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Administrative Reform and Governance Performance in Vietnam: Evidence from a Decade of PAR Index and PAPI Data

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Abstract

Vietnam measures the progress of its public administration reform with two very different instruments. The Public Administration Reform Index (PAR Index), compiled by the Ministry of Home Affairs, scores ministries and provinces on how far they have carried out the reform tasks assigned to them. The Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI), produced by an independent research consortium with the United Nations Development Programme, asks citizens how governance actually feels from the receiving end. This article reads the two series side by side for the decade 2015–2024, together with the government's citizen satisfaction index (SIPAS). It relies only on published secondary data and uses descriptive longitudinal comparison and source triangulation rather than econometric modelling. Three patterns emerge. First, official reform scores rose steadily: The provincial mean of the PAR Index climbed from 74.64% in 2016 to 88.37% in 2024, and the distance between the best and worst province

shrank from 27.77 to 13.22 points. Second, citizen-reported governance improved far more slowly and unevenly. Dimensions linked to the supply of services, such as administrative procedures and public service delivery, sit comfortably above the midpoint of the PAPI scale, while participation, vertical accountability, environmental governance and e-governance remain below it in every province. Third, the two instruments often rank the same province very differently, and several episodes of compromised survey data since 2023 show that the pressure created by league tables now reaches the measurement process itself. The article interprets these patterns as a gap between reform compliance and governance experience, and argues that the PAR Index is approaching a ceiling at which it can no longer separate strong from weak performers. It closes with proposals for linking the two instruments, protecting survey integrity and redesigning indicators for the two-tier local government system introduced in 2025.

Keywords: Administrative Reform, Governance Indicators, PAR Index, PAPI, Performance Measurement, Citizen Experience, Vietnam

JEL Classification: H11; H83; O53

1. Introduction

Measuring government performance has become a central activity of government itself. Over the past three decades, states at every income level have adopted scorecards, rankings and composite indices to judge how well their own agencies carry out reform. These tools promise to make abstract goals, such as transparency, efficiency and accountability, visible and comparable. They also create incentives. Once a score is attached to a province or a ministry and published in a ranked table, officials have strong reasons to improve the score, and they do not always do so by improving the underlying reality (Bevan & Hood, 2006; Kelley & Simmons, 2015) ^[5, 24].

Vietnam offers an unusually rich case for studying this tension. Since the early 2000s, public administration reform has been a standing priority of the Communist Party and the Government, organised through two consecutive ten-year master programmes: Resolution 30c/NQ-CP for 2011–2020 and Resolution 76/NQ-CP for 2021–2030 (Government of Viet Nam, 2011, 2021) ^[19, 20]. To monitor these programmes, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) introduced the Public Administration Reform Index, known as the PAR Index, in 2012. Each year it scores every ministry and every province against a long list of criteria, from the issuance of reform plans to the share of procedures handled online. In parallel, the Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI) has surveyed a representative sample of citizens in all provinces every year

since 2011, after pilot rounds in 2009 and 2010. PAPI is produced by an independent consortium led by the Centre for Community Support and Development Studies (CECODES) with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Since 2017, the government has also run its own Satisfaction Index of Public Administrative Services (SIPAS).

These instruments look at the same administrative system from opposite ends. The PAR Index is mainly a supply-side measure: Roughly two thirds of the points come from appraisal of what agencies report they have done, and about one third from surveys. PAPI is a demand-side measure built entirely from citizens' experiences and perceptions. When both series move together, we can be fairly confident that reform is reaching people. When they diverge, the divergence itself tells us something about the reform process and about the measurement tools.

Surprisingly little research has set the two series against each other over a long period. Studies using PAPI have examined urban–rural differences in governance (Acuña-Alfaro *et al.*, 2015) ^[1], citizen participation in cities (Nguyen *et al.*, 2015) ^[35] and the effects of institutional change on local services (Malesky *et al.*, 2014) ^[26]. The PAR Index, by contrast, is used mostly in official reporting and in provincial self-evaluations, and has rarely been analysed critically in the international literature. There is, therefore, no systematic account of what a decade of these two indices reveals when read together.

This article fills that gap. It asks three questions. How did official measures of administrative reform evolve between 2015 and 2024, overall, by reform field and across provinces? How did citizens' reported experience of governance evolve over the same period? And what do the points of convergence and divergence between the two instruments reveal about the state of reform and about the reliability of the instruments themselves?

The study deliberately avoids econometric modelling. Public data on the two indices are published in summary form, with changing methodologies, and the full provincial series are not consistently available for every year. Under these conditions, a careful descriptive and comparative reading, with explicit rules for comparability, is more defensible than regression estimates built on an incomplete panel. The approach follows a tradition in comparative public administration that treats indicator series as evidence to be interpreted in their institutional context rather than as variables to be plugged into a model (Andrews, 2008; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017) ^[2, 39].

The article makes three contributions. Empirically, it assembles a verified ten-year record of both indices, including national means, reform-field scores, provincial extremes and survey coverage, from official reports and government releases. Conceptually, it proposes a simple distinction between reform compliance, which the PAR Index captures well, and governance experience, which PAPI captures, and shows that the gap between them is neither random nor shrinking. Practically, it identifies concrete signs that the PAR Index is losing its power to discriminate between provinces, and that the pressure attached to rankings has begun to affect independent survey data. These findings matter beyond Vietnam, because many governments in Asia and elsewhere now run similar internal reform scorecards alongside external citizen surveys.

The rest of the article is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on administrative reform and governance measurement and sets out the analytical framework. Section 3 describes the data and methods. Section 4 presents the findings. Section 5 discusses their meaning, Section 6 draws out policy implications and Section 7 concludes.

2. Literature review and analytical framework

2.1 Administrative reform beyond New Public Management

The modern vocabulary of administrative reform owes much to New Public Management (NPM), which since the 1980s has promoted the transfer of private-sector techniques to government: Performance targets, output measurement, decentralised management and a customer orientation towards citizens (Hood, 1991) ^[21]. In practice, reform rarely followed a single template. Comparative studies show that countries borrowed elements of NPM selectively and combined them with older bureaucratic traditions, producing hybrids rather than convergence (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017) ^[39]. Later approaches shifted attention away from internal efficiency. The New Public Governance perspective emphasised networks, co-production and the involvement of citizens (Osborne, 2006) ^[36], while the idea of digital-era governance stressed the reintegration of fragmented services through information technology (Dunleavy *et al.*, 2006) ^[12].

