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Cultural Heritage Management Capacity of Commune-Level Government After Administrative Reorganisation: A Case Study of Dong Anh Commune, Hanoi City

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ABSTRACT:
Background: The transition to a two-tier local government system in Vietnam on 1 July 2025 changed the institutional setting in which commune authorities protect and manage cultural heritage. Objective: This article examines the management capacity of Dong Anh commune, Hanoi, which includes the Co Loa citadel and Hoa Lam Vien heritage area. Methods: A qualitative documentary case study analysed eight legal and policy instruments, four dated press reports and two assessments of the administrative reform. Evidence was organised around five dimensions: legal mandate, organisation and coordination, personnel, finance and information, and community relations and interpretation. Results: Commune authorities hold specified festival and dossier-processing responsibilities, whereas major planning and approval functions for higher-ranked relics remain with provincial and central institutions. Public evidence identifies a historical division of management at Co Loa and village-based monitoring arrangements, but does not establish the post-merger staffing structure, heritage operating budget or custody of transferred records. Hoa Lam Vien illustrates the additional need to distinguish documented archaeological evidence from contested historical narratives. Conclusion: The case demonstrates the importance of intergovernmental coordination and verifiable local information, while identifying the data required to assess actual administrative performance.

KEYWORDS: cultural heritage governance, commune-level administration, administrative reorganisation; Dong Anh, Co Loa, local government capacity, community participation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Vietnam replaced its three-tier structure of local government with a two-tier arrangement on 1 July 2025. The reform abolished district-level administrations and reorganised commune-level territorial units under the Law on the Organisation of Local Government No. 72/2025/QH15. Its implementation coincided with the entry into force of the Law on Cultural Heritage No. 45/2024/QH15 and the redistribution of several cultural-administration procedures (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2024; Government of Vietnam, 2025a). The reform therefore raises a question that extends beyond changes in territorial boundaries: whether the government closest to a heritage site has the authority, resources and institutional relationships required to manage it.

Heritage administration differs from many routine public services. Archaeological remains, protected buildings, festivals and continuing religious practices require technical judgment, reliable records, negotiated access and cooperation with custodians. District-level agencies formerly connected communes to specialised provincial departments and helped coordinate dossiers, monitoring and site activities. Removing that level changes the institutional network even where the protection status of the heritage itself remains unchanged. General assessments of Vietnam's reform identify task overload, uneven specialisation and limitations of local fiscal discretion (Doan, 2025; Le et al., 2026; Nguyen, 2026; Tran, 2026), but do not establish how a specific commune performs its heritage functions.

Dong Anh commune in Hanoi is an informative case because Resolution No. 1656/NQ-UBTVQH15 incorporated the whole former Co Loa, Dong Hoi and Mai Lam communes, alongside parts of neighbouring units (National Assembly Standing Committee, 2025). The new commune contains Co Loa, a special national relic with extensive earthwork ramparts, and Hoa Lam Vien, whose association with a Ly-dynasty royal retreat remains an active subject of historical interpretation (Ha Noi Moi, 2024; Tuoi Tre, 2026). The coexistence of protected monuments, residential pressure, significant public investment and divided administrative responsibilities makes capacity especially consequential.

This article asks: RQ1, what heritage-related legal duties can be attributed to the new commune? RQ2, which dimensions of capacity are documented in public evidence, and which remain unmeasured? RQ3, how do the Co Loa and Hoa Lam Vien cases illuminate the coordination and interpretation requirements of local heritage management? Its contribution is a case-based assessment framework. It does not equate missing public information with demonstrated administrative failure or claim to measure outcomes without field evidence.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Administrative capacity and institutional networks

Public-sector capacity is the ability to carry out specified mandates under real institutional conditions. Grindle and Hilderbrand (1995) locate capacity at multiple levels: the wider environment, the rules of the public sector, networks connecting organisations, individual organisations and

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personnel. Christensen and Gazley (2008) caution that capacity becomes analytically meaningful only when its inputs, processes and outcomes are linked to concrete functions. Andrews and Boyne (2010) identify the importance of leadership and organisational capacity for local authority performance. In heritage management, this suggests analysing both the commune office and the task network involving city agencies, conservation boards, technical specialists and villages.

