

Social Participation and Proactiveness of Middle-Class Families in Vietnam

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Abstract: The middle-class in Vietnam is now of considerable size, but its social participation and proactiveness remain limited. Middle-class families have not yet engaged much in activities which are socially constructive and critical. They pay more attention to aspects of daily life rather than macro-social issues. They often react to issues with “safer” and more neutral actions rather than socially-critical ones. A part of middle-class families is still apathetic or sceptical about the possibility to address social issues surrounding them. The explanation for such a situation is that the modern middle class in Vietnam has just been established and needs more time to develop and assert their social responsibility as well as self-awareness of social status and contributions to the current development of society.

Keywords: Middle-class families, social participation, social proactiveness, social issues.

Subject classification: Sociology

1. Introduction

This paper uses findings of the research “Middle-Class Families in Vietnam with Socio-economic and Cultural Development Processes” under the Ministerial-level research programme “*Overall Assessment Research on Families in Country’s Industrialisation, Modernisation and International Integration*” led by the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS) in the period 2016-2018. The research was conducted in the middle of 2017 in

provinces and centrally-run cities, namely Hanoi, Nam Dinh, Da Nang, and Ho Chi Minh; and the sample size surveyed by questionnaires was 2,200 households.

The research gained ground on three social theories, namely social stratification, structural functionalism, and symbolic interactionism to analyse its contents. While social stratification, especially the income-based one was used for the classification of households in the sample based on their per capita income, the other two theories helped study the statuses,

roles, attitudes, and behaviours of households in the current socio-economic and cultural development processes.

In this research, middle-class families are those households that have a per capita income in the regulated range of the middle class and must hold an upper secondary degree or higher. In the five-level classification scale of per capita income, Group 1 refers to the lowest-income households (with a monthly income of under VND 2.5 million); and Group 5 refers to the highest-income households (with a monthly income of over VND 10 million). Groups 2, 3 and 4 are middle-class families with incomes ranging from VND 2.5 million to VND 10 million and account for 71% of the surveyed sample.

The Group 1 of middle-class families (MCF 1) is categorised with the household owner/representative holding an upper secondary degree or higher. The establishment of such ranges was accomplished partly by the reference to findings of home and overseas studies on the middle class, data of the Vietnam Living Standard Surveys (VLSS) in the period 2010-2016, and sample survey results of the research.

This article will focus on the social participation and proactiveness of middle-class families in the socio-economic development by comparing groups 1 and 2 with each other, as well as middle-class families and groups 1 and 5.

2. The engagement of middle-class families in social activities

The proactiveness of an individual or a family can be shown through the level of

their participation in various social activities, especially socially-critical ones, which means putting forward opinions and proposals on pressing socio-economic affairs of the country or localities (via different channels in a direct or indirect manner). The research names the nine following activities in order for middle-class families to indicate their participation in the activities with four degrees (“usually”, “sometimes”, “seldom” and “never”). The result is presented below:

1. Making comments in written form or sharing opinions in meetings and on mass media about pressing socio-economic issues of the country and locality.

2. Doing charitable work and making philanthropic contributions (at the residential places, workplaces, and in groups).

3. Taking part in anti-corruption activities.

4. Participating in activities which fight against crimes and social evils.

5. Attending activities of mass organisations such as the Vietnam Fatherland Front, Vietnam Women’s Union, Farmer’s Union, Veteran’s Association, and Youth Union (at the residential places and workplaces).

6. Joining socio-professional organisations (professional associations).

7. Participating in hobby-based groups (art, sport, entertainment, etc.).

8. Taking part in groups of beliefs (visiting temples and pagodas).

9. Writing statuses and comments on social network sites (blogs, Facebook, etc.).

The social proactiveness can be reflected through the total percentage of middle-class families and their participation at all levels.

To embolden their proactiveness, this article will focus on analysing the frequency that middle-class families engage in such activities.

The following table and figure draw an overarching picture about the levels of families' participation (through their representatives) in social activities (see Table 1).