For transition economies, these debates take a specific form. Reform in a single-party state does not aim at political competition, but it does aim at a more capable, predictable and responsive administration that can sustain growth and legitimacy. Painter (2003, 2005) ^[37, 38] described Vietnam's administrative reform as a layering of imported techniques onto a socialist administrative structure, with outcomes shaped by contested priorities inside the state. Gainsborough (2010) ^[15] and London (2014) ^[25] showed that reform in Vietnam is closely tied to the internal politics of the Party-state, where central leaders seek better control over local agents as much as better service to citizens. Vasavakul (2019) ^[50] traced how successive reform programmes reorganised ministries, local governments and the civil service while keeping political authority centralised.

A useful lesson from this literature is that formal reform and actual capability can drift apart. Pritchett *et al.* (2013) ^[40] called this "isomorphic mimicry": Organisations adopt the forms of modern administration, such as plans, procedures and portals, without a matching rise in the capacity to deliver. Andrews *et al.* (2013) ^[3] argued that reform success should be judged by whether concrete problems are solved, not by whether prescribed solutions are adopted. Both arguments point directly to the question this article examines: Whether a rising score on an official reform index reflects a real change in how citizens experience government.

2.2 Measuring governance: Uses and limits of composite indicators

Composite governance indicators became widespread in the late 1990s. The best known, the Worldwide Governance Indicators, combine many sources into six dimensions of governance for most countries in the world (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2011) ^[23]. Their spread prompted a lively methodological debate. Critics pointed to unclear

definitions, weak links between theory and measurement, and the danger of treating aggregate scores as precise (Arndt & Oman, 2006; Thomas, 2010) [4, 42]. Andrews (2008) [2] warned that indicators built on an idealised image of “good governance” may push countries towards institutional forms that do not fit their problems. Fukuyama (2013) [14] suggested that governance should be measured mainly through the capacity and autonomy of the bureaucracy, rather than through democratic procedures, while Rothstein and Teorell (2008) [41] proposed impartiality in the exercise of public authority as the core criterion of quality of government.

Gisselquist (2014) [18] offered a practical checklist for evaluating governance indices. Among its questions, three are especially relevant here: What exactly the index claims to measure, whether its sources are independent of the units being assessed, and whether changes over time reflect real change or methodological revisions. These questions apply with particular force to indices produced by a government about its own agencies.

Indicators also have political effects. Davis *et al.* (2012) [11] described indicators as a “technology of governance” that shapes the behaviour of those being measured. Kelley and Simmons (2015) [24] showed that published rankings work as a form of social pressure, encouraging the ranked to change policies in order to improve their position. This pressure can be productive. It can also redirect effort towards the visible parts of performance that the indicator rewards.

2.3 Performance measurement inside hierarchies

When an indicator is used inside a hierarchy to evaluate subordinate units, its effects become stronger. Campbell (1979) [7] formulated what is now known as Campbell’s law: The more a quantitative indicator is used for social decision-making, the more it will be subject to corruption pressures and the more it will distort the processes it is meant to monitor. Bevan and Hood (2006) [5] documented how targets in the English health system produced gaming, including ratchet effects, threshold effects and output distortion. Van Thiel and Leeuw (2002) [48] described a “performance paradox”, in which indicators gradually lose their ability to distinguish good from poor performance because all units learn to score well on them. Hood (2007) [22] noted that management by numbers varies widely in design, and that rankings tied to reputational or career consequences produce the strongest behavioural responses. Moynihan (2008) [34] added that performance information is used selectively and interpreted through organisational interests.

Single-party states offer close parallels. Studies of China’s cadre evaluation system show that numerical targets helped the centre to steer local officials (Edin, 2003; Gao, 2009) [13, 16], but also encouraged manipulation of the very statistics used to evaluate them (Gao, 2015; Wallace, 2016) [17, 53]. Wallace (2016) [53] argued that authoritarian governments face a particular information problem: The more they rely on internally produced data to evaluate local agents, the less reliable those data become. Independent sources of information, such as citizen surveys, are therefore especially valuable, but they too can come under pressure once their results enter official evaluation.

2.4 Citizen experience as a measure of governance

A second strand of literature concerns the measurement of government performance through citizens’ eyes. Satisfaction

surveys are widely used, but they are shaped by expectations as well as by performance, so that rising satisfaction may reflect lower expectations as much as better services (Van Ryzin, 2004) [49]. Bouckaert and Van de Walle (2003) [6] cautioned that satisfaction with specific services and trust in government are distinct, and that neither maps simply onto “good governance”. Experience-based questions, which ask what actually happened during a contact with the administration (for instance, whether a bribe was requested or how many visits a procedure required), are generally more robust than general opinion questions.

PAPI was designed with these concerns in mind. It combines experience-based items with perception items, uses a probability sample of citizens and is produced outside the state hierarchy. Research based on PAPI has shown large and persistent gaps between urban and rural residents (Acuña-Alfaro *et al.*, 2015) [1], uneven citizen participation in city governance (Nguyen *et al.*, 2015) [35] and measurable effects of institutional reforms on local service delivery (Malesky *et al.*, 2014) [26]. However, PAPI’s value as an independent check depends on its separation from the incentives created by official evaluation.

2.5 Analytical framework

Drawing these strands together, the article distinguishes two faces of administrative reform. The first is *reform compliance*: The extent to which agencies carry out the tasks set by the reform programme, such as issuing plans, simplifying procedures, restructuring units or launching online services. The PAR Index is designed mainly to capture this face. The second is *governance experience*: What citizens actually encounter when they deal with the state, including information, responsiveness, integrity and service quality. PAPI is designed to capture this face, and SIPAS sits between the two, as a government-run survey of service users.

