theoretic Stereotype and (4) A comprehensive view. This study also finds out that maybe Vietnamese are emphatically agreed that decentralization is the transfer of authority and general definition and administrative decentralization are paid attention.

Keywords

Decentralization, Q- methodology, Vietnam, Citizen understanding

1. Introduction

Alexis de Tocqueville said, “Centralization is now a word constantly repeated but is one that, generally speaking, now one tries to define accurately.” in his famous work "Democracy in America." Tocqueville's statement still appropriates today. Central and local governments have been renegotiating their relationships and reconsidering the separation of authority and resources between levels of the state (Treisman, 2002). Centralization and decentralization are two terminologies which have many different usages. Many scholars have paid increasing attention to the causes and the results of “centralization” as well as “decentralization”.

Nowadays, more and more countries move away from centralized governments institutions. Decentralized government institutions are doing more work of government both in developed and developing countries than ever before (Schneider, 2003). The literature on decentralization are vast, but there is little agreement about what decentralization means.

Although there are many research about decentralization, there still have a great deal of conceptual confusion. Fiscal decentralization, administrative decentralization, and political decentralization are three types which have been mentioned mostly. (Schneider, 2003; Torrisi et al., 2011; UNDP, 1999; World Bank, 2017). Besides, there is also market decentralization (economic decentralization) (World Bank, 2017); services delivery decentralization and Decentralization of participatory mechanisms and citizen feedback systems (UNDP, 1999). Treisman (2002) had another conception of decentralization. His work showed six conceptions: vertical decentralization, decision-making decentralization, appointment decentralization, electoral decentralization, fiscal decentralization and personnel decentralization.

Official decentralization in Vietnam began with *Doimoi* (economic innovation) in 1986 and rapidly accelerated in the late 1990s. However, there are not many studies about the conceptualization of the decentralization. Overall, Vietnamese authors separate two forms.

Under vertical decentralization, the central government hands down specific powers, functions, and resources to subnational government. Under horizontal decentralization, governance responsibilities are spread more broadly between the different organization of government in the same level. (Nguyen N. C., 2010). Furthermore, some authors mention fiscal, political and administrative decentralization (Vu, 2016) but they did not show the definitions. It is usually limited to fiscal and administrative decentralization rather than other kinds of decentralization (Vu, 2016). Whether the citizens understand the decentralization to develop their power to construct the nation. This paper report on data collected via Q-sort and follows up the interviews in Ho Chi Minh City – a largest, developed city the south of Vietnam. The aim was to define the decentralization, what Vietnamese citizens understand about decentralization.

2. Decentralization definition

Decentralization is an elusive term because of its meaning confusion. Most agree that decentralization is not the transferring power and resources to national governments, “nevertheless, all share the assumption that decentralization includes the transfer of power and resources away from the central government” (Schneider, 2003). It is the transfer of authority and power from higher to lower levels of governments or from the national to subnational levels (Collins and Green, 1994) (Mills, 1994) (Agrawal and Ribot, 1999) (Crook and Manor, 1998).

There have many conceptualizations of decentralization, and various concepts have different meanings. It has been demonstrated that fiscal decentralization, administrative decentralization, and political decentralization are three dimensions which have been mentioned mostly. (Schneider, 2003; Torrasi et. al., 2011; UNDP, 1999; Wescott, 2003; World Bank, 2017). Both Schneider and Torrasi et al. reported that decentralization only consists of above tripartite dimensions. Torrasi et. al. (2011) found that these dimensions are worthy to review separately.

Fiscal decentralization (fiscal federalism): refers to “how much governments cede fiscal impact to non-central government entities” (Schneider, 2003; Torrasi et. al., 2011). It concerns with taxes, expenditure and how “vertical imbalance” is corrected (UNDP, 1999; Treisman, 2002).

Administrative decentralization “refers to how much autonomy non-central government entities possess relative to central control”. (Schneider, 2003; Torrasi et. al., 2011). It concerns with how political institutions, once determined, turn policy decisions into allocative outcomes

(UNDP, 1999). Different levels of government administer resources and matters that have been delegated to them, through a constitution.

Political decentralization could be analyzed according to the spatial distribution of political function. (Torrise et. al., 2011). It “refers at one level to the extent to which political institutions map the multiplicity of citizen interests on to policy decision” (UNDP, 1999). Groups at different levels of government are empowered to make decisions related to what affects them.

3. A short overview of decentralization in Vietnam

Decentralization process in Vietnam has been started since the 1970s and 1980s with the administrative merging or division of some provinces. Official decentralization in Vietnam began with Doimoi (an innovation progress) in 1986 and rapidly accelerated in the late 1990s.

