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Success in combating a pandemic: Role of fast policy responses

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ABSTRACT

The rapid outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is putting humanity in front of enormous health risks. The pandemic also causes serious social crises in many countries. In order to successfully prevent and control a dangerous epidemic such as COVID-19, it requires the government to have an urgent, flexible and effective policy response framework. This health disaster once again highlights the importance of public governance in crisis. Since the COVID-19 spread globally, Vietnam has been recognized by international organizations as having one of the best-organized epidemic control programs in this pandemic. My paper introduces the fast policy responses of the Vietnamese government to prevent and control the COVID-19 pandemic. The practical experiences from Vietnam are not only useful for policymakers in other countries in finalizing the policy response framework for coping with the on-going pandemic but also contribute to the public management theory in social crises.

1. Introduction

In the global fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnam has been recognized as a successful country (Reed, 2020; World Bank, 2020). The statistics have shown a very small number of COVID-19 confirmed cases since the first patient found in Vietnam (see Fig. 1). On November 22, 2020, Vietnam recorded only 1306 confirmed cases (1142 recovered cases, accounting for 87.3%) and 35 deaths (Ministry of Health, 2020). Since early May, Vietnam has transformed the economy into a “new normal state”, restored production and business activities to support economic growth. Although Vietnam had the second phase of COVID-19, health risks have been under controlled and there were not newly infected cases in the community. Based on the good experiences gained as the first country to successfully control the SARS pandemic (Lam, Zhong, & Tan, 2003), the Vietnamese government has responded quickly, flexibly, and effectively in combating the COVID-19 pandemic (La et al., 2020). Faces with a trade-off relationship between the health of the community and economic loss, obviously, the government of Vietnam has put the health of its citizens first and accepted the huge losses of the economy (Huynh, 2020). For several months, some powerful and stressful solutions have never been implemented in Vietnam such as closure schools, canceling community events, implementing social distance, and working from home. The success in combating the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the good prospect of the economic recovery in Vietnam.

Although many strong solutions worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic situation is highly complicating with the number of infected people reaching 58.9 million and 1393.1 thousand deaths (on November 22, 2020) and increasing rapidly now (Worldometers, 2020). On the other hand, many countries have been stuck in the second phase of the COVID-19 outbreak. Besides, the situation may continue to worsen in the near future when the risk of COVID-19 outbreak in poor countries is still in the early stages (Pangescu, 2020). Following a low-cost strategy approach (Hong, 2020), therefore, the experiences from the policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic of the Vietnamese government are useful to policymakers in other countries, especially those with limited resources, in coping with this on-going pandemic. Furthermore, the policy implications provided also contribute to public policy theory and public administration theory in crisis management in the future.

2. A synthetic analysis of the fast policy responses in Vietnam

2.1. Direct and multidimensional communication of pandemic information to people

Public communication is a very important tool in the context that it is necessary to act quickly and unite in the community to respond to a pandemic. In a social crisis, the close collaboration between government and citizens has a leading role to help the success of the final result of the society (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Since the first COVID-19 infection case (on January 23, 2020), the Vietnamese government has conducted direct communication on disease situation and national action plans to
its citizens through a variety of channels such as mobile phone messaging, social networks (e.g., Facebook, Zalo), social media channels (e.g., Youtube), national television channels, national radio channels, online newspapers, and daily papers. In the road system and residential areas, the propaganda posters were designed and appeared to highlight the action slogans and preventive measures. The government also provided finance to the creation of a well-known song “Ghen Covy” (on February 20, 2020) on Youtube channel to practice the prevention activities to the community, especially young people (Huynh, 2020).

The rapid and direct communication through a variety of channels has helped the Vietnamese government spread the information to the people in an up-to-date manner. Besides, transparency of information is needed to have high confidence from citizens. The amounts of patients and information about the virus status, in both Vietnam and foreign countries, were fastly updated and easily accessible on communication channels by an official website of the Ministry of Health. Based on good experiences, in the second phase of the COVID-19 pandemic with the infected central in Da Nang (a large city in the middle of Vietnam) since late July, public communications have shown a higher efficiency than the previous one. Obviously, direct communication to people is a key and effective measure to the prevention of the virus outbreak in the community and it leads to a final successful result in combating a pandemic.

