

## **Vietnam Lost Public Buy-in. Its COVID-19 Struggles Followed.**

**Collaborative governance and facilitative leadership will help Vietnam win its battle against COVID-19.**

By Le Vinh Trien and Kris Hartley

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every sector, level of governance, and corner of society. Accordingly, many policy responses have been undertaken collaboratively. However, the pandemic has also highlighted challenges in governance that call for reform in preparation for future crises. Vietnam's early success and recent struggles against COVID-19 provide illuminating examples.

During the initial global outbreak of COVID-19 (January to May 2020), most governments were caught off-guard by the rapid and severe spread of the virus, relying on incomplete information and often outdated heuristics to appear duly reactive. Some countries, like Iran, Italy, and South Korea, struggled significantly with containment. Others, like Vietnam and Taiwan, appeared to adopt the right strategy initially.

Vietnam's experience during the most recent phase of the pandemic, however, has been less encouraging. The highly contagious Delta variant tested and ultimately broke the country's previously effective pandemic defenses. This is exemplified in Vietnam's economic capital, Ho Chi Minh City, where after more than two months of lockdown cases and death tolls continue to be consistently high.

Explanations abound for Vietnam's recent containment failures, and the actual explanation is likely a combination of these theories. It's plausible that the society fell into complacency after Vietnam's initial success, believing that the methods that had contained the original variant would be sufficient for the newly emergent Delta variant. Vaccine imports did not occur at the needed pace, due in part to a belief in the development of a home-grown vaccine (which has yet to be distributed). Furthermore, hospitals' capacity to isolate and treat all cases has been paralyzed by higher-priority severe cases – a trend observed in almost all countries experiencing the recent case spike.

It is instructive to examine these failures through the lens of collaborative governance. In this model, the state plays the role of facilitator by synthesizing public perspectives, expert insights, and the constraints and realities of government capacity. Participants representing various sectors of the economy and society are invited to share their views in pursuit of a common good.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlights not only the mandate to include a variety of voices in the policymaking processes (including experts, politicians, civil society, and the general public) but also the importance of political legitimacy and public buy-in. Most pandemic containment strategies include participation by the public at the individual level: wearing masks, social distancing, and practicing proper hygiene. To affect such behavioral changes, the legitimacy of

the policy project is essential. One way to achieve this legitimacy is for government to practice cross-sectoral facilitative leadership and to involve the public in the policymaking process.

### **Assessing Vietnam's Collaborative Governance Approach to COVID-19**

As Vietnam's first major pandemic wave continued, the government appeared to regress on previously effective practices while policy consistency waned. Commercial enterprises suffered disrupted supply chains. Vulnerable groups faced heightened health and economic precarity. Volunteer groups and civil society organizations struggled to assist disadvantaged groups. Scientists, doctors, and experts were often unconvinced by the government's response measures.

Anti-pandemic measures developed without collaboration fail to reflect the voices of diverse communities. When the political power among these communities is imbalanced, policy inconsistencies arise and a chain reaction emerges. Case counts rise as people resist restrictive behavior protocols, straining health care capacity and imperiling vulnerable groups. Ultimately, mixed messaging at the policy level widens the trust gap between government and citizens.

In one example, on July 10 the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) secretary of Ho Chi Minh City met with scientists in a move that generated some political credibility for the science underlying some policy measures. However, the move also raised questions about why similar consultations were not held earlier for all involved parties. Lack of early coordination and collaboration, particularly amidst a poorly understood but rapidly evolving crisis, can lead to policies that are unclear and difficult to heed. After losing the opportunity to be a facilitative leader, the government is left with the harsher option of controlling information while seeking to manage its image by appearing assertive.

This vicious cycle further erodes trust. If the public trusts government and experts, even discouraging information is less likely to arouse panic and speculation. On the other hand, lack of trust under an information-control strategy can lead the public to believe rumors that confirm their biases or indulge alarmist tendencies. The government must break this cycle.

### **A Collaborative Way Forward**

Crisis moments are opportunities to foster collaboration. The Vietnamese government should approach COVID-19 in this way by establishing an official forum of representatives from all community sectors. Participants should include professionals, intellectuals, media, social activists, and representatives of business, faith, and other communities. Collaborative activities should be developed, undertaken, and reported publicly to strengthen trust in the policymaking system. Additionally, policy initiatives should address not only the substance of what is needed to fight the pandemic (e.g., resources for the health sector and civil society organizations) but also the processes by which decisions are made as conditions evolve. This approach includes consistent public provision of information of both an epidemiological and governance nature.

In the longer run, governments should make efforts on two fronts. First, they should embrace a facilitative leadership role, particularly where participatory systems are currently lacking. In this role, governments should seek to develop trust not only between the state and society but also among constituent groups within society; this is crucial as, in many cases, response capacity involves non-government bodies. Deriving their power and legitimacy from public trust, governments in a facilitative role should demonstrate accountability, openness, and transparency.

Second, governments should officially recognize and support civil society organizations. These types of organizations are often better connected than government to the interests and needs of constituent groups, including socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals. In Vietnam, local governments and the CPV-sponsored Fatherland Front must make better efforts to serve vulnerable individuals by strengthening and working with voluntary, religious, and civil society organizations. The COVID-19 crisis is no occasion to abandon progress on the types of participatory and collaborative capacities fundamental to strengthening state-society relations.

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