Table 1: Middle-class Families usually Taking Part in Social Activities
(placed in the order of high-to-low)

Activities	Group 1	MCF1	MCF2	Group 5
Joining mass organisations	22.9	34.9	40.7	40.2
Doing charitable work	15.2	26.4	31.7	38.5
Joining hobby-based groups	6.4	13.2	16.4	22.1
Joining groups of beliefs	8.9	14.9	10.6	13.9
Writing statuses on social network sites	2.7	5.6	8.0	13.1
Making written comments	6.2	6.3	7.0	9.0
Fighting against crimes and social evils	4.7	8.3	10.7	7.4
Taking part in anti-corruption activities	3.6	5.3	7.0	7.4
Joining socio-professional organisations	2.7	5.8	7.5	7.5

Source: Dataset of the research “Middle-Class Families in Vietnam with Socio-economic and Cultural Development Processes”, *Overall Assessment Research on Families in Country's Industrialisation, Modernisation and International Integration*, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, 2016-2018.

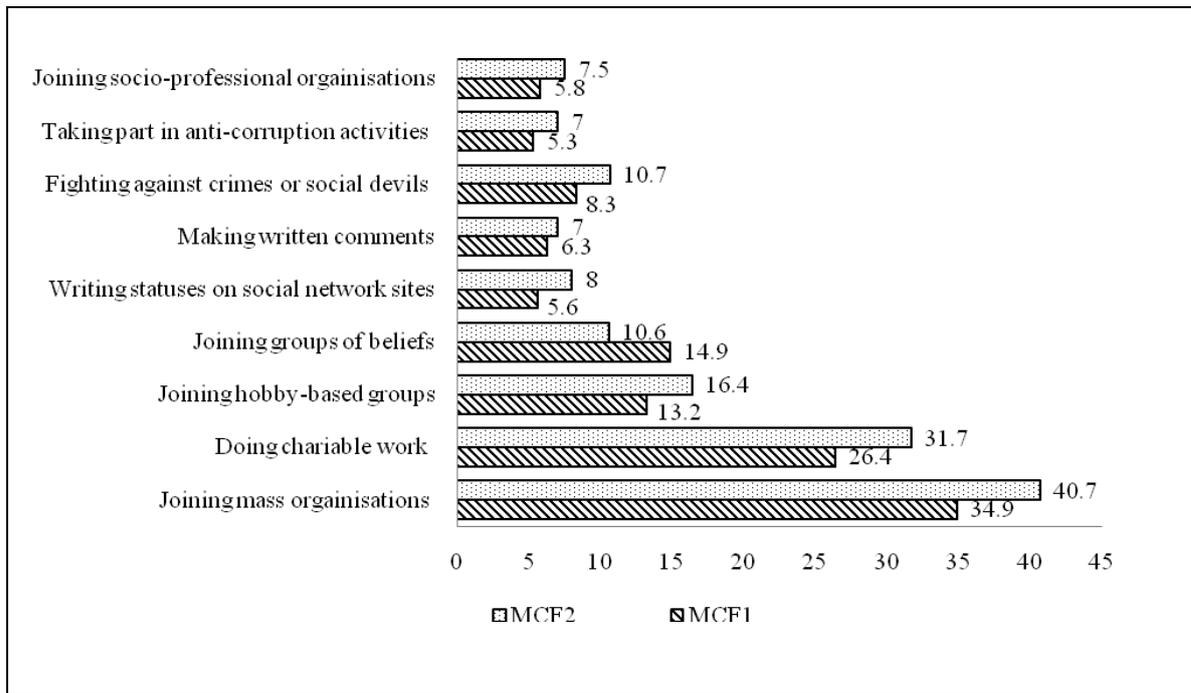
The comparison among activities reveals that the proportion of middle-class families who usually take part in the activities never exceeds 40%. This shows that the social proactiveness of middle-class families is still not high.