2.2. Using short and clear slogans to send out urgent anti-epidemic directions

One of the positive experiences in Vietnam was that the government immediately put out short and clear slogans that corresponded closely to the policies being implemented. In the context of the rapid spread of a pandemic, policy responses must be communicated to people quickly. Although communication is a difficult issue in a country having a large population (97 million), the Vietnamese government decided to transform its policies into short and easy-to-understand slogans that could be easily spread among the community. Besides, the slogans have been always updated to fit with the perspective of the COVID-19 in Vietnam. For example, the slogan ‘Fighting against the epidemic like fighting against an enemy’ appeared in the first phase to show the strong determination to prevent the epidemic, ‘Proactively prevent – Early detection – Prompt isolation – Radical treatment’ was used to give a clear outline of the plans that would be practiced in the pandemic, ‘Sacrificing economic benefits to protect people’s health’ showed the spirit of putting public health first, ‘No one is left behind in the fight against COVID-19’ stated the government’s intention to ensure social security for citizens, and ‘Socio-economic recovery and development in a new normal status’ was used to implement the strategy for economic recovery after the pandemic. In the context of the second phase of the COVID-19 in Vietnam (end of July 2020), the official slogan was adjusted to fit with the perspective of a new normal status as “Fighting the pandemic while promoting economic development”. Short and clear slogans are one of the important points in a rapid-response strategy from policymakers to create a unified action framework for a community that is facing a potential outbreak of a new and dangerous disease.

2.3. Centralized isolation of infected cases and monitor suspected cases

Since the first information about the COVID-19 epidemic from foreign countries (end of January 2020) (Phan et al., 2020), the Government of Vietnam has taken some early and strong measures to closely monitor the risk of disease outbreaks through the transport of goods and travel. In order to combat the risk of the epidemic, one of the consistent measures of the Vietnamese government is to absolutely isolate the
infected cases, monitor history travel, and find all of the people who have been in contact with the confirmed cases in the community. This strategy helps to save resources because of minimizing the number of tested people (Fleming, 2020). In the case of direct contact with infected cases, the centralized isolation is employed at health centers or monitoring centers, besides, in the case of indirect contact, the home quarantine is used under the close supervision of medical employees. The patient isolation measure has been learned from the successful experience of controlling the SARS pandemic in Vietnam. By financial funding of the government, all of the costs were free for related people in treating, testing, living in the time of isolation.

In addition, some fast policy responses to cut the infected risk of the virus from outside have been applied to closely alongside the pandemic situation in foreign countries. The suspension of visas for foreigners entering Vietnam for a period of 30 days was started on March 18, 2020. After that, since March 21, all people entering Vietnam must be quarantined in centralized centers. From 1 April, all of the international passenger flights to Vietnam have been stopped. Since the beginning of May, all new confirmed cases have been absolutely isolated when entering Vietnam, so there were no risks of infection to the community. In the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam, the public responses also were very fast. On the day that the positive case found in Da Nang, all of the people who had been in contact with the COVID-19 patient were quarantined immediately and the Da Nang hospital was locked down on the next day. Two days after, the city authorities decided to suspend all international flights at Da Nang International Airport. The Ministry of Health rolled out extensive countermeasures and immediately sent groups of doctors from Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi to Da Nang to assist the local health system. Because of the fast and effective solutions, on August 30, Vietnam recorded its first day without new COVID-19 cases since the beginning of the second phase of the virus outbreak. These fast and strong measures have sharply reduced the risk of COVID-19 disease outbreaks in Vietnam.

