

Some thoughts on responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in Vietnam

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The lunar new year of 2023 has arrived, and life in Vietnam is returning to normal as if the Covid-19 pandemic had never swept across the country. In the early waves of Covid-19, [Vietnam succeeded in controlling the disease](#), even though it shares a long border with China, where the virus originated. In 18 months since the outbreak of Covid-19 in January 2020, the country recorded roughly 13,000 cases with only 66 related deaths [1]. This success has been attributed to the ability of the government to [respond quickly to the disease](#) [2], the mobilization of various state institutions and players in society, and the central government's communication campaigns [evoking the spirit of patriotism](#) [3]. However, the fourth wave of Covid-19, driven by the Delta variant, dramatically changed the situation. The daily infections and deaths increased quickly, and at times, they were even higher than the cumulative numbers recorded in the previous waves [4]. It is not easy to point out what caused this deadly wave, but some believe that the leading factor was the slow vaccination rate [3]. The battle against Covid-19 has entered its third year, but the pandemic's ending time is still uncertain. Looking back at the strengths and shortcomings of Vietnam's past responses can help prepare and handle new waves of Covid-19 and pandemics that might happen in the future.

First, government responses should be flexible and adaptive timely in accordance with the pace of the disease, socio-economic conditions as well as the capacity of the healthcare system. In the initial phase of Covid-19, the Vietnamese government adopted a "Zero Covid" strategy with strict quarantine and restrictions. It shut down borders, limited domestic

movements, ordered lockdowns, and implemented contact tracing. [These measures worked out well](#), and from January 2020 to March 2021, Vietnam was able to contain the spread of the virus and keep the infection cases around 2,500, with only 35 related deaths [5]. In April 2021, the country was hit by the Delta variant. This time, the government responded with more stringent measures. Yet, in the course of a few months, the [number of infection cases surged](#) to hundreds of thousands [6], and the [death toll rose to more than 5,000](#) [4], which raised concern about the continuation of the previously effective control measures when facing the new variant.

Although lockdowns helped contain the virus transmission to some degree, they have disrupted economic activities. Hundreds of factories and businesses were forced to close, leaving a large number of workers unemployed. Millions of people were ordered to stay at home, but the national financial support packages could not satisfy the needs of all affected people, and [many of them struggled without support](#) [3]. In addition, the dramatic increase in the daily cases and the requirements of infected people and their close contacts to stay in designated state quarantine facilities and hospitals have severely strained the healthcare system. The vaccination campaign was launched as early as March 2021; however, the government has been slow in the rollout to the whole population due to the shortage of vaccines [3]. In August 2021, Vietnam finally made a major shift in its strategy from “Zero Covid” to effectively controlling Covid-19 and living safely with the disease. Restrictions were eased gradually; domestic travel was restored, and businesses and schools were reopened.

Second, practices to tackle the pandemic must be grounded in science. Reckless actions could result in a waste of resources and affect the well-being of local residents. Examples of rash efforts could be found at the provincial level and in big cities. In Ho Chi Minh, army officials launched a seven-day project to spray citywide streets with disinfectants. However, the World Health Organization has advised that [spraying disinfectants outdoors is ineffective](#) and can be physically and psychologically harmful [7]. In Hanoi, a 200-meter metal wall was built along a small alley to prohibit residents on the left side from interacting with residents on the right side because the latter administratively belonged to a high-risk district. Scientifically, there was no evidence suggesting that a physical wall could help prevent residents from contracting the virus. In reality, the wall caused lots of inconveniences for people living in the alley and blocked access to ambulances and fire trucks in case of emergency.



Figure: The metal wall built to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in Hanoi (*Source: <https://cand.com.vn/Xa-hoi/ngo-nho-o-ha-noi-lap-rao-chan-cung-ngan-doi-de-chong-dich--i625528/>)

Third, localism must be avoided for more effective nationwide responses. Each province can develop its own measures; however, these must comply with the central policies. The fear of Covid-19 infection has led to local closures despite the non-isolation policy of the central government. Provinces where the national highways run across established checkpoints, each requiring different travel documents. As a result, transportation and trade activities were heavily affected. Vehicles carrying goods from the North to the South and from neighborhood areas to Ho Chi Minh City were stuck in tailbacks that stretched for a few kilometers. To an extent, provincial control measures disrupted the national supply chain, leading to increased prices of goods and worsening people's lives.

Finally, social media should be used wisely to provide useful information and keep people informed and connected. On the one hand, national media such as Vietnam Television (VTV) or The Voice of Vietnam (VOV) successfully called for the voluntary adoption of restriction methods. They educated audiences on scientific approaches to prevent Covid-19. On the other hand, the frequent broadcasting of Covid-19 news and the overwhelming information on the total number of cases and new daily case counts increased people's anxiety and fear. In reality, [most cases suffered mild symptoms](#) [6], and infection rates and deaths in Vietnam were considerably low compared to other countries. As of August 2021, with a population of

nearly 100 million people, [Vietnam ranked 59 out of more than 200 countries and territories](#) in terms of the total number of infected cases [8]. Instead of focusing on numbers, perhaps it would be better if social media put more effort into developing programs to guide people on how to stay safe, healthy, and positive during the pandemic.

The first month of 2023 saw a decrease in case counts, with an average of 47 new cases per day nationwide [9]. It appears that [the pandemic is fading in Vietnam](#). For now, it is too early to estimate the exact costs of Covid-19 in terms of life loss, social turmoil, and economic disruptions. However, the past three years' successes and failures have helped the government have a clearer view of its abilities and limitations to become more efficient and better prepared for future crises.

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