



# Adaptive Governance in the “Vuca” World of Covid -19 Pandemic – The Case of the Vietnamese Government

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The COVID-19 pandemic has been bringing unprecedented and enormous challenges to the economy and society of all countries worldwide. In a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment (VUCA) of the COVID -19 epidemic, countries often face changes and are forced to update their governance strategy to maintain and adapt to changes. Based on the analysis of research papers related to adaptive governance strategies in the VUCA context, specifically the context of COVID -19 pandemic, and the concept of adaptive governance to the COVID -19 epidemic, this article proposes implications from Vietnamese Government towards adaptive governance in response to crises in the VUCA world.

**Keywords:** *COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnamese Government, VUCA world, adaptive governance, Vietnam.*

## 1. Introduction

The COVID -19 pandemic has been creating an unprecedented series of crises, affecting all aspects of economy and social life, causing crises in many areas such as health, society, education, social policy, employment policy and immigration policy, etc. Countries around the world have had to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak with limited information and face many uncertainties. In that context, the ability to be agile and flexible in public governance of governments is emphasized, especially in terms of time and policy measures, degree of centralization in making decision, and autonomy of the decisions.

This article consists of four parts: The first part defines the concept of VUCA world and its characteristics in the context of the COVID -19 pandemic, Additionally, we argue that the public sector should pay more attention to the development of adaptive governance; In the next parts, the article mentions the strategy of Vietnam’s Government in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic in each stage from 2020 to present; The fourth part proposes some lessons to be learned

on adaptive governance in the context of VUCA where the COVID -19 epidemic is a typical situation.

In order to collect the data, we have researched available articles and specialized papers in the areas of VUCA world and its components related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study is based on the case of Vietnam, as the authors have deep knowledge of the situation there. We have reviewed policy documents, official articles, reports, briefs, presentations, and credible data sources in Vietnam. An overview of major strategies undertaken in Vietnam to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic was provided. Subsequently, narrative analyses were applied to describe the pandemic and policy responses, and a thematic approach to analysis was used to identify typical lessons.

## **2. “VUCA” world in the COVID - 19 pandemic**

The concept of “VUCA” world has attracted more and more attention from researchers. The term “VUCA” is an acronym (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) originating from the US military in the 1990s, and has been recently introduced into the public sector lexicon. Firstly, with reference to volatility, a situation of high dynamics and high speed of change (Lawrence, 2013; Codreanu, 2016), governments have to deal with everyday situations such as disruptive events, scandals, crisis and disasters, and have plans and practices to deal with some of them. However, governments have difficulty in forecasting their timing and occurrence, and because the increase of interconnectedness, even small events may cause other disruptive events and crises, resulting in volatility (Van Der Wal, 2017; Cousins, 2018). Volatility is a real issue in the public sector and has become a key concern of administrators (Schillemans and van Twist, 2016). Secondly, regarding uncertainty, this is a situation of lack of predictability (Lawrence, 2013). The concept of uncertainty has been the concern of many administrative scholars (Lipsky, 1980; Vinzant et al., 1998; Wagenaar, 2004; Lipsky, 2010). Public organizations are limited by incomplete knowledge about future consequences; therefore, public organizations’ decisions are based on relatively simple heuristics and standard operating procedures. In many cases, public managers lack crucial information about the short-term implications and cues on how to proceed; therefore, they fall into situations of uncertainty (Simon, 2013). Thirdly, in the matter of complexity, this signifies the numerous and difficult-to-understand causes and mitigating factors involved in a problem. Most scholars in public administration readily confirm that the public sector is now characterized by increased complexity of plural conflict values, stakeholders and organizations, as well as contradiction (Schillemans and Van Twist, 2016). Christensen et al. (2007, p.150) highlighted that the public sector copes with a variety of conflicting concerns from public service users, for instance, “economy, efficiency, being representative, responsiveness to voters, professional quality, performance, service quality, safety and security, due process, control, neutrality, equal treatment, impartiality, public transparency and openness, predictability and rights of participation”. Finally, ambiguity is a situation or an event which is unclear, and the nature of cause-effect relationships is doubtful in situations of ambiguity (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014). Van Der Wal (2017) argued that the public sector faces increasing ambiguity when dealing with innovative implementation, untested new solutions and reforms for better

satisfying service users. However, the outcomes of innovation and experiments are unclear or unknown to them; hence they are surrounded with ambiguity. They have to respond to citizens, with a limited amount of information or time to make a decision, even though the written rules do not always match the situation. The ambiguity and simplification of rules often makes political institutions appear to be bureaucratic, stupid, insensitive, dogmatic or rigid (March and Olsen, 2004).