The relationship between the two faces is an empirical question. In a well-functioning reform, compliance should translate, perhaps with a delay, into better experience. If compliance rises while experience stagnates, three explanations are possible. Reforms may be formal rather than substantive, in line with the idea of isomorphic mimicry. Reforms may be real but concentrated in areas that citizens rarely encounter. Or the compliance measure may be losing accuracy, as the performance paradox and Campbell’s law predict for indicators used in high-stakes evaluation.

The framework leads to three expectations that guide the analysis. First, scores on the compliance measure should rise faster and more uniformly than scores on the experience measure. Second, the gap should be widest in reform fields where compliance can be achieved by issuing documents or building systems, such as digital government, and narrowest in fields where compliance requires direct changes in front-line behaviour. Third, as the compliance measure matures, it should show signs of saturation, including compressed scores and falling discrimination between units, and the incentives attached to rankings may spill over into other data sources.

3. Data and Methods

3.1 The PAR Index

The PAR Index has been published every year since its first full round for 2012. It assesses two groups of units:

Ministries and ministerial-level agencies (19 in 2015–2017 and 17 from 2019) and provinces and centrally governed cities (63 until 2024). For provinces, the index is organised into eight fields: Direction and management of reform; institutional reform; administrative procedure reform; reform of the administrative apparatus; civil service reform; public finance reform; e-government and digital government; and the impact of reform on people and socio-economic development. Ministries are scored on the first seven fields.

Each unit first assesses itself against the criteria. MOHA and an appraisal council then verify and adjust the scores. A further part of the score comes from surveys of officials, leaders and managers, and of service users through SIPAS. The methodology has been revised several times. Decision 4361/QD-BNV of 28 December 2016 set the basis for the 2016 index. Decision 2636/QD-BNV of 10 December 2018 set 41 criteria and 96 sub-criteria for provinces, with 35.5 of 100 points from surveys. Decision 1149/QD-BNV of 30 December 2020 raised the number of provincial sub-criteria to 102 and set the survey share at 33.5 points. Decision 876/QD-BNV of 10 November 2022 introduced a framework for 2022–2030 with 37 criteria and 88 sub-criteria for provinces (MOHA, 2018, 2020, 2022) [28, 29, 31]. In the 2023 summary report, the survey component for provinces is given as 32 points, of which 10 come from SIPAS and 22 from a survey of leaders and managers, while appraisal accounts for 61.5 points and socio-economic impact for 6.5 points (MOHA, 2024) [32]. In every version, therefore, about two thirds of the score rests on appraisal of reported actions.

These revisions limit comparability. The provincial mean of 85.11% for 2015 was calculated under the earlier method and cannot be compared with the 74.64% recorded in 2016 under Decision 4361 (MOHA, 2017) [27]. The present analysis treats 2016 as the start of a comparable series and notes a second break in 2022, when Decision 876 took effect.

3.2 PAPI

PAPI is a nationally representative survey of adult citizens. Each year, respondents are selected through multi-stage random sampling in every province, and the results are aggregated into dimension scores on a scale from 1 to 10. Until 2017 the index had six dimensions: Participation at local levels; transparency in local decision-making; vertical accountability; control of corruption in the public sector; public administrative procedures; and public service delivery. In 2018 two dimensions were added, environmental governance and e-governance, so that the aggregate now ranges from 8 to 80 (UNDP, 2019) [45]. By 2023 the index contained 122 indicators grouped into 28 sub-dimensions (CECODES *et al.*, 2024) [9].

Table 1 summarises survey coverage. The sample grew from 13,955 respondents in 2015 to 19,536 in 2023 and 18,894 in 2024. Coverage fell from 63 to 61 provinces in both 2023 and 2024 for reasons discussed in Section 4.5.

Table 1: PAPI survey coverage, 2015–2024

Survey year	Respondents	Provinces in ranking	Dimensions	Aggregate scale
2015	13,955	63	6	6–60
2016	about 14,000	63	6	6–60
2017	14,097	63	6	6–60
2018	14,304	63	8	8–80
2019	14,138	63	8	8–80
2020	14,732	63	8	8–80
2021	15,833	63	8	8–80
2022	16,117	63	8	8–80
2023	19,536	61	8	8–80
2024	18,894	61	8	8–80

Source: Compiled from UNDP fact sheets, press releases and annual PAPI reports (see Appendix A).

3.3 SIPAS

The Satisfaction Index of Public Administrative Services is run by MOHA and measures the satisfaction of people and organisations that have used administrative services. Its national mean is reported each year alongside the PAR Index, and it also feeds into the survey component of the provincial PAR Index. SIPAS therefore occupies an intermediate position: It collects citizens' views, but within the official evaluation system.

3.4 Analytical strategy

The study uses three descriptive techniques. The first is longitudinal comparison of national means and of reform-field means, read within comparable methodological periods. The second is an analysis of dispersion, using the gap between the highest- and lowest-ranked province as a simple measure of how well each index separates units. The third is triangulation across instruments: For provinces that appear at the top or bottom of either index, their positions are compared across the two series and over time.

No regression or other inferential model is estimated. The reason is practical as well as methodological. Full provincial tables for every dimension and year are not consistently available in published form, and the methodological breaks in both indices would require strong assumptions to build a balanced panel. Descriptive comparison allows the analysis to stay close to what the published data actually show, and to make the limits of the evidence explicit. This choice follows Gisselquist's (2014) [18] advice that the interpretation of governance indices should start from their construction rather than from their numerical output alone.

3.5 Data sources and verification

All figures come from published sources. For the PAR Index, the primary sources are MOHA summary reports for the 2016, 2023 and 2025 rounds, MOHA presentation slides for the 2020 round (MOHA, 2021) [30], and the relevant MOHA decisions. For other years, figures were taken from official government news portals and national newspapers that reported the results on the day of publication, and each figure was checked against at least one other source. For PAPI, the primary sources are the annual reports and UNDP

press releases and fact sheets, supplemented by press coverage of the launches. Where sources disagreed, the discrepancy is noted in the text and the figure is either reported with a caution or omitted. Values that could not be verified are left blank rather than estimated. Appendix A lists the sources year by year.

