



## Research and training partnership to assist policy and capacity building in improving food safety in Vietnam



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### ABSTRACT

This paper evaluated the implementation of an initiative for promoting risk-based approaches to improve food safety management in Vietnam. A Taskforce of Risk Assessment for Food Safety (Taskforce) was formed and consisted of researchers working on risk assessment and food safety, and representatives of the related ministries of Health and of Agriculture. We used the OECD Development Assistance Committee Evaluation Criteria as a framework for assessing the impact of the Taskforce with five evaluation areas – relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability. They analysed current food safety policies, identified key constraints and opportunities, and conducted action research and capacity building to address these challenges in food safety. Stakeholder workshops helped determine priority food safety issues and activities. A series of hands-on training based on real-world case studies were organized and risk assessment curricula were developed and taught at universities to promote sustainability. Practical guidelines, text books, a special edition and policy briefs were published. The Taskforce provided technical support to a national food safety assessment commissioned by the World Bank and evidence for development partners. The Taskforce was institutionalized by a national university to have a formal role in implementing its activities. In conclusion, the Taskforce has brought experts in Vietnam to work together on prioritized topics of food safety risk assessment, assisted and informed ministries in implementing risk-based approaches for food safety management. It can be recommended as a way of institutionalising risk-based methods in countries new to the approach.

### 1. Introduction

Vietnamese agriculture has seen remarkable progress in the past decades, generating income for approximately 70% of over 90 million people and producing food for domestic consumption and export. Agriculture contributes 20% to the gross domestic product of Vietnam, and the agricultural product export value in 2017 was US\$ 36 billion (Baocongthuong, 2018). High food demand due to increased population, income, and urbanization has led to an intensification of agricultural production, especially notable in the case of livestock and fish products. Vietnam is one of the world's top exporters of coffee and rice, and increasingly prominent in other agriculture exports including

seafood and meat (Baocongthuong, 2018). However, food safety issues can cause important economic and competitiveness losses in international trades. For example, in 2015 and 2016, 35 notifications in the EU Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed regarding to pesticide residues in food imported from Vietnam were made due to non-compliance residues level (World Bank, 2017).

Food production has negative as well as positive health effects, among the most important of which are food-borne diseases (FBDs). FBDs harm health and livelihoods, and are of great concern to consumers, producers, and policymakers (Havelaar et al., 2015). In Vietnam, concern about the safety of food extends to production, trade and consumption (Nguyen-Viet et al., 2017). For example, the concern

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that pork was contaminated with growth promoter (salbutamol) caused the lost of US\$ 90 million per month during the crisis (Vietnamnet, 2012) for the pig sector in 2011 and currently captures much attention of the media and public. In addition, antibiotic residues in food and microbial contamination are major concerns to consumers. The use of banned substances in animal husbandry now faces harsher punishment as the new criminal code in Vietnam took effect on 1st July 2016. However, “detect and punish” approaches have not worked well in developing countries and interest is increasing in co-regulatory and participatory approaches (Grace, 2015).

The switch from “having enough food to eat” to “needing safe food” is happening rapidly in Vietnam and makes food safety a pressing issue. Given that approximately 85% of food come from wet or traditional markets, food safety management is an important challenge (World Bank, 2017). The poor, women, and children are the groups often exposed to food hazards from over 8600 traditional markets (versus 700 supermarkets) and many other informal markets (World Bank, 2017). Finding different ways to manage the food safety for the traditional and informal markets in Vietnam is critical.

Food safety management system of Vietnam benefits from a modern framework, thanks to the Food Safety Law (FSL) in effect since 1st of January 2011. This has endorsed a risk-based approach which is the gold-standard approach for managing food safety in high income countries. Risk analysis has three components: (1) Risk assessment (RA) estimates the possible extent of harm and the probability that harm will occur; this is followed by (2) Risk management, which uses a pathway approach (“farm to fork”) to identify critical control points and strategies to eliminate or reduce risk; and (3) Risk communication involves two-way communication of risk between authorities and those affected, incorporating useful feedbacks from all parties into RA and risk management. However, the capacities from different levels (ministries, universities, provinces, districts and communes) to apply a risk-based approach and its application is rather limited in low and middle income countries, including Vietnam (World Bank, 2017).