2.2. Territorial amalgamation and the proximity problem

Amalgamation can create larger administrative units, potentially allowing functional specialisation, yet it may also increase the distance between decision makers and local constituencies. Tavares (2018) finds that municipal consolidation does not consistently translate into improved services and can weaken local democratic responsiveness. The rapid assessment of the Vietnamese reform reports a simultaneous surplus and shortage of capabilities: staff transferred from former districts can have technical knowledge without detailed familiarity with the locality, while existing commune staff may know local conditions but lack specialised administrative expertise (Le et al., 2026). Heritage exposes this tension because a village's ritual calendar, historical boundaries and informal custodianship are difficult to transfer through formal administrative orders.

2.3. Participatory and living-heritage governance

Heritage governance increasingly recognises community actors as participants in defining value, maintaining practices and shaping decisions. Sokka et al. (2021) distinguish approaches by the extent of citizen involvement and emphasise the structures required for co-creation. Poulios (2014) treats continuing use and connections between heritage and associated communities as central to conservation. Studies in Vietnam identify urbanisation pressures on intangible heritage in Hanoi (Doan et al., 2023) and associations between residents' heritage engagement, place attachment and sustainable cultural tourism (Vu & Nguyen, 2026). These findings are not measures of Dong Anh's government capacity, but they justify including community relations in the analytical framework.

2.4. Information infrastructure and credible interpretation

Information management is a substantive administrative capacity rather than an optional technical facility. Phuong (2026) identifies fragmented digitisation, inconsistent metadata and limited technical skills as recurrent problems in Vietnamese heritage preservation. Ta (2026) argues that relic data can support coordinated, risk-informed governance in Hanoi. Phuong and Tran (2026) show that interpretation and public-facing heritage products require a relationship between historical evidence, operational planning and safeguards. In a reorganised commune, uncertainties about the whereabouts of former district records and the status of historical narratives can directly affect dossier preparation and the responsible use of heritage content.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Case design and analytical dimensions

The research uses a qualitative single-case design and deductive documentary analysis. Dong Anh was selected purposively because of its newly consolidated territory, the presence of Co Loa and Hoa Lam Vien, and the coexistence of commune and city-level heritage actors. The unit of analysis is not a relic alone but the commune government as one actor in an interdependent management network. Five capacity dimensions were defined: (D1) mandate, the tasks assigned by law; (D2) organisation and coordination, the distribution of responsibilities and communication channels; (D3) human resources, staffing and specialised competence; (D4) finance and information, recurring resources and reliable records; and (D5) community relations and interpretation, participation and the governance of meaning. The dimensions integrate administrative-capacity theory and heritage-governance literature (Grindle & Hilderbrand, 1995; Christensen & Gazley, 2008; Sokka et al., 2021).

3.2. Documentary corpus and selection

The documentary corpus comprises eight legal or policy instruments relevant to the reform and the sites, four press reports carrying dated local information, and two wider assessments of the reform. The instruments include the 2024 Heritage Law, Hanoi's 2025 commune-reorganisation resolution, Decrees No. 137/2025/ND-CP and 208/2025/ND-CP, two Prime Ministerial decisions concerning Co Loa, a Hanoi management decision and a 2026 ministerial reply on relic restoration. The three earlier Co Loa decisions were traced through press accounts that report their dates and scope rather than independently reanalysed in full. Scholarly literature was used to define categories and interpret patterns, not as proof of present-day conditions in Dong Anh.

Table 1. Documentary evidence and its analytical role

Evidence group	Main documents	Capacity questions addressed
Law and territorial reform	Heritage Law (2024); Resolution 1656 (2025)	Legal context; new commune boundaries
Delegated procedures	Decrees 137/2025 and 208/2025	Festival registration; relic project dossiers
Site governance	Co Loa decisions (2012, 2015, 2018); 2026 ministerial reply	Relic status; planning; appraisal responsibilities
Local reporting	Ha Noi Moi (2022, 2024); Dai bieu Nhan dan and Tuoi Tre (2026)	Site monitoring, investment and interpretation
Reform assessments	Le et al. (2026); Nguyen (2026)	National implementation pressures; contextual comparison

3.3. Extraction and evidentiary limits

Documents were read for provisions or dated observations relating to each dimension. Statements were identified by date, issuing or reporting institution, and the territorial unit to which they referred. This precaution separates the former Co Loa commune and Dong Anh district from the

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new Dong Anh commune. Claims were classified as directly documented, indirectly indicated or unavailable in the public corpus. National observations were not treated as measurements of Dong Anh. Where an earlier practice might continue after the merger, continuity was treated as a question for verification rather than as an established fact. No interviews, site inspections or audits of administrative records were undertaken.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Territorial change and the relevant heritage assets

Clause 114 of Resolution No. 1656/NQ-UBTVQH15 formed Dong Anh commune from the whole former Co Loa, Dong Hoi and Mai Lam communes, selected portions of Dong Anh township and several adjacent communes (National Assembly Standing Committee, 2025). The whole transfer of Co Loa and Mai Lam establishes that the new unit contains both the Co Loa citadel and the Hoa Lam Vien area. The previous district was divided into five successor communes; therefore, figures compiled for the former district cannot be attributed automatically to the new Dong Anh commune.