Two limitations follow from this approach. The published PAPI material available for this study reports provincial ranges, top and bottom scores and selected national indicators, but not a full series of national dimension means for every year. The analysis therefore relies on ranges and specific indicators when describing PAPI trends. In addition, some PAR Index results for intermediate years, such as complete bottom-three rankings, were not found in verifiable form and are left out.

4. Results

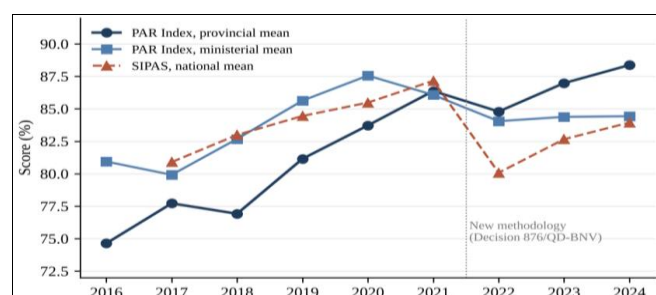
4.1 A decade of rising reform scores

Table 2 and Fig 1 present the national means of the PAR Index and SIPAS. Within the comparable period 2016–2021, the provincial mean of the PAR Index rose by 11.73 points, from 74.64% to 86.37%. The new methodology introduced in 2022 produced a small dip, to 84.79%, after which the mean resumed its rise and reached 88.37% in 2024, the highest value recorded for the 63-province system. The first round under the new 34-province structure, for 2025, produced a provincial mean of 89.96% (MOHA, 2026) [33].

Table 2: National means of the PAR Index and SIPAS, 2015–2024 (%)

Year	PAR Index, provinces	PAR Index, ministries	SIPAS	Approving decision for the methodology
2015	85.11	85.30		Earlier method, not comparable
2016	74.64	80.94		Decision 4361/QD-BNV
2017	77.72	79.92	80.90	Decision 2948/QD-BNV
2018	76.92	82.68	82.99	Decision 2636/QD-BNV
2019	81.15	85.63	84.45	Decision 1150/QD-BNV
2020	83.72	87.56	85.48	Decision 1149/QD-BNV
2021	86.37	86.07	87.16	Decision 1149/QD-BNV
2022	84.79	84.05	80.08	Decision 876/QD-BNV
2023	86.98	84.38	82.66	Decision 876/QD-BNV
2024	88.37	84.43	83.94	Decision 876/QD-BNV

Source: MOHA summary reports and official releases (see Appendix A). Blank cells: SIPAS was not yet conducted nationally.



Source: Authors' compilation from MOHA reports and releases

Fig 1: National means of the PAR Index and SIPAS, 2016–2024

Two features of this trend deserve attention. The first is the different paths followed by provinces and ministries. Ministries began the period ahead of provinces and peaked in 2020 at 87.56%. Since 2022 their mean has been almost flat, at around 84%, while the provincial mean has continued to rise. In 2024 the provincial mean exceeded the ministerial mean by almost four points. This reversal is notable, because ministries draft the legal and procedural framework that provinces implement. A large share of the remaining weakness in the reform system now appears to sit at the central level rather than the local level.

The second feature is the behaviour of SIPAS. Citizen satisfaction rose every year from 80.90% in 2017 to 87.16% in 2021, then dropped by more than seven points to 80.08% in 2022, before recovering to 83.94% in 2024. The drop coincides with the introduction of Decision 876, which also revised the SIPAS survey. Its size, however, is much larger than the corresponding dip in the PAR Index. The result is that, under the current methodology, citizen satisfaction lags more than four points behind the provincial reform score. In the earlier period, SIPAS had generally been higher than the provincial PAR Index.

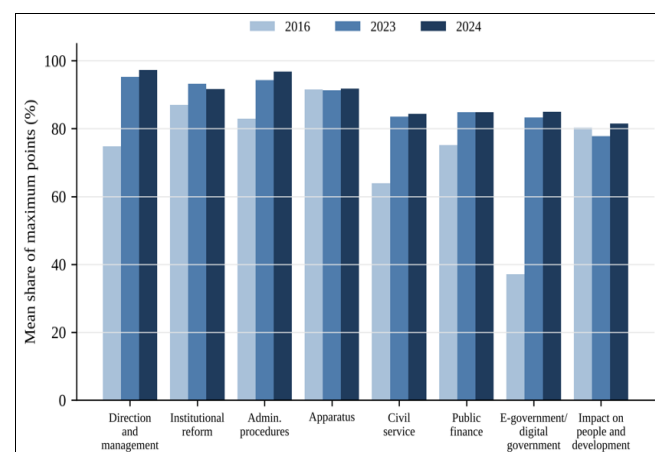
4.2 Uneven progress across reform fields

Table 3 and Fig 2 break the provincial PAR Index into its eight fields for 2016, 2023 and 2024, the three years for which national field means are available in official reports. Because the fields carry different numbers of points, the scores are expressed as a share of the maximum.

Table 3: Provincial PAR Index by reform field, selected years (% of maximum points)

Reform field	2016	2023	2024	Change 2016–2024
Direction and management	74.79	95.25	97.28	+22.49
Institutional reform	86.99	93.21	91.61	+4.62
Administrative procedures	82.98	94.32	96.79	+13.81
Apparatus reform	91.51	91.28	91.79	+0.28
Civil service reform	63.87	83.47	84.34	+20.47
Public finance reform	75.10	84.80	84.78	+9.68
E-government / digital government	37.11	83.25	84.93	+47.82
Impact on people and development	80.29	77.73	81.48	+1.19

Source: MOHA (2017, 2024, 2026) [27, 32, 33]. The change column compares methodologically different rounds and indicates direction and order of magnitude only



Source: Authors' compilation from MOHA summary reports

Fig 2: Provincial PAR Index by reform field, 2016, 2023 and 2024

The fields fall into three groups. In the first group are fields where provinces now score above 90% and where progress has largely consisted of meeting procedural requirements: Direction and management of reform (97.28% in 2024), administrative procedures (96.79%), apparatus reform (91.79%) and institutional reform (91.61%). In these fields the index has little room left to record further improvement.