Specifically, middle-class families show their most active participation in regular activities of mass organisations (MCF1: 34.9%; MCF2: 40.7%) and charitable work (MCF: 26.4%; MCF2: 32.7%). Generally speaking, this high level of participation in regular activities of mass organisations is understandable due to regulations of the current political

system structure. One-fourth to one-third of all the surveyed middle-class families are doing charitable work to develop a new feature in fulfilling their social responsibilities and showing their empathy towards vulnerable groups in society.

Another 13-16% of middle-class families usually join in hobby-based groups and groups of beliefs to form a newer mode of social participation, which characterises middle-class families in urban areas. Together with the enhanced material life, the non-material life in these areas is ever-more attended to.

Figure 1: Middle-class Families 1 and 2 Joining Social Activities



Source: See Table 1.

The most noteworthy point when making a comparison between the two groups of activities is the fact that only quite a low rate (5-10%) of middle-class families usually takes part in the five remaining activities (i.e. making comments in written form or showing opinions in official meetings; participating in anti-corruption activities; joining activities which fight against crimes and social evils; being members of socio-professional organisations; and writing statuses and comments on social network sites). Oddly enough, these are important activities of social discourse and much expected to be made from middle-class families. Even if the levels of participation are combined, the indicators for these activities are still considerably

lower in comparison to the other four activities. Therefore, it is grounded to conclude that the social participation (as a factor of the social proactiveness) of middle-class families in Vietnam remains limited. Such level of social participation is often related to their citizenship consciousness or level of knowledge while being affected by a wide range of macro political, socio-economic, and cultural factors in Vietnam. Seemingly, middle-class families as a component of the middle class in Vietnam are still in the formation stage. They, thus, need more time to continue improving their awareness and sense of social responsibilities as well as assert themselves as positive attributes of the development of society.

3. Evaluations and reactions of middle-class families to some social issues

3.1. Attitudes/evaluations of middle-class families on current pressing social issues

Showing their attitude towards pressing social issues is also an indicator of the social proactiveness of middle-class families. We have listed 11 such pressing

social issues so that middle-class families can assess the urgency of each of the issues by a scale with four levels (“serious”, “worrisome”, “normal” and “no idea/no interest”). The data indicate that three categories of pressing social issues were evaluated by middle-class families as serious and worrisome and can be classified from low to high as follows (see Table 2 and attached figure).

Table 2: Middle-class Families Considering Social Issues to Be Serious and Worrisome (placed in the order of high-to-low)

Social issues	Group 1	MCF1	MCF 2	Group 5
Unsafe food	36.0	52.4	55.6	70.5
Environmental pollution	39.2	50.8	53.0	58.2
Unemployment	32.4	35.7	37.9	36.9
Drugs	23.3	36.3	40.0	42.6
Crime	25.7	35.7	37.6	37.7
Traffic jams	12.5	37.3	43.0	57.4
Traffic accidents	23.7	38.9	42.5	50.0
Corruption	11.5	22.4	26.3	39.4
Misconduct in management	10.2	19.8	25.1	37.7
Rich-poor polarisation	28.0	19.9	22.4	32.8
Violence	9.6	16.2	17.3	22.2

Source: See Table 1.