2.4. Quickly locking down, disinfecting and mass testing

When a high risk of an outbreak of the virus was detected in a community where some people were infected, the solution of a rigid lockdown and large-scale disinfection was used. Moreover, mass testing was carried out thoroughly for related people. In Vietnam, a lockdown can be applied anywhere that has a detected outbreak. The largest areas subject to lockdowns were a community of about 10,000 people (in Vinh Phuc province), part of Truc Bach street (in the capital, Hanoi), a residential area in District 8 (in Ho Chi Minh City), and in a small area in an urban region (in Binh Thuan province). In the health system, a mass lockdown and the testing of thousands of people occurred at Bach Mai Hospital (in Hanoi). Local lockdowns of epidemic spots helped the regional authorities to screen people, detect cases, and eliminate the risk of the disease spreading to the community. During lockdowns, the affected people received support, such as free food, from the government. In the second COVID-19 phase in Vietnam (end of July 2020), the major outbreak also started at healthcare centers, in detail, three hospitals in Da Nang. This problem in Da Nang was the same situation in Bach Mai hospital (Hanoi) in the first phase, there was a large number of people have been infected by the virus was transmitted from patients to their family members as well as health workers in these hospitals. Besides, there were first serious patients have been died by the virus in Vietnam. Following the experience received from the first phase, quickly lockdowns, disinfect and mass testing solutions have continuously helped to well control the risk of the coronavirus in Vietnam.

2.5. Closely monitoring compliance with anti-epidemic solutions and strictly punishing the spread of fake news

Since the first case of infection was discovered, people were encouraged by the government to wear masks and wash their hands regularly to combat the risk of the disease. Propaganda and monitoring measures were quickly implemented in the community. Face masks were compulsory in public areas, and people were forced to carry out social distancing. During the time when there was a high risk of an outbreak of the virus, people who did not wear face masks when going about in the community would be sanctioned. Besides, during the two COVID-10 phases in Vietnam, restaurants and bars that did not ensure the safety of the epidemic prevention would be fined and forced to close their businesses. Fake news generally appears in the form of false and unverified information, but it can influence public opinion and citizens’ activities (Bondielli & Marcelloni, 2019). In an on-going pandemic like COVID-19, obviously, misinformation and disinformation put health and lives at risk, besides, they can undermine the community’s trust in science, in institutions as well as the health system (WHO, 2020). Acts of spreading fake news on social networks or social media channels were urgently punished and the perpetrators were even detained. Any actions against public services in the implementation of anti-epidemic measures were thoroughly penalized. The quick, strong, and efficient policy responses of the government earned people’s confidence during the anti-epidemic months.

2.6. Urgently prevent price manipulation and speculation in essential products

In the context of combating an outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the policies of social distancing and travel restriction that were adopted resulted in a rapid increase in demand for essential goods. Many households stored food and essential products. Speculative behaviour in relation to market prices took place in markets for items such as rice, face masks and antiseptic liquids. However, the government’s solutions were very effective and it acted quickly to stop speculation and price manipulation in the market. Responding to the government’s policies, many supermarket systems increased their opening hours for selling and supplying a variety of essential goods. Because of the efficient and fast responses of the government, during the social distancing period, the supply of essential products far exceeded market demand in Vietnam. In addition, market regulators imposed heavy fines on those engaging in price manipulation and took further action such as withdrawing business licences, and confiscating products; the police even arrested the people involved. The behaviour of supplying poor quality medical products (including counterfeit ones) was successfully prevented by the public agencies. In summary, the quick responses by the public agencies helped to keep market prices stable, and there was no sign of any scarcity of essential products after the outbreak of the pandemic. The government’s measures to regulate the market are also a good experience from Vietnam for how to protect communities and prevent a pandemic like COVID-19.

3. Conclusion

Humanity has been facing the biggest health crisis for the last 100 years. The COVID-19 pandemic is seriously outbreaking with a fast increase in the number of infected cases and deaths now. Furthermore, the pandemic situation can be worse when the virus may be attacking poor countries in the future. However, the policy responses to combat with a pandemic is diverse and complex. Policymakers are facing great challenges and pressure in order to well prevent the COVID-19 pandemic. In the current context, Vietnam is considered as a highlighted country that successfully controls this pandemic and already transforms the economy into a new normal state. My paper provides a multidimensional analysis of the role of fast policy responses from the Vietnamese government to explain the reasons behind the success story of this country in preventing a dangerous pandemic such as COVID-19. My study result does not only provide good lessons for policymakers but also contributes to the broadening of the theoretical framework of the government’s response during a crisis.
Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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