The second group consists of fields with large gains from a low base. The most dramatic is e-government and digital government, which rose from 37.11% in 2016 to 84.93% in 2024, an increase of almost 48 points. Civil service reform also rose by more than 20 points. These gains reflect a period of intensive investment in online public services, electronic one-stop shops and personnel management systems, encouraged by the national digital transformation programme.

The third group is the field that measures outcomes rather than actions: The impact of reform on people and socio-economic development. This field scored 80.29% in 2016, fell to 77.73% in 2023 and recovered only to 81.48% in 2024. Over eight years, the outcome field barely moved while the action fields rose sharply. In 2023, it was the lowest-scoring of all eight fields. The same contrast appears in the ministerial index, where in 2024 the weakest fields were public finance reform (74.55%) and institutional reform (79.42%), both of which depend on the quality of legal and financial frameworks rather than on administrative actions alone.

The pattern matches the second expectation of the analytical framework. The largest gains are concentrated in fields where compliance can be achieved by issuing plans or deploying systems, and the smallest in the field that captures what those actions achieve for people.

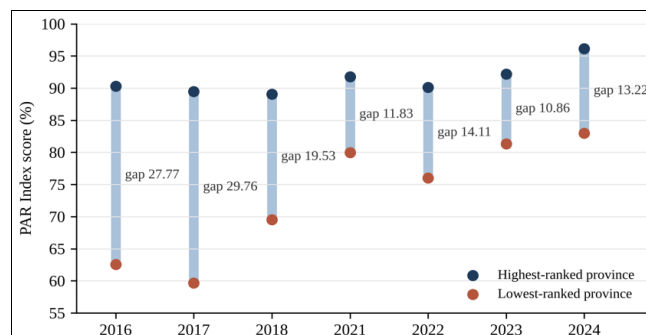
4.3 Narrowing gaps and the ceiling problem

Table 4 lists the highest- and lowest-ranked provinces in the PAR Index for each year where both were verified, and Fig 3 plots the distance between them.

Table 4: Highest- and lowest-ranked provinces in the PAR Index, 2015-2024 (%)

Year	Highest-ranked province	Score	Lowest-ranked province	Score	Gap
2015	Da Nang	93.31	Dien Bien	74.99	18.32
2016	Da Nang	90.32	Hau Giang	62.55	27.77
2017	Quang Ninh	89.45	Quang Ngai	59.69	29.76
2018	Quang Ninh	89.06	Phu Yen	69.53	19.53
2019	Quang Ninh	90.09	Ben Tre	not reported	
2020	Quang Ninh	91.04	Quang Ngai (reported)	not verified	
2021	Hai Phong	91.80	Kien Giang	79.97	11.83
2022	Quang Ninh	90.10	Phu Yen	75.99	14.11
2023	Quang Ninh	92.18	An Giang	81.32	10.86
2024	Hai Phong	96.17	Cao Bang	82.95	13.22

Source: MOHA reports and official releases (see Appendix A). The 2017 lowest score is the minimum reported in the MOHA release for that year



Source: Authors' compilation. Years shown are those with verified highest and lowest scores under the post-2015 methodologies

Fig 3: Distance between the highest- and lowest-ranked provinces in the PAR Index, selected years

Two trends stand out. The floor has risen much faster than the ceiling. Between 2016 and 2024 the lowest provincial score climbed by more than 20 points, from 62.55% to 82.95%, while the highest rose by about six points, from 90.32% to 96.17%. As a result, the distance between the best and worst province, which peaked at 29.76 points in 2017, fell to between 10.86 and 14.11 points in the most recent four years for which it can be calculated.

At first sight this convergence is good news: Lagging provinces have caught up. A closer look suggests a second interpretation. In 2024, the lowest-ranked province scored 82.95%, close to the national mean of 2020 (83.72%). With the mean at 88.37% and most fields above 90%, the index is compressing the whole distribution into a narrow band near the top of the scale. Small differences in appraisal, of one or two points, can now move a province by many places in the ranking. This is the pattern that van Thiel and Leeuw (2002)^[48] called the performance paradox: As all units learn what the indicator rewards, the indicator loses its ability to separate strong from weak performance.

There is also strong persistence at the top. Quang Ninh ranked first in six of the ten years (2017–2020, 2022 and 2023) and second in 2021, and Hai Phong ranked first in 2021 and 2024 and second in 2020, 2022 and 2023. Hanoi appeared among the top three in 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2023 and 2024. These are among the country's most economically developed provinces, with larger budgets and administrative staffs. The bottom positions, by contrast, rotate among smaller and poorer provinces, mostly in the Mekong Delta, the south-central coast and the northern mountains, such as Hau Giang, Phu Yen, Kien Giang, An Giang and Cao Bang.

4.4 What citizens report: PAPI 2015–2024

PAPI tells a more measured story. Between 2015 and 2019, on the original six-dimension basis, the average provincial aggregate rose from about 34 to 37.4 points out of 60 (UNDP, 2020)^[46]. This is an improvement of roughly 10%, but it left the typical province in the middle of the scale. After the index was expanded to eight dimensions in 2018, the highest provincial score in any year stayed between 46

and 49 points out of 80. The best province in 2018, for example, scored 47.05; the best in 2023 scored 46.04; and the best in 2024 scored 47.82 (Table 5). Even the strongest performers thus reach only around 60% of the theoretical maximum.

