



# The Political Economy of Avian Influenza Response and Control in Vietnam

Tuong Vu

# Vietnam



## The Political Economy of Avian Influenza Response and Control in Vietnam

As a country suffering from large-scale AI outbreaks and receiving considerable international support, Vietnam provides a crucial case not to be missed in any analysis of the global AI crisis. Vietnam is also interesting because of two paradoxes in her response to AI. Despite being poor, Vietnam selected the most expensive approach (comprehensive vaccination) to disease control. Despite substantial foreign aid and praise lavished on Vietnam, and despite a tough strategy, Vietnam has not performed better than neighbouring countries in keeping the epidemic from coming back. Based on interviews of various stakeholders and newspaper sources since 2003, this paper analyses the timeline of major events, key narratives driving the debate, and the main actor networks in the policy process. I found Vietnam's AI policy process was characterised by top down/technical perspectives supported by the central government and foreign donors. These narratives reinforced the political interests of a national/international elite. This powerful nexus pushed a particular approach that involved mass culling and comprehensive vaccination, and projected a narrative of success to the nation and the world. The main lesson from Vietnam is the need to bring accountability back to aid collaboration. Vietnam's case suggests that many mistakes such as excessive culling and wasteful vaccination could have been avoided had accountability been given a higher priority by donors.

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# **The Political Economy of Avian Influenza Response and Control in Vietnam**

**By Tuong Vu**

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## About the STEPS Avian Flu project

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## STEPS Avian Flu project publications (available to download free from [www.steps-centre.org](http://www.steps-centre.org))

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## INTRODUCTION

Since 2004 when Avian Influenza (AI) outbreaks occurred on a massive scale throughout Asia, Vietnam has been on the front line in the global efforts to contain AI. Thus far six waves of outbreaks have struck Vietnam, killing 52 human beings and millions of birds.<sup>1</sup> Among the three countries most affected by the epidemic since 2004, the number of human deaths in Vietnam is surpassed only by Indonesia (122), and is more than twice the number in Egypt (22), the country that ranks third. Yet in terms of overall economic damage from AI, Vietnam easily tops the list. According to the OIE, about 2,500 outbreaks were reported in Vietnam from 2004 to 2008—ten times more than in Indonesia (261) and more than twice the number in Egypt (1,084) in the same period.<sup>2</sup>

Matching the scale of outbreaks is international support for Vietnam and for her strategy for fighting the virus. Vietnam ranks second among the top ten recipient countries with \$115 million in total AI-related aid commitments from foreign donors. This was \$1.35 per capita, compared to \$0.57 for Indonesia and \$0.27 for Egypt. As the darling of the donor community (Harvard Vietnam Program 2008, 2-3), Vietnam also stands out among aid recipients for her approach to dealing with the epidemic: she is the only country in this group that launched a comprehensive nationwide vaccination campaign for all birds. As one of the poorest countries in the group (certainly poorer than Indonesia and Egypt), Vietnam's bold approach of veterinary intervention has attracted worldwide attention and praise (Avian Influenza Emergency Recovery Project 2005). Collaboration on the AI front has spilled to other areas: Vietnam volunteered to be a pilot country for the implementation of the One-UN plan for UN reform in 2005.

Given the large scale of the outbreaks, the high level of international support and her tough method of disease control, Vietnam thus provides a crucial case not to be missed in any analysis of the global AI crisis. Vietnam is also interesting because of the paradoxes implied in the comparative data cited above. Despite being poor, Vietnam selected the most expensive approach to disease control. Despite substantial foreign aid and praise lavished on Vietnam, and despite a tough and comprehensive strategy, Vietnam has not performed better than neighbouring countries in keeping the epidemic from coming back. What explains these paradoxes? More broadly, how successful has Vietnam's strategy been in response to the threat from AI? How was this strategy justified and decided upon? Who gained and who lost from this strategy? What role did international agencies and funds play in shaping Vietnam's overall response? What lessons does the Vietnamese case offer about international collaboration?

This paper will attempt to get at these questions through an analysis of the political economy of Vietnam's response to AI. I hope to show that underlying the above paradoxes are Vietnam's particular history and her political system that has been undergoing a complex transition from central planning and autarky to market and global integration. The transition has provided enormous benefits to the Vietnamese; yet it also introduces many paradoxes as new players emerge and existing power networks are being rearranged. The Vietnamese case thus offers important insights into the intersections of local, national, and global responses to the AI problem—and the various contradictions that arise from such responses.