In recent decades, the public sector has been facing violent terrorist attacks, massive floods and droughts due to climate change, global financial crisis, anti-racism protests, huge influx of refugees, etc. However, the COVID-19 pandemic is a more complex crisis than normal crises (Christopher et al., 2021; Joy et al., 2020). The COVID-19 crisis, with its complex, chaotic, unexpected, unpredictable, and uncertain nature, has continuously disrupted human social activities and challenged the public sector of all countries in the world. The issues and properties related to the COVID-19 pandemic have been linked to the characteristics of the VUCA world by many scholars such as Christoph Schulze et al (2021); Worley, C. G., and Jules, C. (2020); Nembhard, I. M., et al., (2020); Singhal, N. (2021). At the time of the pandemic, each country had to make a series of day-to-day decisions in order to protect their economy and citizens and to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic from reaching a higher rate of spread. However, due to the limitation in our current understanding of the pandemic, especially with regard to the epidemiologic features of the virus, it is also very hard to forecast crisis situations that may occur and their implicit consequences. As a result, countries in the world had to adapt quickly to a new world, full of restrictions that it had not "known" before. At the same time, there are many paradoxes in the solutions that governments offer to deal with the epidemic. For example, many governments applied a near-total lockdown strategy that disrupted the economy, and forced the poor without welfare to choose between hunger and infection (Christopher et al., 2021). Identifying the challenges posed by the pandemic to public governance has important and practical significance to help governments develop appropriate governance strategies to respond effectively to such extreme crisis as the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in the context that similar extreme events will come back in the future in the forms beyond the understanding and prediction of human beings.

### **3. VUCA world call for adaptive governance in the public sector**

The traditional public administration was bureaucratic model, characterized by hierarchy, impartiality, high legality, continuity and standardization (Larbi, 1999; Drechsler, 2001; Wynen and Verhoest, 2015). This model was expected to bring safety to citizens, set and enforce social criteria, and maintain law provisions. In the model of bureaucracy, rules and procedures are strictly applied to concrete cases in order to limit individual bureaucrats' discretionary powers (Thompson, 2017). It is interesting to note that formalization, red tape and centralization are the main characteristics of bureaucracy, shaping the contradictory behavior of actors. While the VUCA conditions require a flexible responsive structure, traditional public administration is trapped in "iron cage", which is characterized by rigidity, stability, inertness, and dependence of hierarchy, red tape, civil servants' status, and political interventions (Weber, 1978).

According to many scholars, there is an ongoing shift from traditional public administration with hierarchical and institutionalized forms of governance implemented by an administrative and bureaucratic government to less formal governance approaches with powers distributed among different actors and organizations (Arts et al., 2006). The VUCA world calls for innovation in public governance, and perhaps most importantly, the development of robust and adaptive governance strategies that facilitate and support adaptive adjustment (Gray, 1989; Overbeek, Klievink, and Janssen 2009; McCann and Selsky 2012). The COVID-19 pandemic becomes a test of the limits of the public sector by nullifying the public sector's traditional standard strategies of vision, maintenance, protection and resilience. Complex and chaotic problems require powerful and adaptive governance solutions. Certainly, complex problems cannot be solved only thanks to dedicated, well-trained staff. Foresight, protection and resilience are not enough in chaotic situations. Instead, the public sector needs to be agile to adapt to unforeseen problems by building networks and partnerships with the private sector and society. Adaptation is essential in the face of a huge, complex change like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adaptive governance originates from the evolutionary theory, then developed and applied in many other fields such as organization, politics, public administration, public policy, theory of systems, etc. (Hatfield-Dodds, Nelson, and Cook, 2007; Janssen, M., and Van der Voort, H, 2020). Over the past decade, the concept of adaptive governance has been rapidly popular in the scientific community as a new alternative to the traditional mode of prediction and control (Stockholm Resilience Centre 2012). The ability to adapt to the changing environment is understood as a prerequisite for survival. As societies change, governments need to adapt to new conditions (Hong, S., and Lee, S, 2018). Adaptive governance refers to the ability to address complex social issues involving multiple stakeholders, different interests, and uncertainty about the actions to be taken; such as in the resettlement of communities caused by climate change (Dietz et al., 2003; Folke et al., 2005; Walker et al., 2004; Bronen and Chapin, 2013). Theories of adaptive governance refer to “fitting” to a changing environment, and “learning” is at the core of governance efforts (Janssen, M., and Van der Voort, H, 2020). Adaptive governance is considered as a way to increase the resilience of a system in the face of dynamism and unpredictability (Levin 1999, Gunderson and Holling 2002). Rijke, J., et al. (2012) argued that the application of adaptive governance helps policymakers and public administrators to increase their ability to deal with complexity and various uncertainties, especially in the context of VUCA world. In general, adaptive governance has two goals: 1) Overcome obstacles to take adaptive measures; and 2) Improve the capacity of society to maintain its ability to adapt to change after initial adaptive measures have been implemented (Honkonen, T, 2017).