In the 1980s, Vietnam acknowledged that centrally planned economies could not have a positive effect on economic development, especially during the severe financial crisis and lack of food. At the Sixth National Congress in December 1986, the Vietnamese government presented a comprehensive reform program to liberalize and deregulate the economy under the name Doimoi. This innovative program has introduced solutions for promoting economic development and integrating into the rest of the world. Doimoi's goal is to develop the private sector, improve agricultural production, reduce the role of state-owned enterprises, focus on light industries, attract foreign investment and boost exports. Thus, Doimoi has demanded comprehensive reforms in all aspects of state management to adhere to the rules of the market economy.

Then, the decentralization has continuously expanded. In January 1995, Vietnam made the comprehensive public administration reform for the first time that focused on restructuring governmental organizations, simplifying administrative procedures and rebuilding civil services. This program was considered as a core part of socio-economic development strategy in Vietnam.

However, it is usually limited to fiscal rather than political, administrative or personnel decentralization (Vu, 2016). Decentralization was expected to “promote strong dynamism, creativity, autonomy, self-responsibility at all local government levels in their management and implementation of socio-economic development tasks” (Resolution Number 08/2004/NQ-CP of The Government, 2004). Nevertheless, the results did not reach the government's expectations. In the view of the central government, decentralization has undermined the uniformity of

national policies and encouraged unhealthy competition among local governments. On the one hand, it has led to a decline in the central government's control over local governments; on the other side, it has led to an increase in localism.

The practice of central-local relationship and political and administrative decentralization in Vietnam has gone through significant changes. This transformation has two sides. On the one hand, there is an attempt to provide more local autonomy and grassroots democracy to promote local participation in governance. On the other hand, there is a goal of re-centralizing some functions to have better control and supervision over local authorities (Nguyen K. H., 2009).

For local governments, decentralization is not always accompanied by institutional autonomy and financial resources. Moreover, there is a lack of synchronization between central ministries as well as unity between different dimensions of decentralization. Thus, local authorities have been confused in many situations, and therefore became passive, relying heavily on instructions from the center. Finally, the people and businesses, who are eventually affected by the decentralization policy, do not participate or have a voice in the most important policies that affect their lives and economic activities.

In the Vietnamese state system, four fundamental tensions emerged during the process of decentralization. (Government, 2004), (Vu, 2016).

- The first is that decentralization requires a fundamental change in the role of the state, from the social planner and decision-maker to regulator. However, in a unitary system like Vietnam, this transition is never simple as it not only involves changes in the internal organization but also undermines its inherent power.
- Second stress is due to the fact that, in many cases, decentralization does not involve a sufficient increase in capacity and resources, causing severe overburdening for the local government.
- The third tension is between accountability and autonomy, as increasing autonomy for the local government does not guarantee accountability.
- Finally, the increased autonomy of local governments, self-governance, may break the consistency and uniformity of national policies.

As mentioned above, although many decentralization policies have been implemented, decentralization has not yet achieved its goals. The Government Resolution 08 (2004) of the Government recognizes that decentralization has reduced the uniformity of state management,

dispersion, and locality. The responsibilities of each level of government have not been clearly defined. Decentralization is not accompanied by the necessary conditions for local authorities to carry out their duties. Lack of uniformity and consistency among ministries and aspects of decentralization. And some of the decentralization tasks in the law and regulations are only partially implemented or delayed.

Decentralization is not accompanied by the necessary conditions for local authorities to carry out their duties; There is a lack of uniformity and consistency among ministries and aspects of decentralization, And some of the decentralization mandates in the law and regulations are only partially or partially implemented. According to Resolution 08 (2004), the main reason is:

- The understanding and awareness about decentralization policies and solutions are unclear, incoherent, and inconsistent between the central and local governments.
- There is a concern that radical decentralization can lead to localism and regionalism
- Lack of will and determination in the implementing process: from design to adoption and implementation of decentralization regulations.
- Evaluation and learning from decentralization experiences are not correctly implemented.
- The legal system is not synchronized and lacked the requirements for social and economic development under the current conditions.

Even though the government's evaluation of the limitations of decentralization is valid, it has not met the root reasons which are attached to the current institutional system. The central government has always tried to defend its authority, which most important aspects are its political power as well as its controlling the personnel appointment and budget allocation. This explains why the decentralization in Vietnam is limited mainly to the decentralization of economic management and almost does not involve political or personnel decentralization.