This paper aims to analyse the process and describe lessons learnt of an initiative where food safety RA researchers and their partners (the Taskforce) worked together to promote the risk-based approach as a tool for a better food safety management in traditional markets, and improvement of the safety of animal sourced foods in Vietnam. The purpose of the Taskforce was to strengthen the capacity of researchers to use RA to assist the Ministry of Health (MOH) and Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) in making decisions on the management of food safety in Vietnam.

## 2. Method

This paper is a practitioner case study that describes the lessons of how a research group worked together and with people in related ministries to develop the capacity of food safety RA. We analysed the process of how the Taskforce was initiated, developed and operated with case studies conducted by the Taskforce. We used the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Evaluation Criteria as a framework for assessing the impact of the Taskforce initiative (OECD, 2018; Chianca, 2008). The five DAC evaluation areas – relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability – set the standard for what should be considered and measured and are considered the most widely used and referenced evaluation criteria. The DAC Network on Development Evaluation is currently exploring how the DAC Evaluation Criteria can be adapted to the new development landscape and the 2030 Agenda and our experience also provides advice for this (OECD, 2018; Chianca, 2008). This was a self-evaluation and the results presented were from the direct experience of the authors, supported by project's documents and substantiated by published documents. The Taskforce did not have an explicit theory of change, but was based on over 10 years of promoting risk assessment by the initiators of the Taskforce. Our

experiences led to the following assumptions that under-pinned the Taskforce and directed our evaluation: Understanding the policy landscape and actors is needed to influence policy change; Risk assessors need to have training in theory and practice; Risk assessment skills are best acquired through conducting real world case studies; The utility of risk assessment can best be shown by conducting relevant risk assessments in-country; Disseminating risk assessment widely requires clear, simple and relevant material in local languages; and Policymakers need to be aware of how risk assessment can benefit them and help them meet their objectives.

Thus, in this paper, we outlined the initiation and establishment of the Taskforce, its objectives and prioritized activities. In Section 5 “Key highlights of Taskforce's activities”, we presented the results of our evaluation for each of the above assumptions, using DAC criteria. We report our evaluation focusing on the following areas: (1) Situational analysis of food safety policy in Vietnam; (2) Training and capacity building of food safety risk assessment; (3) Hands-on research case studies in risk assessment; (4) Publications and disseminations of results; and (5) Policy engagement.

## 3. Initiation and establishment of the Taskforce and objectives

The Hanoi University of Public Health (HUPH, formerly known as HSPH) in Vietnam is one of the very first universities to introduce the food safety RA training and research, thanks to research partnership with international partners started in 2007 (Tuyet-Hanh and Nguyen-Viet, 2013). The idea of having a taskforce working on food safety RA came from a discussion with Vietnam Food Administration (VFA) of MOH in 2011. In the same year, the Taskforce was put in place and consisted of researchers and representatives of MOH and MARD working on RA and food safety. In total, eighteen (18) Vietnamese experts on RA and food safety, mainly from research institutes and universities in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh cities formed the Taskforce. They were invited individually based on their RA expertise and experiences, in consultations with MOH, MARD and their home institutions. In addition to risk assessors, the Taskforce includes four policy-makers from MOH and MARD who are responsible for food safety (Table 1). As several members of the Taskforce have collaborated together for the past few years, informal meetings have taken place to discuss plans and activities for food safety RA in Vietnam. The group was developed to promote research and training in food safety RA and management. The funding support for the Taskforce's training, research and policy advocacy activities were mobilised from the CGIAR Research Program on Agriculture for Nutrition and Health (A4NH), the Swiss Development Cooperation Agency (SDC), the World Health Organization in Vietnam through the MOH, and through a number of research projects.

The general objective of the Taskforce was to strengthen the RA capacity of researchers to assist MOH and MARD in making decisions on food safety management. The initial specific objectives were i) To understand the food safety policy in Vietnam; ii) To form a RA Taskforce and to strengthen the capacity of members and risk managers through training; iii) To conduct RA case studies and develop guidelines for RA in four specific value chains; and iv) To communicate policy and research results in RA.

## 4. Defining prioritized activities

A workshop was organized on 26th September 2013 to launch the Taskforce, define the scope and prioritize activities. The Taskforce decided to have an advisory board, with a clear operation mode and regulations. It would operate in alignment with state organizations and would have both domestic and foreign technical partners and sponsors. It was agreed that a memo among the related ministries and the involved units was needed and MOH could recognize the Taskforce to be a technical subcommittee. In addition, information safety should be

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