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<sup>1</sup> Data in this paragraph and the next are from Jonas (2008).

<sup>2</sup> See OIE (2008). The numbers of outbreaks as cited here are not entirely accurate because the ability and willingness of countries to count and report outbreaks may vary.

The paper includes four sections. The first section presents an overview of the political system and the policymaking context. Subsequent sections assess the timeline of events, key narratives driving the debate, and the main actor networks in the policy process. The conclusion will return to the paradoxes of Vietnam's AI response and discuss the lessons for donors. My sources come from major Vietnamese newspapers, available reports from the Vietnamese government and donors, and numerous interviews with foreign officials and consultants, Vietnamese central and local officials, media professionals, academics, industry executives, livestock producers, and ordinary farmers since 2003. The most recent interviews were conducted during three weeks in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh (HCM) City during June-July 2008.

## **PARADOXES OF TRANSITION: THE POLICYMAKING AND POLITICAL ECONOMY CONTEXT**

Vietnam is a low-income country under transition to a market economy. For decades, Vietnam had followed the Soviet model of public ownership and central planning. Long wars and economic mismanagement impoverished the country and created a severe economic crisis by the late 1970s. The collapse of the Soviet bloc forced Vietnam's leaders to look to the West for aid and investment in the late 1980s. While these men sought to avoid the fate of communist parties in Eastern Europe, they remained loyal to Marxism-Leninism as their ideology. Market reforms were initially viewed as a temporary step back for the regime to survive. By the late 1990s, however, Vietnamese leaders had accepted the necessity of continuing market reforms for their long-term survival.

Yet market reforms have brought both positive results and deep contradictions. Since the government adopted economic liberalisation measures in the late 1980s the country has seen rapid growth fuelled by a young labour force, low labour costs and massive amounts of foreign aid, direct investment, and overseas remittances. Vietnam's GDP has grown at an annual average of 7% in the last 20 years. Per capita GDP has increased from less than \$200 before reform to about \$600 today. Although poverty rates have fallen sharply, the income gap between the top and the bottom 20% has doubled from 4.1 to 8.1 times during 1990-2004.<sup>3</sup> After years of internal debate, Vietnam eventually joined the World Trade Organisation in 2006. There are clear signs of a vigorous market economy in Vietnam, yet legacies of her socialist past still run deep. The country has achieved remarkable economic growth, but this is more a spontaneous and muddling-through process than one guided by effective state plans or policies.<sup>4</sup>

The most important political institution in Vietnam is the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), which has been in power since independence. The VCP (2 million members) is organised as a vertical hierarchy with power concentrated at the top—primarily the Politburo (14 men), the Secretariat (6 members), and the Central Committee (160 members). Party units are organised in most villages and urban neighbourhoods, and embedded in the bureaucracy, the military, state-owned businesses and

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<sup>3</sup> Ngoc Minh, "Khi chenh lech giau ngheo gia tang" (When the gap between the richest and the poorest widens), *Thanh Nien* (Youth), February 11, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> This is a remark by Professor Kenichi Ohno of Japan's Institute of Economic Research. See his interview in "VN can mot cuoc cach mang trong xay dung chinh sach" (Vietnam needs a revolution in the way policies are made), *Tuan Viet Nam* (Vietnam Weekly), May 13, 2008. For a similarly critical Vietnamese perspective, see comments by Dr. Le Van Sang of Vietnam's Asia-Pacific Economic Research Institute in "Can mot tu duy moi ve lam ke hoach" (A new way of thinking about planning is needed), *Thoi Bao Kinh Te Sai Gon* (Saigon Economic Times), December 15, 2005, p. 12.



media, and state-sanctioned social organisations and associations at all administrative levels. No private media or organisations are allowed to form. All leadership positions in society from the lowest level are reserved for VCP members. The dominance of the VCP in most aspects of social life results in the politicisation of most social activities, whether literature, science or education, that in most other countries would have little to do with politics. Internally the Party is governed primarily by the Leninist principle of “democratic centralism.” According to this principle, internal debates are allowed and even encouraged but once decisions have been made, all party members are expected to comply and refrain from speaking or acting contrary to Party decisions. Policies, especially important ones, are rarely debated in public and those officials who violate this principle are subject to dismissal or other disciplinary actions. The Party’s grip has weakened in recent years but Party members are held accountable first to Party rules and second to state laws.