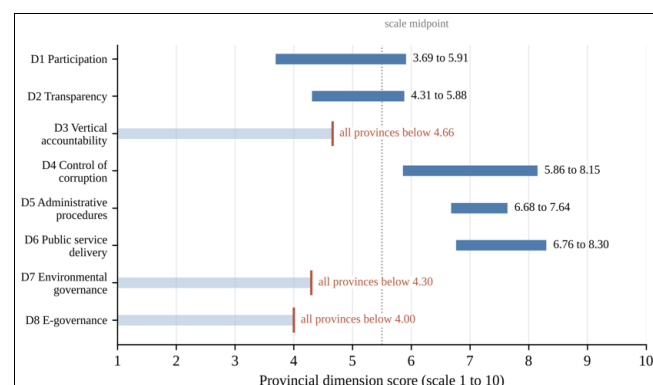
Table 5: Highest- and lowest-ranked provinces in PAPI, 2016–2024 (aggregate score)

Year	Highest-ranked province	Score	Lowest-ranked province	Score	Scale
2016	Can Tho	39.57	not reported		6–60
2018	Lang Son and Ben Tre (tied)	47.05	not reported		8–80
2019	Ben Tre	46.74	not reported		8–80
2020	Quang Ninh	48.81	not reported		8–80
2021	Thua Thien Hue	48.10	not reported		8–80
2022	Quang Ninh	47.88	Cao Bang	38.80	8–80
2023	Thua Thien Hue	46.04	Dak Nong	38.97	8–80
2024	Quang Ninh	47.82	not reported		8–80

Source: UNDP press releases, PAPI reports and press coverage of report launches (see Appendix A). For 2022, one UNDP summary lists Thua Thien Hue first; most national sources report Quang Ninh first

The spread between provinces is also narrower in PAPI than in the PAR Index, but for a different reason. In 2022 the gap between the highest and lowest aggregate was 9.07 points, and in 2023 it was 7.07 points, on an 80-point scale. In PAPI, provinces cluster in the middle of the scale, not at the top. This is what one would expect if the main problems of governance are shared across the country rather than concentrated in a few lagging provinces.

Fig 4 shows the provincial range for each dimension in 2023, the most recent year for which ranges were available for all dimensions.



Source: Authors' compilation from CECODES *et al.* (2024) [9]. For D3, D7 and D8 the report gives only the upper bound of the provincial range

Fig 4: Provincial range of PAPI dimension scores, 2023

The dimensions divide sharply into two blocks. Three dimensions linked to the supply of services lie wholly above the midpoint of the scale in every province: Control of corruption (5.86 to 8.15), administrative procedures (6.68 to 7.64) and public service delivery (6.76 to 8.30). The other five lie mostly or wholly below it. No province scored above 4.66 on vertical accountability, above 4.30 on environmental governance or above 4.00 on e-governance. Participation (3.69 to 5.91) and transparency (4.31 to 5.88) straddle the midpoint at best. The same structure appears in 2021, when no province scored above 5 on vertical accountability or

above 4 on e-governance (Vietnam Law Magazine, 2022) [51]. Its persistence suggests a structural feature of the system rather than a temporary fluctuation.

Selected indicators help to explain the pattern (Table 6). On administrative procedures, in the median province around 80% of applicants for land use rights certificates reported a smooth process, although overall ease of procedures declined slightly (Vietnam Law Magazine, 2026) [52]. On integrity, the share of applicants for land certificates who reported paying a bribe fell from 23% in 2016 to 17% in 2017 (UNDP, 2018) [44], and control of corruption improved every year from 2016 to 2020 before its first decline in 2021. The national control of corruption score stood at 6.71 in 2022 and 6.77 in 2023. Large differences remain, however: In 2023, the share reporting informal payments for land certificates ranged from 19% in the best province to 81% in the worst (CECODES *et al.*, 2024) [9].

Table 6: Selected PAPI indicators, 2015–2024

Indicator	Earlier value	Recent value	Source
Bribe paid for land use rights certificate	23% (2016)	17% (2017); provincial range 19–81% (2023)	UNDP (2018) [44]; CECODES <i>et al.</i> (2024) [9]
Perceived need for a bribe to obtain a state job	51% (2015), 54% (2016)	36.7% (2023)	CECODES <i>et al.</i> (2017, 2024) [8, 9]
Corruption named as most important national issue	4.53% (2019), 5.25% (2023)	22.58% (2024)	UNDP (2020) [46]; CECODES <i>et al.</i> (2025) [10]
Poverty and hunger named as most important issue	18% (2015), 28% (2017)	22.39% (2023), 14.2% (2024)	UNDP (2016, 2018) [43, 44]; CECODES <i>et al.</i> (2025) [10]
Household internet access	31% (2016)	about 80% (2023)	UNDP (2024) [47]
Use of the National E-Service Portal	under 5% (2022)	8.3% (2023)	UNDP (2024) [47]
Respondents taking formal action on a local concern	27% (2018)	18.5% (2023)	Vietnam Law Magazine (2026) [52]

Note: Indicator definitions follow the PAPI reports; some items changed wording over time and figures should be read as indicative of direction.

The weakest dimensions are those that depend on two-way interaction between citizens and authorities. Fewer than 20% of respondents have known about local land use plans in any year since 2011, and only slightly more than 40% have been informed about commune budget spending (Vietnam Law Magazine, 2026) [52]. The share of respondents who took formal action, such as a petition or complaint, to resolve a local concern fell from 27% in 2018 to 18.5% in 2023, and the share who considered the result successful fell from 23% to 17% over the same period. In 2024, 20.6% of respondents with a concern took action, 18.1% of these received a worthwhile response, and fewer than 4% saw their issue resolved (Vietnam Law Magazine, 2026) [52].

E-governance offers the clearest case of a gap between infrastructure and use. Household internet access rose from 31% in 2016 to around 80% in 2023. Yet in 2022 fewer than 5% of respondents had ever visited the National E-Service Portal and only 3% had an account. Use rose to 8.3% in 2023, almost double the previous year, but remained very low, and about one third of users expressed concerns about

privacy (UNDP, 2024)^[47]. The average e-governance score in 2024 was just over 3 points on the 10-point scale (Vietnam Law Magazine, 2026)^[52].

Finally, citizens' priorities shifted during the decade. Poverty and hunger were the most frequently named national concern for most of the period, peaking at 28% in 2017. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the share naming health as the main concern rose from 2% to 23% within two years. In 2024, corruption became the top concern for the first time, named by 22.58% of respondents, up from 5.25% the year before and the highest level recorded since 2015 (CECODES *et al.*, 2025)^[10]. Because the same survey shows fewer citizens reporting bribe payments in 2024 than in 2023, this rise seems to reflect the visibility of the national anti-corruption campaign rather than an increase in petty corruption.