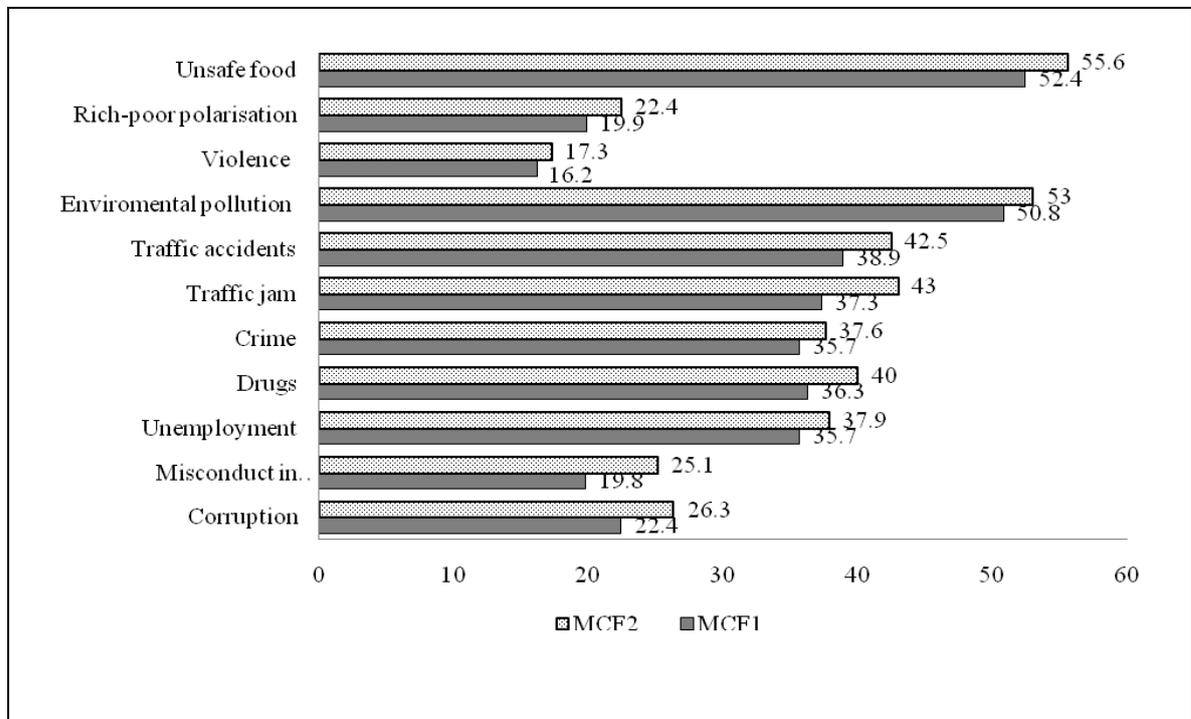
The first group, including two issues, namely environmental pollution and unsafe food, is deemed to be “serious” and “worrisome” by over 50% of middle-class families. The second group, comprising five issues, namely unemployment, drugs, crime, traffic jams, and traffic accidents, is deemed to be “serious” and “worrisome” by about 35% of middle-class families. The third group, consisting of four issues, namely corruption, misconduct in management, violence, and

rich-poor polarisation, is considered to be “serious” and “worrisome” by approx. 20% of all the surveyed middle-class families.

The assessment rates of these issues indicate that the surveyed middle-class families in general have not evaluated adequately all dangers of macro social issues. They only pay more attention to urgent issues of daily life such as environmental pollution, unsafe food, traffic jams, and traffic accidents, and show some interest in

unemployment, drugs and crime. Social management, violence, and the rich-poor issues such as corruption, misconduct in polarisation had the lowest rate of concern.

Figure 2: Middle-class Families 1 and 2 Evaluating Pressing Social Issues as "Serious" and "Worrisome"



Source: See Table 1.

When comparing middle-class families with families in Group 1 and Group 5, the difference always exists. However, it still depends on the compared issues. For example, poor families often show little attention to the larger social issues such as corruption and misconduct in management or even do not know about them. Therefore, the percentage of issues which they consider to be “serious” or “worrisome” is often just half or one third as much as the corresponding figure in middle-class families. For more recognisable “micro” issues, the difference in

these percentages often stands at less than two times. In general, it can be concluded that the difference of middle-class families in assessing and spotting risks of pressing social issues is not much bigger in comparison to the evaluation of poor families.

3.2. Reactions/actions of middle-class families to pressing social issues

Reactions and actions of middle-class families to current pressing social issues are an indicator which reflects their social