Parallel to the Party at all administrative levels are state agencies and mass organisations (MOs). In theory, the Party controls only personnel and broad policy directions while leaving the daily management of the country to state agencies. In practice, the lines between the Party and state agencies are often blurred. Important policy decisions involving executive, legislative, and judicial branches are frequently made by Party committees before receiving official stamps of authority by state functionaries. The state bureaucracy has been strengthened greatly in the last decade as more officials have had the chances to study in Western countries and as younger officials are promoted to leadership positions. At the same time, many officials (especially those in the top echelon) were trained in the former Soviet bloc, have spent long careers under the old socialist system, and tend to resist changes.

The MOs are organised and paid for by the government to “represent” workers, farmers, students, youths, women and so on. Occasionally these MOs do perform representative functions in the true sense of the word. More commonly, they serve as channels to transmit orders from the top and as vehicles to mobilise mass participation to carry out state programs. The state-owned media are invested with a dual role similar to the MOs: they ostensibly serve both as the mouthpiece of the state or Party organisation overseeing them, and as the voice of certain social groups below them. In practice, most media are accountable only to the Party or state supervising agencies which appoint their editors, tell them what to report, and, in most cases, pay their staff salaries and subsidise their products. Editors of major news outlets are accorded official status equivalent to Director General of a Department in a line Ministry. Despite rigid government control, ambitious and conscientious reporters and editors have often pushed the envelope whenever they could. In the last two years, however, the government has tightened the leash on the media after some reporters became too keen on reporting corruption cases potentially involving top leaders and their children.

There are popularly “elected” organs in Vietnam such as the National Assembly (at the national level) and People’s Councils (at local levels).<sup>5</sup> These organs are responsible for turning Party resolutions and decisions into laws and state regulations. Recently “elected” representatives have been allowed to play more visible roles during televised sessions when they question state ministers on policies. Still, these organs play secondary roles to the Party and state bureaucracy. More than 90% of National Assembly representatives are Party members and there is only a single non-Party member in all local councils. Only 25% of National Assembly representatives are full-time legislators. The rest are mainly

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<sup>5</sup> Most, if not all, candidates for these institutions were handpicked by the VCP. Very few non-VCP members are allowed a chance to have their names on the ballot.

bureaucrats and Party leaders who contribute to the legislative process by attending Assembly sessions held twice a year.

Turning to central-local relations, central government's power in Vietnam is much more limited than one would expect in a one-party communist state. Less than a quarter of all provinces are financially independent from the central budget; the rest depend on central funds for development, among other sources of subsidies. Yet the central-provincial resource imbalance does not reflect the real distribution of power. Provincial leaders form the largest bloc in the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the top policymaking body in the system (every province is entitled to at least one seat and each of the two largest cities can send at least two). Provincial officials also enjoy many informal channels of influence through dense patronage networks based on places of origin, family relations or other informal ties. It is not uncommon that local governments interpret central policies any way they like, ignore central policy with impunity, or comply only when subsidies are provided. Since provinces were recently authorised to approve foreign investment projects up to a certain limit, there has been a scramble among them for those projects on top of the regular contests for a share of the central budget.<sup>6</sup> Besides their desire for financial clout, provincial leaders have short terms in office and many want to attract big projects to their provinces because these can offer opportunities for making money, boost their political images, and hopefully earn them seats in the Politburo at the next Party's Congress held every five years.

Socialist legacies are clearly observable in the policymaking and planning processes. Rarely do these processes allow local inputs, involve private citizens, or build on social or market demand. They typically follow a top-down method: policies are made by central officials behind closed doors with the expectation that they be implemented in uniform fashion throughout the country via administrative channels. Although central planning has been substantially reduced, long-term development plans today often aim for inflated numeric targets that have more political than economic rationale. These plans betray the fact that policymakers pay little attention, and are not held accountable, to those affected by their decisions. They also betray state bureaucrats' lack of knowledge or concern about how a market economy works and how ordinary people go about making their decisions. They are, therefore, often unimplementable in a market economy. But it would be a mistake to ignore them because their real function in the system is to serve as channels of patronage networks to distribute rents from central to local politicians.