#### **4. Adaptive governance in action: Vietnamese Government's response to COVID-19 pandemic**

Vietnam has experienced four outbreaks of COVID-19 pandemic. During the epidemic, the Government of Vietnam has adapted coping strategies to each stage, in which there are both success and failure. The COVID-19 pandemic has become a test for adaptive governance in every country. In this paper, we used the concepts of adaptive governance to analyze the Vietnamese

Government's responses in the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically including three categories of adaptive governance as follows:

*First, prompt response to the COVID-19 epidemic*

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, all countries had to devise a fast-track action plan. Vietnam has taken decisive actions to prevent spread of the virus since the very beginning of the epidemic. Immediately after the first case of COVID-19 in Vietnam was declared on January 23, 2020, the Working Group for COVID-19 Prevention and Control were established with 24 members from 23 representative ministries, departments, agencies, press agencies, radio and television stations to direct and coordinate between authorities, Governmental agencies, relevant agencies and localities in the prevention and control of acute respiratory infections caused by new virus strain. In the early stages of the outbreak, the Government of Vietnam has directed the application of measures at a level higher and earlier than recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) through guiding documents such as Directives No.15/CT-TTg, No.16/CT-TTg and No.19/CT-TTg to guide localities to respond appropriately to epidemic situations. The success of the Vietnamese Government in this period was to prevent the infectious disease source, isolate, localize to contain the epidemic, minimize the morbidity and mortality rates, which was recognized by WHO and many other countries as correct and effective measures.

However, to some extent, the efficiency and timeliness of governance has not been taken into account. Although the Government has announced to promote digital transformation and will put the achievements of IT into supporting the prevention and control of the COVID-19 epidemic, due to weak governance and absence of clues, the electronic health declaration alone currently has many different applications. Each branch (health, public security, information and communication...) builds its own application. The application of IT into the scheduling of vaccinations is hardly focused, although the experience of other countries is abundant.

*Second, appropriate adaptation to each stage of the epidemic*

Vietnam's strategy to deal with the COVID-19 epidemic in each stage can be divided into two different coping strategies, adapted to the specific circumstances and conditions of the domestic and international context related to the pandemic.

In the first, second and third stages, Vietnam thoroughly applied the coping strategy of "Zero Covid", which is the phase of preventing the infectious disease source, with 5 strategic principles of "prevention - detection - isolation - localization – effective containment and treatment of the epidemic". The Government of Vietnam mobilized security and military forces to perform tasks such as concentrated isolation; entry control on border lines; restriction, temporary suspension of immigration, temporary suspension of issuing visa and validity of visa exemption certificate. After that, in response to the requirement to continue maintaining economic, trade and integration activities, not to apply extreme measures such as stopping immigration, stopping international flights,... the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam coordinated with relevant ministries to give advice on adjustment of immigration policies, facilitate entry for foreign experts, temporarily



recognize foreign vaccine passports... Vietnam was also one of the first countries to apply mandatory health declaration for immigrants, and simultaneously continue to apply concentrated isolation for all citizens on entry.

In fact, after nearly two years of fighting the pandemic, not only Vietnam but most countries and territories in the world, in turn, abandoned the goal of "Zero Covid", which was very hard to achieve and cost a very high price in terms of society and economy since the Delta variant appeared. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries and territories in Asia-Pacific considered "Zero Covid" as the right strategy with strict measures such as closing borders, isolating sick people and close contacts, tightly blocking the whole epidemic area. New Zealand and Australia are typical examples of fiercely pursuing the goal of "Zero Covid".

In the fourth stage of the epidemic, in order to adapt to new circumstances and conditions of the epidemic, Vietnam has rapidly transformed its coping strategy to the governance to flexibly adapt to the pandemic, which is safe cohabitation stage (from November 2021 to present).

From the practical situation, analysis of scientists and experts, opinions of localities and the National Steering Committee for COVID-19 prevention and control, the Government has still determined the goals of preventing and controlling the epidemic as the key task in order to maximally protect the health and life of the people, recover socio-economic development, ensure social security, order and safety; shift the epidemic prevention and control strategy to "safely and flexibly adapting, and effectively controlling the COVID-19 epidemic". Determining the shift from "zero COVID" to safe cohabitation with the epidemic, on October 11, 2021, the Government of Vietnam issued the Resolution No.128/NQ-CP on promulgating temporary regulations of "safely, flexibly adapting, and effectively controlling the COVID-19 epidemic", that was a strong shift of the Government of Vietnam to protect the life and health of the people in the best possible way and revitalize the socio-economic sector.