Co Loa was designated a special national relic in 2012 and covers approximately 860.4 hectares according to a 2024 site report (Ha Noi Moi, 2024). The surviving ramparts and their relationship with settlement are important features of management as well as archaeological evidence. Research by Kim et al. (2010) and Kim (2015) situates the site in a much longer history of political and settlement development. Hoa Lam Vien, in the former Mai Lam area, was the subject of a scholarly meeting in January 2026; its possible function as a Ly-dynasty retreat was discussed with significant qualifications (Dai bieu Nhan dan, 2026; Tuoi Tre, 2026). No consolidated public inventory of relics and festivals by rank for the new commune was identified in the documentary corpus.

4.2. Legal mandate: procedural work and higher-level approval

The Heritage Law establishes the national legal context, while the allocation of particular administrative processes is specified in subsequent regulations. Decree No. 137/2025/ND-CP assigns commune authorities responsibility for receiving and processing registration for specified categories of festivals, while other categories remain at provincial level (Government of Vietnam, 2025a). Under Decree No. 208/2025/ND-CP, effective 1 September 2025, planning and project approval for higher-ranked relics involves provincial or central authorities; the commune has an express role in forwarding dossiers for projects concerning provincial-level or inventoried relics under the conditions defined by the decree (Government of Vietnam, 2025b).

Dong Anh's territorial jurisdiction over Co Loa does not therefore amount to authority to approve its conservation plan. The commune faces the consequences of work taking place in its territory, yet project decisions for a special national relic are subject to a wider statutory process. A 2026 response from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism also notes the specialist expertise necessary for appraisal and the difficulties some localities face in obtaining it (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2026). The legal mandate is comparatively well documented, while its detailed local implementation arrangements are not.

4.3. Organisation and coordination at Co Loa

The pre-reorganisation management arrangement was divided. A site management board under the Thang Long–Hanoi heritage conservation system managed a selection of monuments, while the former Co Loa commune carried responsibility for rampart areas, according to reporting in 2022 (Ha Noi Moi, 2022). The overall preservation plan was approved by Prime Ministerial Decision No. 1004/QD-TTg in 2015, and a Hanoi management plan was approved in 2018, both cited in local reporting. The documentary corpus did not establish a revised allocation of rampart duties or a new written coordination agreement following the territorial merger.

This distinction matters. Territorial succession makes the new commune the relevant point of local government contact, but it does not independently prove that every pre-merger operational responsibility, budget line or reporting chain continued unchanged. The 2015 and 2018 planning instruments provide context for site governance; the precise post-merger assignment of enforcement and maintenance functions requires current administrative records. At Hoa Lam Vien, a management board helped organise the 2026 symposium, yet its formal status and reporting relationship to the commune were not documented in the reviewed materials (Dai bieu Nhan dan, 2026).

4.4. Personnel, finance and information

Public documents identify the existence of the commune's Culture and Social Affairs Division but do not establish the number of officers assigned to heritage, their qualifications, individual workloads or specialist support arrangements. National reform assessments describe substantial workload pressures. One example from Bac Ninh involved a culture and social affairs team handling an unusually broad range of responsibilities, while another assessment reported redeployment of specialised staff across the new system (Le et al., 2026; Nguyen, 2026). These are contextual warnings, not direct observations about Dong Anh personnel. Consequently, the personnel dimension is insufficiently measured, rather than empirically shown to be weak.

Investment figures also require careful classification. Ha Noi Moi (2024) reported total planned investment of over VND 298.4 billion for a King Ngo Quyen temple project associated with the Co Loa area. This project amount does not reveal the commune's annual heritage operating budget, its discretionary funding or its responsibility for investment decisions. Similarly, no public source examined specified the present custody and standardisation of relic records formerly held at district level. Fragmented records would obstruct the preparation of accurate conservation dossiers, but the degree of fragmentation in Dong Anh cannot be inferred from the absence of published information alone (Phuong, 2026; Ta, 2026).