Another important aspect of the policy process in Vietnam is collective leadership and officials' consensus-seeking behaviour. Collective leadership and consensus-based decision-making mean time-consuming procedures for coordination and implementation. Nearly all issues require coordination between Party and state agencies, and in some cases additional coordination with "elected" organs and mass organisations before a designated authority takes action. This characteristic of the Vietnamese system often leads to slow government responses to critical issues that involve uncertainty, confusion, or controversy (Wescott 2001, 55). Incompetent officials can use the need for consensus as a pretext to avoid taking responsibility for controversial decisions. These officials favour collective leadership and consensus-based management because this arrangement reduces risks for them: if something goes wrong, it can be blamed on the entire committee that made the decision. Finally, in many circumstances, the protracted policy process only masks

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<sup>6</sup> At least half of provincial governments have been found to violate national investment laws to attract more foreign investment to their provinces. Pham Duy Nghia, "Luat phap truoc suc ep (The legal system under pressure)," *Thoi Bao Kinh Te Sai Gon*, February 12, 2007.

ideological or factional differences among officials with conflicting interests.<sup>7</sup> Once these differences have been bridged, or once shared material benefits can be identified, policy often moves forward swiftly.

Farmers make up the majority of Vietnamese and are a marginalised group. The relationship between farmers and the Party-state is historically complex. The VCP came to power with substantial farmer support. Yet for decades it pursued a rigid policy of rural collectivisation in order to squeeze greater surpluses from agriculture for industrialisation. Like their counterparts in China, Vietnamese villagers were coerced into giving up their lands and joining rural cooperatives (Kerkvliet 2005). Their passive but persistent and widespread resistance forced the Party-state to abandon collective farming by the 1980s after three decades of trial and failure, first in the northern part, then in all of the country.

The tension between farmers and the government is simmering today primarily around issues of land rights and local governments' abuses of power. Examples of this ongoing tension are the protests against local governments in Thai Binh province in 1997 that involved thousands of farmers, and numerous smaller protests over cases of land expropriation for industrial or urban development projects in recent years. Rising rural conflicts have forced the Vietnamese government to pay more attention to agriculture and to farmers. A new strategy of rural development and a campaign to create "grassroots democracy" were launched following the Thai Binh protests. This latter policy authorised the election of hamlet chiefs and transparency requirements for commune governments. According to a recent study, however, this policy has been implemented unevenly and its impact is unclear (McElwee *et al.* 2006). Legislation authorising pilot elections of commune chiefs was recently brought up for discussion and voted down by the National Assembly.

State policies today seriously neglect and even disadvantage agriculture. For example, state expenditure for agriculture remains at about 5-6% of the total national budget, which is low by regional standards and compared to agricultural contribution to GDP (World Bank 2005, 86-91).<sup>8</sup> Only 6% of poor farmers benefited from training and extension services provided by the government while 60% of middle and upper farmers did so, according to a recent study (*Tuoi Tre* [Youth], October 9, 2008). While the tax burden on farmers has not been particularly heavy compared to international standards, in the early 1990s agriculture was severely hurt by overvalued exchange rates and trade restrictions such as tariffs and quotas (Barker *et al.* 2004, 11). From the late 1990s until the present, trade protection given to industries continues to direct domestic and foreign investment away from agriculture (*ibid.* 13). According to official statistics, there were less than 2,500 rural enterprises in 2006 in Vietnam, accounting for only 2.1% of the total national number. Their annual rate of growth is about 2% compared to that of 25% for urban enterprises.<sup>9</sup> The heavy urban bias under socialism remains largely intact today despite rhetoric otherwise.

Vietnam's livestock policy has shifted gradually since the 1980s when market reforms began. Under socialism, livestock was state-owned, as were all "means of production". Rice production was (and still is, to a lesser extent) the top priority in government plans. Livestock was not viewed as an

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<sup>7</sup> See Vu (2003) for the cases of estate farming development and national dairy programs.

<sup>8</sup> The comparable rates for China, India and Thailand range from 8 to 16%. Vietnam's government investment is in fact lower than 5-6%, because ODA disbursements for agriculture accounted for 88% of the government's agricultural budget in 1997 and still for 46% in 2001 (World Bank 2005, p. 91).