### *Third, centralization and clarity in the leading of the government*

In Vietnam, administrative agencies at each level should base on the leading of the Government and the Prime Minister to take the measures and solutions promulgated by the Central Government. Local governments can issue legal documents on specific measures in their areas provided not be contrary to regulations of the central level. This creates consistency in the implementation of epidemic prevention solutions nationwide. However, centralization in decision-making also has many paradoxes. In fact, this rule has been violated from the very beginning of the fight against the epidemic and until recently, especially in the area of traffic and goods circulation. The situation that each province regulates epidemic control in its own manner and in a way that causes difficulties for businesses and people is quite popular. It can be seen a certain limitation of the central level's capacity in this matter, reflected by the instructions that are not clear and concrete enough, making them difficult to apply or inconsistently applied at the local level.

One of the remaining limitations in the administrative apparatus is bureaucracy, rigidity, and paperwork, causing troubles and frustrations for people and society. The issuance of road permits in Hanoi and some other localities is a typical example of bureaucracy, rigidity and paperwork of the administrative system, which has caused many troubles for people and businesses.

#### *Fourth, participation of organizations inside and outside the public sector*

In the process of fighting the COVID-19 epidemic in Vietnam, there have been always the participation of the whole political system and the whole people, for instance, promoting the role of mutual affection, sharing, support and voluntarily, actively taking measures to prevent and control the epidemic among the people, providing practical support to workers who lost their jobs or suffered a deep reduction in incomes as well as to production and trading enterprises. However, the participation of organizations outside the public sector, reflected in the mobilization of the private health system and social associations to support the fight against the epidemic in the early stages of the outbreak, was hardly used and exploited while the public hospital system was overloaded. Such associations could completely shoulder a lot of tasks but have not been mobilized and used rationally by the government. The role of the private sector was also underappreciated. For example, during the pandemic outbreak, the government banned shippers and used military forces to buy goods for people, but this solution did not work in fact.

### **5. Implications of adaptive governance for governments in VUCA world**

After more than two years of fighting the COVID-19 epidemic, various lessons have been learned from outbreaks as well as successful experiences.

The first lesson is that there is no single best response strategy (Janssen, M., and Van der Voort, H, 2020). Responses will vary from time to time and from place to place, and even within a government there will be no singular best approach. Coping strategies may need to adapt over time to specific conditions and circumstances. In particular, when a pandemic breaks out, response measures must be adjusted. Feedback that is effective at the beginning may not reach the same results at later stages.

The second key lesson concerns the need of coordination among levels of government both vertically and horizontally in the introduction of response measures to the pandemic (national, provincial, grassroots levels, etc.). At the same time, it is necessary to improve administrative competences and resilience of public organizations through changes in government structure (clearly defining responsibilities, tasks, functions, etc.), human resources, and tool systems (checklists, tools, IT, data management, digital technology, etc.) in order to increase the ability of all-level governments to respond effectively in the event of an emergency. Moreover, it should promote cooperation and coordination between governmental agencies and key stakeholders (including public, private and third-party organizations).

The third lesson is to develop, adjust and supplement the legal framework and timely adjust regulations allowing to strengthen the initiative of actors and localities in effectively responding to emergency situations (e.g., amending local regulations to allow rapid reallocation of budget



resources in the event of an emergency or permanent change to the emergency action plan to establish a framework for managing emergencies if they occur simultaneously). At the same time, it is essential to develop and perfect procedures and guidelines to help all-level governments, organizations, and citizens respond appropriately to emergencies.

Fourthly, in order to enhance adaptability, it is necessary to strengthen the capacity of local government. Local leaders need to demonstrate strong leadership in responding to crisis situations, providing reassurance to citizens and stakeholders. Simultaneously, it should strengthen local government's ability to effectively adapt to emergencies through changes in order to ensure a timely, flexible and effective response to emergencies since the beginning and during the progress of situation.

Finally, it is important to promote the active participation of citizens in government activities through the successful integration of democratic principles and people's representation throughout the emergency response and recovery phases. In addition, it should strengthen new communication and consultation channels with citizens and stakeholders such as regular use of online citizen surveys (e.g., via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) to better understand issues related to disease prevention and control measures, promptly inform people about measures and policies to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. At the same time, it is necessary to ensure the openness, transparency and accountability of the government in the process of responding to crises through community supervision.

## **6. Conclusion**

In the current social and economic situation strongly disturbed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it will not be enough for the public sector to activate a predetermined crisis management plan, as well as call for the participation of the military to respond to the crisis. COVID-19 is not the first and it would also not be the last pandemic the world would have to cope with. In order to effectively deal with such crisis, it is required to pay more attention to develop adaptive governance strategies around the world.





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