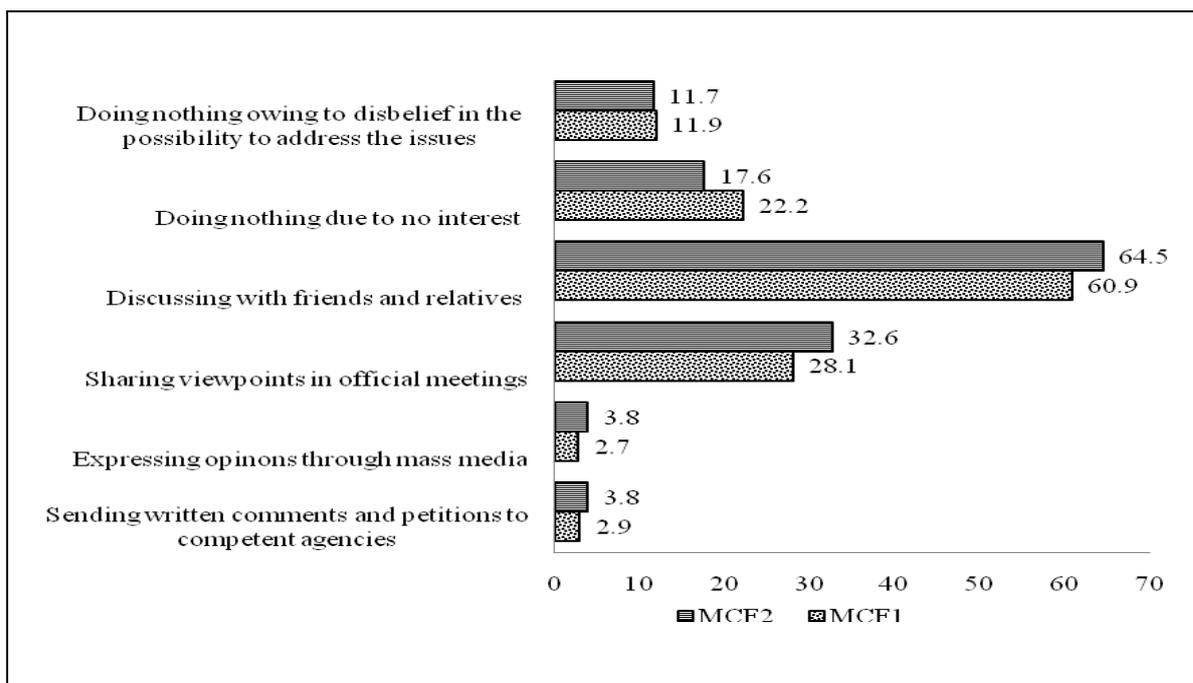
proactiveness in the clearest manner. Six social issues are shown in the following types of reactions/actions to pressing table and figure:

Table 3: Reactions/Actions of Middle-class Families to Pressing Social Issues

No	What to do with pressing social issues	Group 1	MCF1	MCF2	Group 5
1.	Sending written comments and proposals to competent agencies	1.8	2.9	3.8	3.3
2.	Expressing opinions through mass media	1.8	2.7	3.8	3.3
3.	Sharing opinions in official meetings	25.7	28.1	32.6	25.7
4.	Discussing with friends and relatives	46.7	60.9	64.5	63.3
5.	Doing nothing due to having no interest	34.7	22.2	17.6	17.5
6.	Doing nothing owing to disbelief in the possibility of the issues able to be addressed	12.4	11.9	11.7	13.3
	Total N	510	1543	982	120

Source: See Table 1.

Figure 3: Actions of Middle-class Families 1 and 2 to Pressing Issues



Source: See Table 1.

Reactions/actions of middle-class families to the above-mentioned pressing social issues can be also classified into three following groups:

Firstly, they “discuss and complain with friends and relatives about pressing social issues”, which stands out with the highest prevalence (60.9%). For the next kind of reaction, one fourth of the families in the sample and one third of middle-class families often “make comments in official meetings”. Although the percentage is not high, this kind of reaction is more positive than the first one. Notably, this form of reaction is expressed quite uniformly with few disparities among groups with different living standards. The majority of families opted for “moderately reasonable” and other safe options when reacting to current urgent social issues.

Secondly, there are two kinds of reactions (1 and 2) which show the greatest proactiveness yet draw the lowest levels of participation from middle-class families. The prevalence of such reactions never exceeds 3% and concentrates more on middle-class families, especially ones in the group of “upper middle-class families” (5.4%). This prevalence is the lowest in the group of poor families (1.8% for both kinds of reactions).