The success in recent years about the reforms since *Doimoi* is the shift of the role of the state in the economy, in other words, the gradual removal of the central government from the economic activities and the growing part of the provincial government. For example, the rustic transformation in Vietnam in the late 1980s was the direct result of many agricultural development achievements, which is results of land reform. Basically, it returned the plot from the collectives to the households and decided to abandon the intention of the state and monopoly role in the production and distribution of rice. In just a few years, the country emerged from chronic hunger and became one of the largest rice exporters in the world. (Nguyen K. H., 2009)

4. Methods

4.1 Research design and setting

The study employed Q-methodology which was invented in 1935 by British physicist, psychologist William Stephenson (Brown, 1996), a technique for identifying unique, different viewpoints as well as the commonly shared view. Q-methodology is particularly useful in research that explores human perceptions and interpersonal relationships (Chinnis et. al., 2001). It also efficiently combines the strengths of qualitative and quantitative dimensions (Davis and Michelle, 2011).

Typically, Q methodology begins with a sample of statements (Q -set) that offers the fullest range of viewpoints on the study topic. A participant group (P Sample), who represents various socialistic categories relevant to the study topic, is asked to rank all statements along the standardized continuum (Q-sort). The view of participants is then subjected to Q factor analysis to give information about similarities and differences in viewpoint on a particular subject.

4.2 P Sample

The Vietnamese sample consisted of 17 participants from intellectual class who had education level at least bachelors' degree so that they can understand the subject. A half of these people work in the field of economics.

4.3 Data collection and procedure

The first stage of Q is to develop the "concourse"- a set of statements that represents the treatise on the research topic, including "the cultural knowledge and social constructions that each of us can access both implicitly and explicitly" (Goldman, 1999). Statements extracted from some articles, websites. Statements related to different dimensions of decentralization which are mainly prone to a general definition, fiscal, political, administrative and economic decentralization. Finally, 29 comments were chosen. Each of these 29 statements received a random number. The task of the participants was to rank each of the statements and write the number on an inverted grid from +4, most agree with the definition, to -4, most disagree with the characterization, in relation to their view and experience. (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Q-Sort Matrix

| | ← Most disagree | | | | | Most agree → | | | |
|--|-----------------|----|----|----|---|--------------|---|---|---|
| | -4 | -3 | -2 | -1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
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4.4 Analysis of data

The Q sorts were entered the PQ Methods program and were analyzed using by person factor technique. Centroid factor extraction and varimax rotation were used to obtain potential factors. Different factor solutions were examined, and the answer where all the factors had at least two defining sorts and had eigenvalues more than 1.00 was selected. Interpretation of each element was made through examining the characterizing and distinguishing statements.

5. Result

The 17 Q sorts were correlated and rotated using the varimax option of the Q method computer program. According to eigenvalues table which shows the consequence of the principal factor analysis, we choose seven factors which have Eigenvalues over 1.00 to implement varimax rotation.

For Q sorts with 29 statements, the standard error of a factor loading is $1/\sqrt{N} = 1/\sqrt{29} = 0.186$, and at the 0.01 probability level, a loading must be at least $0.185 \times 2.58 = 0.479$. When flagging in factor matrix to implement the varix rotation, there have two factors which were defined by one Q sort. The factors are over 10% were chosen. As the result of that, we choose four factors to analyze. Using these criteria meant that there was a total of 12 respondents (71%) whose Q sorts were used to define these four factors, the others having no significant loading.

Table 1 which shows the Q-set statements and factor array with scores against each statement by factor. Based mainly on the five top and five bottoms ranked statements in this table, next sections represent more details consequences and develop a clarification about the point view of participants for each factor.

Table 1: *Q-set statements and factor arrays*

| No. | Factor | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|-----|---|----|----|----|----|
| 1 | 1. "The term decentralization is used to cover a broad range of transfers of the "locus of decision making" from central governments to regional, municipal or local governments." | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| 2 | 2. "Assignment of accountability and responsibility for results." | -3 | 4 | -1 | 0 |
| 3 | 3. "Decentralization is usually referred to as the transfer of powers from central government to lower levels in a political-administrative and territorial hierarchy". | 2 | 1 | 2 | 0 |
| 4 | 4. "Decentralization is the means to allow for the participation of people and local governments". | -2 | 0 | -3 | 4 |
| 5 | 5. "Decentralization refers to the restructuring or reorganization of authority so that there is a system of co-responsibility between institutions of governance at the central, regional and local levels." | 4 | -2 | -3 | 3 |
| 6 | 6. "Give citizens or their elected representatives more power in public decision-making." | 4 | 2 | -3 | 1 |
| 7 | 7. "Central governments transfer responsibility for decision-making and administration of transportation authority to semi-autonomous organizations." | 0 | 0 | 0 | -3 |
| 8 | 8. "The administration is divided among many tiers." | 0 | -1 | 4 | 3 |
| 9 | 9. "Municipalities elect their mayors and councils." | 3 | -4 | 2 | -1 |
| 10 | 10. "Citizens know better their political representatives and elected officials know better the needs and desires of their constituents." | 3 | 0 | 4 | 4 |
| 11 | 11. "Local government has right authority to raise their revenues, and have independent authority to make investment decisions." | 1 | -3 | 3 | -1 |

