

Public Service Quality in Vietnam: The Role Of E-Government and Administrative Reform

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ABSTRACT: Vietnam's public administration system has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, driven by waves of administrative reform and the adoption of E-Government initiatives. These reforms aim to enhance public service quality, citizen satisfaction, and government accountability. Yet, the relationship between technological innovations and actual improvements in service quality remains complex and uneven. This paper critically examines the role of E-Government and administrative reform in shaping public service quality in Vietnam. Drawing on policy documents, national performance indices, and existing literature, it analyzes the progress made, identifies persistent challenges, and offers policy recommendations to strengthen the governance and delivery of public services in the digital era.

KEYWORDS: Public service quality, E-Government, administrative reform, Vietnam, governance, digital transformation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Vietnam has embarked upon an ambitious agenda of administrative reform and digital government transformation, positioning these twin processes as central components of its broader pursuit of modernization, state capacity enhancement, and sustainable development (Government of Vietnam, 2021). At the heart of this agenda lies an explicit commitment to improving public service quality, a multidimensional construct encompassing dimensions of efficiency, transparency, responsiveness, accountability, and citizen satisfaction (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011; Osborne, 2018).

The advancement of E-Government — broadly defined as the strategic deployment of digital technologies to enhance public service delivery and state-citizen interactions — has been promoted as a core mechanism through which these quality improvements might be realized (UNDP, 2020). Successive national E-Government strategies have been implemented in tandem with the country's long-standing Public Administration Reform Program (Cải cách hành chính nhà nước), reflecting an integrated reform logic aimed at simplifying procedures, reducing corruption opportunities, and building public trust in government institutions.

Yet, despite notable progress in both technological adoption and procedural innovation, the actual impact of these reforms on public service quality outcomes remains variable and uneven across sectors and territorial jurisdictions. While certain services have become demonstrably more accessible, efficient, and transparent, significant challenges persist, particularly in ensuring equity of access, institutional coherence, and deep integration of digital tools within broader process and organizational reforms. Moreover, there is a persistent risk that digitalization initiatives are implemented as technological overlays—focused on front-end service interfaces—without corresponding investment in the process reengineering, capacity building, and governance innovation required to sustain transformative change (Heeks, 2006; Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013).

Against this backdrop, this article critically examines the evolving role of E-Government and administrative reform in shaping public service quality in contemporary Vietnam. Drawing upon policy documents, national performance data, and relevant literature, it seeks to analyze key achievements to date, identify persistent governance and institutional challenges, and offer targeted policy recommendations to enhance the transformative potential of these reform efforts. In doing so, the paper contributes to broader debates on digital-era governance (Dunleavy et al., 2006), state capacity, and public service innovation in transitional and emerging contexts.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Public service quality is widely recognized as a multidimensional and dynamic construct, encompassing both the technical performance of services and the subjective experience of citizens as they interact with state institutions (Osborne, 2018). In the literature on public administration and service delivery, commonly emphasized dimensions of service quality include:

Efficiency: the speed, reliability, and cost-effectiveness of service provision;

Effectiveness: the extent to which services achieve intended policy and programmatic outcomes;

Responsiveness: the timeliness and appropriateness of service responses to citizen needs and preferences;

Transparency and accountability: the openness of public agencies and the extent to which they are answerable for their actions and performance;

Citizen satisfaction: subjective assessments of service quality from the perspective of service users.

E-Government offers multiple potential pathways to enhance these dimensions of service quality. By enabling the automation of processes, increasing the transparency of information flows, and providing multi-channel access to services, digital platforms can improve both the efficiency and citizen-centricity of public services (Scholl, 2010; Dunleavy et al., 2006). Moreover, E-Government holds the promise of contributing to corruption reduction, enhancing equity of access, and fostering more participatory modes of governance (Heeks, 2006).

However, as a growing body of research highlights, the impacts of E-Government on public service quality are highly contingent on the presence of robust and adaptive administrative and governance frameworks (Moynihan, 2018; Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013). Technological tools alone are insufficient to drive meaningful improvements if they are not embedded within broader processes of institutional reform, capacity building, and organizational change (Bannister & Connolly, 2012). In many cases, without such complementary reforms, digital initiatives risk reproducing — or even amplifying — existing inefficiencies, inequities, and governance deficits.