More importantly, the prevalence of these reactions in the group of rich families (Group 5) is even lower than that in the group of middle-class families. This indicates a trend, in which middle-class families have a higher social proactiveness than poor families and wealthy families. Better-off families seem to be so satisfied with their personal lives that they are, to some extent, apathetic about the current pressing social issues. This also emboldens the social role or proactiveness of middle-

class families in interrelations with the socio-economic development in comparison to other social groups.

Thirdly, there are two kinds of reactions of indifference and passiveness of middle-class families to pressing social issues. One fourth of the families (with one fifth of middle-class families) on average answered that they “do nothing due to having no interest”. The second kind of reaction of indifference, “doing nothing due to disbelief in the possibility of the issues able to be addressed”, which is of a pessimistic and doubtful nature, has quite a uniform rate (approx. over 10%) in all groups of families, regardless of their living standards. Combining the two reactions, one can see that 34.1% or around one third, of middle-class families neglect or do not pay attention to the current pressing social issues.

Due to their higher levels of education, middle-class families in Group 2 show better social proactiveness than those families in Group 1 in almost all reactions (except for the last two types of reactions of indifference and passiveness, which tend to be opposite) yet with a difference of no more than 5%. Notably, with the sixth reaction - “Doing nothing due to disbelief in the possibility of the issues able to be addressed” - its prevalence is almost uniform as a constant (11-12%) in all income groups. This also reflects the “social mood” which is closely linked to the social transition and development in Vietnam.

4. Conclusion

Through research on the social participation and proactiveness of middle-class families, the following conclusions can be drawn:

Firstly, very few middle-class families (5-7%) usually take part in activities which show social proactiveness and social discourse such as making written comments or expressing opinions in official meetings; participating in anti-corruption activities; joining activities which fight against crimes and social evils, and others. Being formed only recently, middle-class families in Vietnam seem to need more time to consolidate their awareness and actions which demonstrate their sense for social responsibility and affirm positive attributes of the class in the process of social development.

Secondly, in regarding of current pressing social issues, the majority of middle-class families often focus more on specific ones which are related to their daily life such as environmental pollution, unsafe food, traffic jams and accidents, unemployment, drugs, and crime. Meanwhile, very few middle-class families are concerned about larger social issues such as corruption, misconduct in management, violence, and the rich-poor polarisation.

Thirdly, to the aforementioned urgent social issues, the majority of middle-class families often choose moderate reactions/actions such as “discussing with friends and relatives” and “sharing opinions in official meetings”. The most active reactions/actions such as “sending written comments and proposals to competent agencies” and “expressing opinions through mass media” are indicated by very few middle-class families.

Notably, one third of all the surveyed middle-class families show reactions of indifference or neglect towards urgent

social issues and are sceptical about the possibility to them being addressed.

The social participation and proactiveness of middle-class families as presented through some above-mentioned indicators are also often not uniform. Even though their proactiveness is greater than that of poor families, or even that of wealthy families in some activities, the common trend can be described as that “the social proactiveness tends to be higher in the wealthy families or families with members working as leaders, managers, staff, and salary earners, i.e. the professions of the so-called “new middle class”, which are located at the upper half of the socio-occupational stratification pyramid. However, the difference is often not so big, which reflects the continuation in the transition and mobility among income groups or in middle-class families themselves.

On the one hand, this research’s findings show the active role of middle-class families to some extent in comparison to other groups of families. However, there are limitations in both attitudes and practical actions, and the overall social participation and proactiveness of middle-class families remain low and inadequate. Meanwhile, with the requirements of the real-world development as well as expectations of society at present, the social proactiveness is a crucial and necessary attribute, which must be elevated to a core property of middle-class families. Therefore, in addition to considering the middle class as a huge economic actor, it is necessary to develop favourable policies for them to continue to practice, experience, and improve the self-awareness of their qualities, identities, and roles, thereby making more contributions to the socio-economic development in Vietnam.

Note

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