4.5. Community stewardship and the problem of historical interpretation

At Co Loa, a 2022 report described village heads conducting weekly inspections of rampart areas and reporting encroachment or construction violations to the commune. Authorities also relied on dialogue and awareness activities because houses and livelihoods are closely interwoven with the earthworks (Ha Noi Moi, 2022). These observations document a pre-reform local monitoring practice. Whether it remains active, with equivalent reporting channels and resources, in the enlarged commune is not established by that account. The continuity of community knowledge is nevertheless a distinct governance issue, not merely a question of staffing.

Hoa Lam Vien presents an interpretive challenge. Participants in a January 2026 symposium discussed archaeological and textual indications of a Ly-period royal site, while acknowledging uncertainty about its precise form and location. Historians cautioned against treating the contested 1232 Bai Sap narrative as established fact in prospective exhibitions; proposals for a cultural centre or heritage park were also discussed (Tuoi Tre,

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2026). Here administrative capacity includes the ability to commission qualified historical review, mark uncertainty in public interpretation and consult the people connected to the site before narratives are disseminated.

Table 2. Five-dimensional assessment of documented capacity in Dong Anh

Dimension	Supported observations	Status of evidence	Unresolved information
D1. Mandate	Defined festival and dossier duties; higher-level planning authority	Documented legally	Local implementing instructions; complete relic inventory
D2. Organisation	Pre-merger site board and commune roles; division identified	Partly documented	Post-merger coordination rules; board responsibilities
D3. Personnel	Named division leadership; national contextual pressures	Not measured locally	Number, expertise, training and assignments of heritage staff
D4. Finance/data	Major project reported; no consolidated commune-level records	Partly documented	Operating budget, custody and standards of heritage data
D5. Community	Village inspections reported in 2022; 2026 historical debate	Historically documented	Current custodial role; participation and narrative review

4.6. Integrated capacity assessment

Across the five dimensions, legal authority is the clearest part of the public record. Organisational arrangements are visible chiefly through pre-reform documents and dated reporting. The resource and information dimensions lack local measurements, while community relations are documented at different points in time. These differences in evidence strength prevent a defensible overall capacity score. They do, however, reveal the specific administrative records and field observations that a subsequent assessment would have to obtain. Figure 1 illustrates the five dimensions as linked functions: the capacity to comply with a legal procedure depends on coordination, staff expertise, records and participation, rather than on formal mandate alone.

The chronology of the evidence also affects the interpretation of institutional capacity. Legal provisions issued in 2025 describe current formal responsibilities, whereas the 2022 account of village inspections captures an earlier management arrangement. The 2026 reports on Hoa Lam Vien reveal contemporary debate about historical significance but not the day-to-day enforcement capacity of the commune. Treating these observations as if they measured the same administrative moment would obscure rather than clarify what changed. The proper comparison requires a common post-reorganisation observation period and records that identify the responsible body for each task. This temporal distinction is especially consequential where activities that appear continuous, such as site patrols or festival organisation, may have acquired different authorisation and reporting procedures.

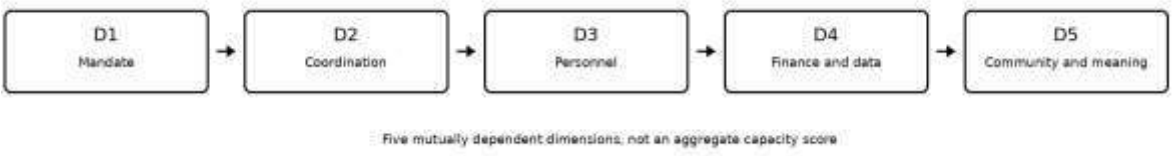


Figure 1. Functional links in the five-dimensional capacity framework

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. A distributed governance arrangement

The principal finding is the separation between territorial proximity and decision-making authority. The commune contains major heritage assets and handles defined local administrative steps, while approval for higher-ranked relics remains with higher levels. This arrangement can be justified by the technical complexity of conservation (Government of Vietnam, 2025b; Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2026). The governance question is therefore not whether every decision should be devolved, but whether duties, consultation, records and accountability are sufficiently explicit at the interfaces between institutions. This interpretation is consistent with Grindle and Hilderbrand's (1995) emphasis on task networks rather than isolated office capacity.