The Vietnamese context provides a particularly salient case of this dynamic interaction. The country's ambitious E-Government agenda has been pursued in parallel with an ongoing national program of public administration reform (Government of Vietnam, 2021). Yet, the degree to which these two reform streams are effectively integrated — in terms of procedural simplification, institutional capacity development, and process reengineering — varies significantly across sectors and levels of government (Nguyen & Doan, 2022).

Consequently, a nuanced understanding of public service quality outcomes in Vietnam requires simultaneous attention to both the technological and organizational dimensions of reform. It is not sufficient to evaluate digital adoption rates or online service availability alone; rather, it is essential to analyze how E-Government initiatives interact with — and are mediated by — administrative practices, institutional cultures, and the broader political economy of public service delivery.

This conceptual framing guides the analysis that follows, foregrounding the importance of integrated governance approaches and adaptive institutional capacities as critical enablers of sustained improvements in public service quality.

3. E-GOVERNMENT AND ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM IN VIETNAM

Vietnam's administrative reform program, initiated in the late 1990s, has constituted a central component of the country's broader state modernization agenda. Evolving through multiple phases, this reform trajectory has aimed to enhance both the efficiency and legitimacy of public administration, while fostering greater responsiveness to citizen needs (World Bank, 2020). The current phase of reform is articulated in the Public Administration Reform Master Program 2021–2030, which reflects a more explicit focus on service quality outcomes as a key performance criterion for the public sector.

The core objectives of the current administrative reform program include:

Streamlining administrative procedures to reduce bureaucratic complexity and transaction costs;

Enhancing transparency and accountability across all levels of government;

Improving public service quality and citizen satisfaction through more citizen-centered service delivery models.

In parallel, Vietnam has pursued an increasingly ambitious E-Government development strategy, guided by the National Digital Transformation Program to 2025, with a vision to 2030 (Government of Vietnam, 2021). E-Government initiatives are framed not merely as tools for technological modernization, but as strategic instruments to support broader goals of governance innovation and public sector performance improvement (Nguyen & Doan, 2022).

Key pillars of Vietnam's E-Government efforts include:

The development of national public service portals (Cổng Dịch vụ công quốc gia), which provide centralized access to a growing array of digital services;

The expansion of online administrative services (Dịch vụ công trực tuyến), aimed at reducing in-person transactions and increasing service accessibility;

The implementation of digital identity and authentication systems, designed to streamline user interactions with public agencies and enhance security;

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The integration of administrative data systems across sectors and tiers of government to support more coherent and efficient service delivery.

These national initiatives have been reinforced by Vietnam's increasing engagement with international digital governance frameworks and global benchmarking exercises, such as participation in the United Nations E-Government Development Index and alignment with regional digital governance standards (UN DESA, 2022).

Taken together, the trajectories of administrative reform and E-Government development in Vietnam exhibit a growing degree of conceptual and policy convergence. Both streams emphasize the imperative of improving public service quality, strengthening state–society interactions, and building institutional capacity for innovation and continuous learning. However, as the following sections will explore, the extent to which these parallel reforms have been effectively integrated — and the implications of this integration for service quality outcomes — remains an area of both scholarly and practical concern..

4. IMPACT ON PUBLIC SERVICE QUALITY

Empirical assessments of the impact of E-Government and administrative reform on public service quality in Vietnam present a complex and uneven picture. While certain improvements are evident, significant challenges remain that constrain the full realization of service quality objectives. This section synthesizes key trends based on available evidence and scholarly assessments.

On the positive side, several gains have been documented in recent years:

There has been a marked increase in the availability of online services, particularly for relatively simple administrative transactions such as document requests and tax payments. The expansion of Vietnam's National Public Service Portal and related platforms has played an important role in broadening citizen access to digital services (Government of Vietnam, 2023).

Transparency of administrative procedures has improved in several domains, contributing to a documented reduction in informal payments and corruption risks in some sectors (UNDP & CECODES, 2023; PAPI, 2023).