4.5 Reading the two indices together

Placing the two indices side by side reveals points of agreement, points of sharp disagreement and episodes in which the measurement process itself was affected.

The clearest agreement concerns the leading performer. Quang Ninh topped the PAR Index in six of the ten years and also ranked first in PAPI in 2020, 2022 and 2024, and third in 2019. At the bottom, Cao Bang was among the three lowest provinces in the PAR Index in 2016, 2022 and 2024, and the lowest in PAPI in 2022. For these cases, the two instruments tell the same story.

Disagreement is, however, common. Table 7 sets out the most striking examples.

Table 7: Selected provinces with divergent positions in the two indices

Province	PAR Index position	PAPI position	Observation
Ha Noi	2nd in 2018 and 2019; 3rd in 2023 and 2024	Low-performing group in 2019 (41.53); 48th in 2020 (41.63)	Strong reform compliance, weak citizen experience
Hai Phong	1st in 2021 and 2024; 2nd in 2020, 2022 and 2023	Low-performing group in 2019 (41.54)	Strong reform compliance, weak citizen experience
Ben Tre	Lowest in 2019	1st in 2019 (46.74); joint 1st in 2018 (47.05)	Weak reform compliance, strong citizen experience
Tay Ninh	Not among extremes	Near bottom in 2022 (39.42); 2nd in 2024 (47.35), with a data caution	Abrupt change flagged by survey team
Binh Duong	Not among extremes	2nd in 2021 and 2022; excluded in 2023; data caution in 2024	Survey integrity concerns

Source: Authors' compilation from Tables 4 and 5 and Appendix A sources

The case of Ben Tre in 2019 is particularly telling. In the same year, one instrument placed the province last in the country and the other placed it first. The case of Hanoi is the mirror image. The capital consistently ranks near the top of the PAR Index, which rewards the issuance of plans, the speed of procedures and investment in digital systems, all areas where a large and well-resourced administration has advantages. In PAPI, Hanoi has repeatedly fallen into the low-performing group, as have other large cities, with Ho

Chi Minh City recording the lowest aggregate among the five centrally governed cities in 2021. Large cities face denser demands, more complex land issues and more distant relations between residents and local officials, and these features weigh heavily in a citizen survey.

The most important finding of this section, however, concerns the integrity of the data. In the 2023 round, PAPI excluded Binh Duong and Quang Ninh from the provincial ranking because of problems of data integrity, and national media reported that results in these two provinces had exceeded the allowable margin of statistical error (CECODES *et al.*, 2024)^[9]. In the 2024 round, Tien Giang and Vinh Phuc declined to participate, and the report advised caution in interpreting the results of Binh Duong, Khanh Hoa, Ninh Thuan and Tay Ninh, where local authorities were found to have primed respondents before fieldwork (CECODES *et al.*, 2025)^[10]. Tay Ninh is among these provinces, and its move from near the bottom in 2022 to second place in 2024 should be read in that light.

These episodes matter for two reasons. They show that PAPI's methodology is capable of detecting interference, which strengthens confidence in the remaining data. They also show that the incentives created by ranking have begun to reach the independent survey. PAPI results are now routinely discussed together with the PAR Index, SIPAS and the Provincial Competitiveness Index in provincial plans that set explicit targets for improving index scores. The behaviour predicted by Campbell's law for internal indicators is now visible in an external one.

5. Discussion

5.1 A persistent gap between compliance and experience

The evidence supports the first expectation of the analytical framework. Over the decade, the official compliance measure rose quickly and uniformly, while citizen-reported governance rose slowly and remained clustered around the middle of the scale. By 2024, the average province met about 88% of the PAR Index criteria, while even the best province reached only about 60% of the maximum PAPI score.

The two instruments do not measure the same thing, and their scales are not directly comparable. Still, the contrast in trajectories is informative. The dimensions on which citizens report the most progress (administrative procedures, public services, control of petty corruption) are those that correspond to the most concrete reform tasks: One-stop shops, service standards and anti-corruption enforcement. Here compliance and experience appear to move together. The dimensions on which citizens report the least progress (participation, transparency, vertical accountability) correspond to reform goals that are harder to translate into checklists. A province can earn points for issuing a regulation on grassroots democracy or publishing a land use plan on its website; whether residents know about the plan, or feel able to influence it, is another matter.

This pattern is consistent with the idea that reform in Vietnam has been most successful where it strengthens the administrative capacity of the state to deliver standardised services, and least successful where it requires the state to share information and decision-making with citizens. That reading fits the political literature on Vietnam, which sees administrative reform as a project of better control and performance within a single-party system rather than a project of political opening (Gainsborough, 2010; London,

2014) [15, 25]. It also echoes the distinction drawn by Fukuyama (2013) [14] between the capacity of a bureaucracy and its accountability to the public: The first can improve rapidly through managerial reform, while the second depends on channels that the reform programme only partly addresses.

The outcome field of the PAR Index supports this interpretation from the official side. If the actions measured by the other seven fields were translating fully into results for people, the impact field should have risen with them. Instead, it remained between 77% and 82% throughout, and it was the lowest field in 2023. The government's own instrument, in other words, contains a signal very similar to the one PAPI provides.

5.2 Saturation and the risk of gaming

The second message concerns the PAR Index itself. Its rising mean, its compressed distribution and the fact that four of eight provincial fields now exceed 90% all point to saturation. When every province scores between about 83% and 96%, the ranking becomes sensitive to small differences in appraisal and documentation. This creates strong incentives to optimise the reporting process, for example by preparing evidence files carefully, timing the completion of tasks to the assessment calendar or concentrating resources on criteria with many points.

There is no evidence in the published data of deliberate manipulation of the PAR Index. However, the structure of the index makes it vulnerable to the effects that Bevan and Hood (2006) [5] observed in other target systems. About two thirds of the score depends on appraisal of reported actions, and the units being assessed prepare the first version of that appraisal themselves. The survey component, which could act as a check, accounts for roughly a third of the score, and part of it comes from surveys of officials and managers whose own performance is linked to the result.