| | | | | | |
|----|--|----|----|----|----|
| 12 | 12. "Self-financing or cost recovery through user charges." | 2 | 0 | 1 | -2 |
| 13 | 13. "Co-financing or co-production arrangements through which the users participate in providing services and infrastructure through monetary or labor contributions." | 1 | 1 | -4 | 0 |
| 14 | 14. "Expansion of local revenues through property or sales taxes, or indirect charges" | -1 | -4 | -4 | -4 |
| 15 | 15. "Government shift responsibility for functions from the public to the private sector. (privatization)" | 1 | -1 | 3 | -1 |
| 16 | 16. "Economic liberalization and market development policies." | -1 | 3 | 0 | -1 |
| 17 | 17. "Allowing private enterprises to perform functions that had previously been monopolized by government." | -2 | -2 | 3 | 2 |
| 18 | 18. "Contracting out the provision or management of public services or facilities to commercial enterprises indeed." | -3 | 2 | -2 | 2 |
| 19 | 19. "Financing public sector programs through the capital market and allowing private organizations to participate." | 0 | -3 | -2 | 1 |
| 20 | 20. "Through the divestiture of state-owned enterprises, transferring responsibility for providing services from the public to the private sector." | -1 | 3 | 0 | -1 |
| 21 | 21. "Reduces the legal constraints on private participation in service provision or allows competition among private suppliers by deregulation." | 1 | 4 | -2 | 0 |
| 22 | 22. "Both central and subnational authorities have the right to legislate." | -3 | -3 | 1 | -4 |
| 23 | 23. "The dominance of many parties in the country." | -4 | 0 | -1 | -2 |
| 24 | 24. "A first tier body appoints the executive at the second tier." | -1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

| | | | | | |
|----|--|----|----|----|----|
| 25 | 25. "The share of administrative personnel employed at lower tiers is greater." | -4 | -2 | -1 | -3 |
| 26 | 26. "Subnational actors have right to make political decisions." | 0 | -1 | 0 | -2 |
| 27 | 27. "Parliament has constitutional right to block legislation." | 3 | -1 | -1 | -4 |
| 28 | 28. "Company's top management delegates authority to subunits of the company." | -2 | 3 | 0 | 2 |
| 29 | 29. "Structure and processes of decision making and on resource and responsibility allocation among different levels of government." | 0 | 1 | 2 | 2 |

Factor 1: Democratization

Three participants loaded significantly onto factor 1. All of them work in high education institutions which belong to the government with bachelor's degree. Factor 1 explains 33.96% of the study variance and has an eigenvalue of 5.77.

Factor 1 reflected a general perception of reducing the authority of the central government. They focus on the restructuring and reorganization of authority (5: +4); giving their representatives more power in public decision -making (6: +4); transfer of the "locus decision making" from central governments to regional, municipal or local governments (3: +2); transfer of powers from central government to lower levels in a political – administrative and territorial hierarchy (3: +2). Besides, rights of people in the election are interested: choosing their own mayors and councils (9: +3); knowing better their political representatives and elected officials know better the needs and desires of their constituents (10: +3). All of these shows these respondents seemed to want more democratization; more transfer the authority to citizens and to officials who are elected.

In the contrary site of factor 1, the dominance of many parties in the country is hugely disapproved (23: -4) that may be led by living in the country where the constitution only accepts the right authority of one communist party. The participants loading in this factor also showed that decentralization is not the greater of the share of administrative personnel employed at lower tiers. (25: -4). They do not want to share the right to legislate to subnational authorities (22: -3), only central governments have right to do that.

Factor 2: Public-Private Transfer

Factor 2 has three significantly loading participants whose job is in the business sector and whose education level is high. It explains 7.15% of study variance and has an eigenvalue of 1.22.

According to factor 2, decentralization is transferring from the public sectors to the private sectors. The responses indicated reducing the legal constraints on individual participation in service provision or allow competition among private suppliers by deregulation (21: +4). Furthermore, assignment of accountability and responsibility for results is so important (2: +4). These people concerned about economic liberalization and market development policies (16: +3); divesting state-owned enterprises (20: +3); delegating authority in a company (28: +3). They want to assign the power to the market so that the private sectors have more power, more independent. Most of these statements belong to economic decentralization that perhaps is caused by their occupations which they employ day by day.