Levels of citizen satisfaction with specific digitally-enabled services have shown notable improvement, as reflected in the Public Administration Reform (PAR) Index and various sectoral evaluations (Nguyen & Doan, 2022). These gains suggest that, where well-implemented, E-Government can make meaningful contributions to improving both the efficiency and perceived fairness of public services.

However, these positive outcomes are counterbalanced by a set of persistent and significant challenges:

Urban–rural digital divides continue to limit equitable access to online services. Citizens in more remote and underserved areas frequently face barriers related to infrastructure, digital literacy, and affordability, undermining the inclusiveness of E-Government initiatives.

Many public services remain at low levels of digital maturity, often limited to informational or basic transactional stages. Comprehensive end-to-end process integration—essential for achieving substantial efficiency gains and improved user experience—remains underdeveloped in many sectors and jurisdictions (Nguyen & Doan, 2022).

Institutional inertia and fragmented governance structures impede effective process reengineering, resulting in digital platforms that frequently replicate cumbersome offline procedures rather than enabling more streamlined, citizen-centric service delivery (Heeks, 2006).

There is considerable variability in local government capacity, leading to pronounced disparities in both service quality and citizen experience across provinces and municipalities (PAPI, 2023). Subnational inequalities in institutional resources, technical expertise, and leadership commitment contribute to this uneven landscape.

Furthermore, in the absence of strong change management practices and citizen-centered service design, E-Government reforms risk inadvertently exacerbating exclusion for vulnerable populations, including ethnic minorities, the elderly, and low-income groups (Nguyen & Doan, 2022). Without targeted interventions to address the specific needs of these groups, digitalization may reinforce rather than mitigate existing inequities in public service access.

Collectively, these findings underscore the importance of viewing E-Government and administrative reform not as technological ends in themselves, but as components of a broader and more complex process of institutional transformation. Achieving sustained improvements in public service quality will require a more integrated governance approach, greater attention to equity and inclusion, and a stronger emphasis on organizational learning and adaptive capacity across all levels of the public administration.

5. GOVERNANCE AND INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

The effectiveness of E-Government and administrative reform in enhancing public service quality is fundamentally mediated by a range of governance and institutional factors. While technological infrastructure and digital platforms represent important enablers of reform, their impact is highly contingent upon the institutional context in which they are embedded (Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013; Bannister & Connolly, 2012). Empirical evidence from both Vietnam and international experiences suggests that sustained improvements in service quality depend on the presence of adaptive governance, institutional coherence, and collaborative capacity (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012; OECD, 2019).

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Several governance and institutional dynamics shape the outcomes of Vietnam's digital and administrative transformation efforts:

Leadership and political will are essential for driving cross-sectoral coordination and overcoming bureaucratic resistance to change. In contexts where senior leadership champions reform and promotes a culture of innovation, E-Government initiatives are more likely to achieve meaningful improvements in service delivery. Conversely, in the absence of such leadership, reforms often stall or become symbolic (Nguyen & Doan, 2022).

Inter-agency coordination remains a persistent challenge. Despite formal mandates for data integration and process harmonization, institutional silos continue to impede the development of unified digital ecosystems and streamlined administrative processes. The lack of interoperable systems and shared governance frameworks undermines both the efficiency and user experience of digital services (OECD, 2019).

The capacity of local governments varies significantly, shaping both the depth and consistency of service quality improvements across Vietnam's provinces and municipalities. Subnational disparities in financial resources, technical expertise, and institutional readiness contribute to territorial inequalities in the implementation and performance of E-Government and administrative reforms (PAPI, 2023).

Citizen engagement and feedback mechanisms remain underdeveloped in many areas of service design and evaluation. While some progress has been made in integrating user feedback through public portals and citizen surveys, these practices are not yet systematically embedded in core administrative processes. Without robust mechanisms for iterative learning and responsive governance, the potential for continuous improvement in service quality is constrained (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012).

These findings align with broader international evidence, which underscores the importance of embedding continuous learning, adaptive governance, and collaborative policy processes in digital transformation efforts (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012; OECD, 2019). Achieving such integration requires moving beyond purely technical solutions to cultivate institutional cultures and governance practices that prioritize user-centeredness, cross-sectoral collaboration, and dynamic capability development.