Co Loa makes the interface concrete. Earthwork protection involves planning, land use, household behaviour, inspection and specialist conservation. A city-level board may hold technical expertise while village networks provide constant local observation. Neither can replace the other. In this respect, the apparent fragmentation of responsibilities can be either an administrative vulnerability or a platform for cooperation, depending on whether reporting and action protocols are reliable. The available documents do not demonstrate which condition currently prevails after 2025.

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5.2. Local knowledge, resources and interpretive accountability

The importance of local knowledge is particularly visible in the pre-2025 inspections at Co Loa. Tavares (2018) warns that territorial consolidation may reduce responsiveness even when administrative structures become more streamlined. Living-heritage scholarship similarly emphasises relationships of continued use and care (Poulios, 2014). The appropriate unit of analysis is therefore the relationship between the enlarged commune and village custodians, including channels for reporting damage and the handling of recurring ritual activities. Historical evidence of such a relationship does not demonstrate that it has been maintained under the new structure.

The absence of public personnel and operating-budget data is a measurement limitation with practical significance. National reform assessments may generate hypotheses about workload and specialisation, but they cannot substitute for an actual staff roster, job descriptions, annual allocations or case-processing records. Information systems are similarly essential to procedural capacity: without dependable records of boundaries, conservation status and previous interventions, timely dossier processing becomes difficult (Phuong, 2026; Ta, 2026). For Hoa Lam Vien, the problem is also epistemic. Heritage communication should distinguish archaeological findings, plausible interpretations and narratives that remain contested, particularly where proposed cultural development may make uncertain accounts more visible (Phuong & Tran, 2026).

Institutional accountability should also be distinguished from the physical location of a cultural asset. A commune may provide information, monitor activity and report a problem without possessing the authority to approve a conservation response. Conversely, a city-level heritage institution may possess specialised authority but depend on locally collected evidence to identify a risk. Assessing capacity only through organisational charts would miss this interdependence. A more informative account would trace an actual sequence from detection of damage, through reporting and appraisal, to a documented decision and subsequent monitoring. This type of process evidence could reveal delays, duplication and successful coordination without assuming in advance that decentralisation either improves or diminishes heritage protection.

5.3. Operationalising the framework and future research

The framework can support a comparative study of communes with differently ranked heritage assets. It should be applied through documentary and field indicators rather than through a single subjective rating. A complete assessment would establish the current legal inventory, the division of duties between the commune and conservation centre, actual staffing, recurring expenditure, record-management practices and community mechanisms. The same indicators could then be observed over time to determine whether administrative reorganisation changes response speed, maintenance performance or public participation.

Table 3. Indicative evidence for a field-based commune capacity assessment

Dimension	Minimum verifiable evidence	Possible assessment focus
Mandate	Applicable regulations; current relic inventory; task log	Clarity and timely execution of defined duties
Coordination	Written protocols; referral files; minutes of interagency meetings	Dossier handovers and responsibility for follow-up
Personnel	Staff roster; specialisations; training and workload records	Coverage of heritage tasks and expertise gaps
Finance/information	Approved budgets; asset register; archive custody and metadata	Adequacy, accessibility and continuity of records
Community/interpretation	Custodian agreements; inspection logs; reviewed exhibition scripts	Participation, response to risks and evidentiary integrity

The present study is limited to published documents and contains neither interviews nor direct observation. The 2022 account of Co Loa monitoring predates reorganisation, national staffing evidence is drawn from other localities, and some local decisions were available only through secondary reporting. These constraints restrict the study to documented institutional arrangements and testable implications; they do not support conclusions about the commune's actual performance or the effectiveness of any specific administrative remedy.

6. CONCLUSION

The formation of Dong Anh commune brought Co Loa and Hoa Lam Vien into one newly enlarged local jurisdiction at the same time that Vietnam redefined local cultural-administration procedures. The commune has identifiable festival and dossier-related duties, but the management of higher-ranked relics remains embedded in city and central approval systems. At Co Loa, reporting documents a historically divided management arrangement and locally organised inspection. At Hoa Lam Vien, public discussion highlights the need to manage the boundary between archaeological evidence and historical interpretation.

A five-dimensional framework distinguishes the legal mandate from organisational coordination, specialised personnel, finance and information, and community relations and interpretation. Its main value in the Dong Anh case is evidentiary discipline: current staffing, operating expenditure, records and post-merger participation cannot be inferred from legal assignments or isolated project figures. Comparative field research is required to determine how these functions operate and whether coordination arrangements protect the material and living values of the heritage under the new administrative system.

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DECLARATIONS

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