These participants seemed to be conflicted with fiscal decentralization. With them, expansion of local revenues (14: -4), financing public sector programs (19: -3) and raising local revenues by the subnational government (11: -3) are not related to decentralization.

Factor 3: Theoretic Stereotype

Five participants loaded significantly onto factor 3. They included three officials in high education institutions and two businesspeople. They have high education level – from bachelor's degree and over. This factor explains 37,92% of study variance and has an eigenvalue of 6.45.

People loading on this factor have a general viewpoint about decentralization. With them, the division of government into many tiers (8: +4) is most agreed. They want citizens to know better their political representatives, and the elected officials know better the needs and desires of their constituents (10: +4). They seemed to consent with general and administrative decentralization (Statement 10: +4; statement 8: +4, statement 29: +2; statement 9: +2; statement 3: +2; statement 1: +1).

Factor 4: A comprehensive viewpoint

Factor 4 has two significantly loading participants, and it explains 15.67% of study variance. It has an eigenvalue of 2.71. Both two respondents piling on this factor work in high education institutions and have master's degree.

Factor 4 also reflected a general standpoint about decentralization. In comparison with other groups, this group knows more comprehensive. The respondents are concerned about the understanding between citizens and elected officials (10: +4) as well as the participation of people and local governments (4: +4). They consent with the division of administration into many tiers (8: +3); the restructuring or reorganization of authority (5: +3) and the adherence of private sectors into some functions that had previous been monopolized by the government (17: +3).

In the negative side, they do not allow the expansion of local revenue through property or tax (14: -4); sharing the power to legislate to subnational governments (22: -4) or parliament (27: -4).

Consensus statements

There were three statements which are not distinguished between any pair of factors. Across factors, participants agreed that decentralization is the assignment of the "locus of decision making" and power from central governments to regional, municipal or local governments (statement 1 and statement 3). However, they have a little disagreement about that subnational actors have right to make political decisions (statement 26). Fundamentally all respondents concerned about subjects which related to governance and nobody disapproved decentralization is the transfer of authority.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we reveal different thoughts about decentralization of intellectual class who has high education level, in the case of Vietnam.

The first-factor solution replicated democratization. The replies shew that the participants loading on this factor allowed to reduce the power of central government. They strongly want their elected representatives have more authority in public decision- making (6: +4). Maybe the cause more or less related to their job's place – high education institutions which belong to the government and they themselves have high education level and experiences in administrative management. Besides, disapproving the dominance of many parties in the country may cause by the political regime of Vietnam – one institution in central government authorizes to legislate.

Participants loading on factor 2 emphasized the public-private transfer. They shew their desire that is withdrawing power from the government to the market, and the private

organizations are more independent and develop by themselves without interfering of subnational governments such as tax or indirect charges. The reason possibly is that they all are businessmen. They hope to have more opportunities to expand their employment.

Factor 3 reflected on a theoretical stereotype of decentralization. The concept of decentralization is complicated so that they have just know the typical definition from the textbook, not much knowledge about this subject. This is a mixed group. Perchance, most people loading on this factor have a basic point view about decentralization, but they do not care too much. It could be suitable for conditions in Vietnam.

Like factor 3, respondents in factor 4 have a general perception about decentralization. However, they know more comprehensive than people loading on factor, that could affect by their education level – master's degree.

Generally, participants are strongly agreed that decentralization is the transfer of authority. It is usually limited to fiscal and administrative decentralization rather than other decentralization in Vietnam (Vu, 2016), but the intellectual class seems to be interested in fiscal decentralization not much. Most of the statements which belong to fiscal decentralization usually are in the negative site of Q-sort. In contrast, general definition and administrative decentralization are paid attention.

All in all, Vietnamese seem to have a general understanding about decentralization but not deeply. These are citizens in a big city – the minority, how about the other citizens in the countryside – the vast majority? What should the government do to increase citizen knowledge about the decentralization in order words increasing citizen participation. This needs more research in future.

This study has some potential limitations. Firstly, the questionnaire (Q-sort) was built by Vietnamese so that there may cause some misunderstanding by translation from English to Vietnamese. Secondly, because of not enough time and geographical distance, we cannot interview some officials who work in Vietnam administrative government. Hence, all statements which were chosen may not reflect all dimension definitions of decentralization. Besides, this reason leads that we can find more participants who are over 40 years-old, so the consequences of this study perhaps have not represented all the viewpoint of the intellectual class.

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