In the Vietnamese context, strengthening these governance dimensions represents a critical precondition for realizing the full potential of E-Government and administrative reform in driving sustained improvements in public service quality.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance the contribution of E-Government and administrative reform to public service quality in Vietnam, a more integrated and strategically coordinated approach to governance is required. The following policy priorities are proposed to address current gaps and support the development of a more effective and inclusive public service ecosystem.

First, it is essential to strengthen the integration of E-Government initiatives with process simplification and broader administrative reform. Treating digitalization as an isolated or purely technological objective risks reinforcing existing inefficiencies and procedural burdens. Instead, digital transformation efforts should be embedded within a comprehensive agenda of business process reengineering, ensuring that digital platforms support genuinely streamlined, citizen-centered service delivery (Heeks, 2006; Margetts & Dunleavy, 2013).

Second, targeted capacity building at the local government level is needed to ensure more consistent implementation of reforms and to reduce territorial disparities in service quality. Investing in technical expertise, organizational learning, and leadership development at the subnational level will be critical to achieving a more equitable and resilient public administration (OECD, 2019).

Third, the promotion of inclusive digital services should be prioritized to address persistent connectivity gaps, digital literacy barriers, and accessibility challenges faced by vulnerable groups, including those in rural and remote areas. Policies must go beyond infrastructure provision to encompass targeted outreach, skills development, and the design of accessible digital interfaces that accommodate diverse user needs (Nguyen & Doan, 2022).

Fourth, the development of more robust citizen engagement mechanisms is necessary to support continuous learning and service improvement. Incorporating user feedback systematically into service design and evaluation processes can help public agencies identify performance gaps, innovate responsively, and build greater public trust (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012). Mechanisms such as participatory design workshops, real-time feedback platforms, and citizen advisory councils should be expanded and institutionalized.

Finally, fostering collaborative governance structures is essential to improving inter-agency coordination and promoting shared ownership of service quality goals. Establishing cross-sectoral working groups, promoting joint accountability frameworks, and enabling shared data governance arrangements can help overcome institutional silos and drive more coherent, user-centered public service delivery (Peters, 2015; OECD, 2019).

Collectively, these policy directions underscore the importance of approaching digital transformation and administrative reform as mutually reinforcing components of a broader governance agenda. Advancing this integrated approach will be critical to ensuring that Vietnam's investments in E-Government and public administration modernization translate into sustained improvements in public service quality, greater equity of access, and enhanced citizen trust in government institutions.

7. CONCLUSION

Vietnam's efforts in advancing E-Government and administrative reform have established a valuable foundation for enhancing public service quality. Significant progress has been made in expanding digital service delivery, promoting greater transparency, and increasing citizen access to public services. However, as this analysis has demonstrated, the realization of the full transformative potential of these initiatives remains contingent upon addressing a set of persistent governance and institutional challenges.

Moving forward, it is imperative to adopt a more integrated, citizen-centered, and institutionally adaptive approach to governance. Such an approach must view digitalization and administrative reform as mutually reinforcing processes, deeply embedded within broader efforts to foster organizational learning, process reengineering, and collaborative governance. Merely extending the reach of digital platforms will be insufficient if underlying institutional and procedural rigidities are not simultaneously addressed.

In this context, effective state management—characterized by strong leadership, sustained cross-sectoral collaboration, and a commitment to continuous learning and innovation—will be critical to steering this complex transformation. The capacity of the Vietnamese state to orchestrate these dynamics will shape not only the trajectory of public service quality but also the broader legitimacy and responsiveness of public administration in the digital era.

As Vietnam deepens its digital and administrative modernization, sustained investment in the governance of service quality should remain a central strategic priority. Doing so will be essential not only for building public trust and improving citizen experience, but also for supporting the country's wider development goals, including inclusive growth, social equity, and democratic governance.

Future research should continue to explore the evolving dynamics of state capacity, institutional adaptation, and citizen engagement in the context of Vietnam's digital transformation. Comparative insights from other emerging and transitional governance contexts could provide valuable lessons to inform the next phase of reform.

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