The episodes of interference in PAPI suggest that this vulnerability is not hypothetical. If local authorities have sought to influence the answers of citizens in an independent survey, similar pressure may exist in processes that are much less insulated from local control. Wallace (2016) [53] described the information problem of authoritarian governance as a race between the centre's need for reliable data and local agents' incentives to shape it. The Vietnamese case shows the same dynamic emerging at a relatively advanced stage of reform, at the point where scores have become important enough to matter for reputation and careers.

5.3 Digital government: Supply without demand

The third message concerns digital government, which shows the widest gap between the two instruments. In the PAR Index, the e-government field rose by almost 48 points between 2016 and 2024, the largest gain of any field. In PAPI, e-governance remained one of the lowest-scoring dimensions in every year for which provincial ranges are available, and use of the national service portal stayed below one in ten respondents even after household internet access reached around 80%.

The gap is a textbook example of the distinction between building a system and having it used. The PAR Index rewards the number of procedures available online, the integration of databases and the share of applications processed electronically. These are reasonable measures of

supply, but they say little about whether ordinary citizens find online services useful, trustworthy and easier than visiting an office. The privacy concerns reported by about a third of portal users, and the persistence of in-person contact for complex procedures such as land registration, suggest that demand-side barriers are at least as important as supply-side ones. Digital-era governance, in the sense of Dunleavy *et al.* (2006) [12], requires reorganising services around users, not simply moving existing procedures online.

The decision to abolish provincial public service portals from July 2025 and to concentrate services on the national portal may help by reducing fragmentation (Vietnam Law Magazine, 2026) [52]. It will also, however, make the national portal the single point of contact for all online procedures, raising the stakes for usability and data protection.

5.4 Reform measurement after the 2025 restructuring

The end of the study period coincides with the deepest reorganisation of Vietnam's subnational government in decades. In 2025 the number of provinces was reduced from 63 to 34, and the district level of local government was abolished, creating a two-tier system of provinces and communes. The PAR Index for 2025 was already calculated for 34 provinces and 12 ministries, under a new methodology set by Decision 1187/QĐ-BNV of 15 October 2025 (MOHA, 2026) [33].

This restructuring has three implications for governance measurement. The comparable time series of both indices is broken, since merged provinces combine units with very different histories, and their scores cannot be traced back without reconstruction. The functions previously performed at district level have moved to communes and provinces, so many of the interactions that PAPI measures (land procedures, local consultation, petitions) now take place in different institutions. And the merger creates an opportunity to redesign indicators that have reached saturation and to align the official and citizen-based instruments more closely. The analysis in this article suggests that this opportunity should be used.

5.5 Limitations

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. The analysis is descriptive and cannot establish whether improvements in the PAR Index caused any change in citizen experience, or vice versa. The two indices use different units, scales and concepts, so comparisons concern trajectories and positions rather than levels. Methodological revisions in both instruments interrupt their time series. Data availability is uneven: Full provincial tables for every year were not accessible in published form, some extreme positions could not be verified, and some indicators changed wording over time. Finally, rankings at the extremes are a narrow window on distributions that contain 63 provinces. Future research with access to complete provincial panels could test the patterns identified here more formally, for example by estimating rank correlations between the two indices year by year.

6. Policy implications

The findings suggest five directions for policy. They are presented as practical adjustments within the existing reform architecture rather than as a new model.

The first is to give more weight to outcomes in the PAR Index: The field that measures impact on people currently

carries a small share of points, while most of the score depends on documented actions. Raising the weight of outcome measures, and of the survey component in general, would reduce the incentive to optimise documentation and bring the index closer to what citizens experience. Survey items could be drawn from or harmonised with PAPI, so that both instruments track the same experiences with different methods.

The second is to restore the discriminating power of the index: When most provinces exceed 90% on half of the fields, these fields no longer separate strong from weak performers. Criteria that nearly every unit satisfies could be retired or replaced with more demanding ones. Reporting score bands or tiers, rather than exact ranks separated by fractions of a point, would also reduce the pressure to compete on very small differences.

The third is to protect the integrity of citizen surveys: The PAPI episodes of 2023 and 2024 show that independent surveys need explicit protection once their results become important for reputation. Agreements between the government and survey producers could state that local authorities must not contact sampled respondents, and the detection methods that identified interference could be applied to the government's own surveys, including SIPAS. Publishing a short integrity statement with each round would make these safeguards visible.

The fourth is to measure use and trust, not only availability, in digital government: Indicators such as the share of procedures completed fully online by ordinary users, the rate of abandoned applications and user satisfaction with online services would capture the demand side that the current PAR criteria miss. Data protection measures and simpler interfaces deserve priority as services are concentrated on the national portal.

The fifth is to strengthen two-way accountability at the commune level: The weakest results in both instruments concern participation, transparency and responsiveness. In the new two-tier system, communes have become the main point of contact between citizens and the state for most procedures. Publishing land use plans and budgets in accessible formats, tracking the resolution of citizen petitions and reporting this information in both indices could turn these weak dimensions into explicit targets of the next reform phase.

7. Conclusion

This article has examined a decade of Vietnam's two principal measures of administrative reform. Read separately, each tells a familiar story. The PAR Index shows steady, broad-based progress, with almost every province now meeting most reform criteria. PAPI shows modest improvement in some areas, notably administrative procedures, public services and petty corruption, and persistent weakness in others, particularly participation, accountability and e-governance.

Read together, the two indices reveal something that neither shows alone. Reform compliance has advanced much faster than governance experience, and the gap is largest in the fields where compliance is easiest to document and hardest to feel. The official index is reaching a ceiling at which it can no longer tell strong from weak performers. And the incentives created by rankings, which have helped to drive real improvements, are now strong enough to affect the

measurement process itself, including an independent citizen survey.

None of this means that the reform effort has failed. Many citizens report easier procedures, fewer informal payments and better public services than a decade ago. The point is rather that the instruments built to guide reform need reform themselves. As Vietnam moves into a new phase with a restructured local government, the most useful step may be to treat the gap between the two indices not as a discrepancy to explain away, but as the main target of the next reform programme. Doing so would require measuring less of what governments do and more of what citizens experience. That lesson applies well beyond Vietnam, wherever internal scorecards and citizen surveys coexist.

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