<sup>9</sup> Ngoc Le, "57.000 dan moi co mot doanh nghiep nong nghiep" [One rural enterprise for every 57,000 people], *Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, October 23, 2007, 5.

independent sector but existed to serve rice-growing farmers (as draught power and sources of fertilizer) and urban state workers (as food). By the mid-1990s, after Vietnam became a major rice exporter, this rice-centred mono-sectoral view was relaxed somewhat. There have been limited efforts since to promote livestock production, which now contributes about 25% of agricultural GDP and which is primarily driven by the private sector. The official vision of livestock development is one of large-scale industrial production for import substitution (beef and milk) and for export (pork). Poultry has received less attention by policymakers than have other livestock products, even though poultry production has grown as fast as pork and faster than beef (Vu 2006).

Before reform, Vietnam had a large state-owned sector and a small and marginalised private sector. In recent years, most of the smaller state-owned companies have been “equitised” (a euphemism for privatisation). Foreign invested and private companies now account for a larger share of the economy (60%) than the state sector (40%) in the whole economy. For livestock in particular, state farms were small even during socialist days and today play only a marginal role. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) still manages (through the National Institute of Animal Husbandry or through the General Corporation of Livestock Production) 12 state farms that supply chicks to the market (Delquiny *et al.* 2004, 25-29). There are also state farms under the management of provincial departments of agriculture and rural development (DARDs).

In the feed business, large foreign firms predominate. Four companies (French-Vietnamese Proconco, US Cargill, Thai Charoen Pokphand, and Indonesian Japfa) captured 40% of the market in 2004.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, poultry production in Vietnam is still dominated by semi-industrial farms (15%) and small-holder farms (65%) (*ibid.*). Industrial producers accounted for only 20% of Vietnam’s total chick production in 2004. Among these industrial producers, the same four foreign companies above also predominated.

Five major characteristics of the political system and policymaking context which have implications for the analysis of Vietnam’s response to AI can be summarised here. First is the organisational and institutional domination of the Party-state over society. State actors drive the policy process which is highly insulated from societal stakeholders. Contrary to politicians’ claims, policy primarily serves the interests of state actors. Unless societal actors could overcome the high barriers to collective action (as they did in the Thai Binh protests), one would expect Vietnam’s response to AI not to deviate from this general pattern.

The second characteristic of the Vietnamese political system is the fragmentation of authority within the structure of government from central to local levels. Central policy has become a channel to distribute patronage and provincial governments have emerged as major players in politics. Given this characteristic, one expects great discrepancies to exist between central and local policies, and between policy intent and policy results. Implementation can be an extremely contentious process with competition for resources (including foreign aid and investment) intersecting with competition for power. These discrepancies need not imply negative consequences for farmers who are already marginalised, but rather suggest the overall lack of policy effectiveness and a high rate of leakage as funds travel down administrative hierarchies.

The third characteristic is the marginalisation of farmers in the system. Since farmers account for about 70% of the Vietnamese population, this marginalisation suggests a wide gap between policy

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<sup>10</sup> Based on [www.marketsharematrix.org](http://www.marketsharematrix.org). Other companies with smaller but significant capacity were South Korea’s Cheil Jedang, Taiwan’s Uni-President, and China’s New Hope.

statements and reality on the ground. Unless coercion is employed, farmers can be predicted not to conform to, and even resist, policies that exclude their legitimate interests.

Fourth, Vietnam has become increasingly dependent on foreign aid, investment, and markets. Public external debt (mostly official development assistance) is currently estimated to be 25% of GDP (31.5% if including the private sector) (World Bank 2008a). Annual remittances from overseas Vietnamese are equal to about 10% of GDP. In 2008, for example, remittances, official assistance, and foreign direct investment amounted to nearly 34% of GDP (World Bank 2008b). Given the importance of the AI threat to Western donor countries, aid dependency suggests that donors would have a strong influence on Vietnam's AI response.

Fifth and finally, Vietnam's poultry sector faces "triple neglects" by policymakers: the neglect of agriculture in Vietnam's economic development strategy, the neglect of livestock as a sector in agriculture, and the neglect of poultry as a sub-sector in livestock production. Given these longstanding neglects, AI posed especially formidable challenges to Vietnam: it struck where the government was least prepared.

As I hope to demonstrate in the remainder of the paper, Vietnam's response to the AI threat closely reflected these five characteristics of her political system and policymaking context.

## TIMELINE OF KEY POLICY EVENTS

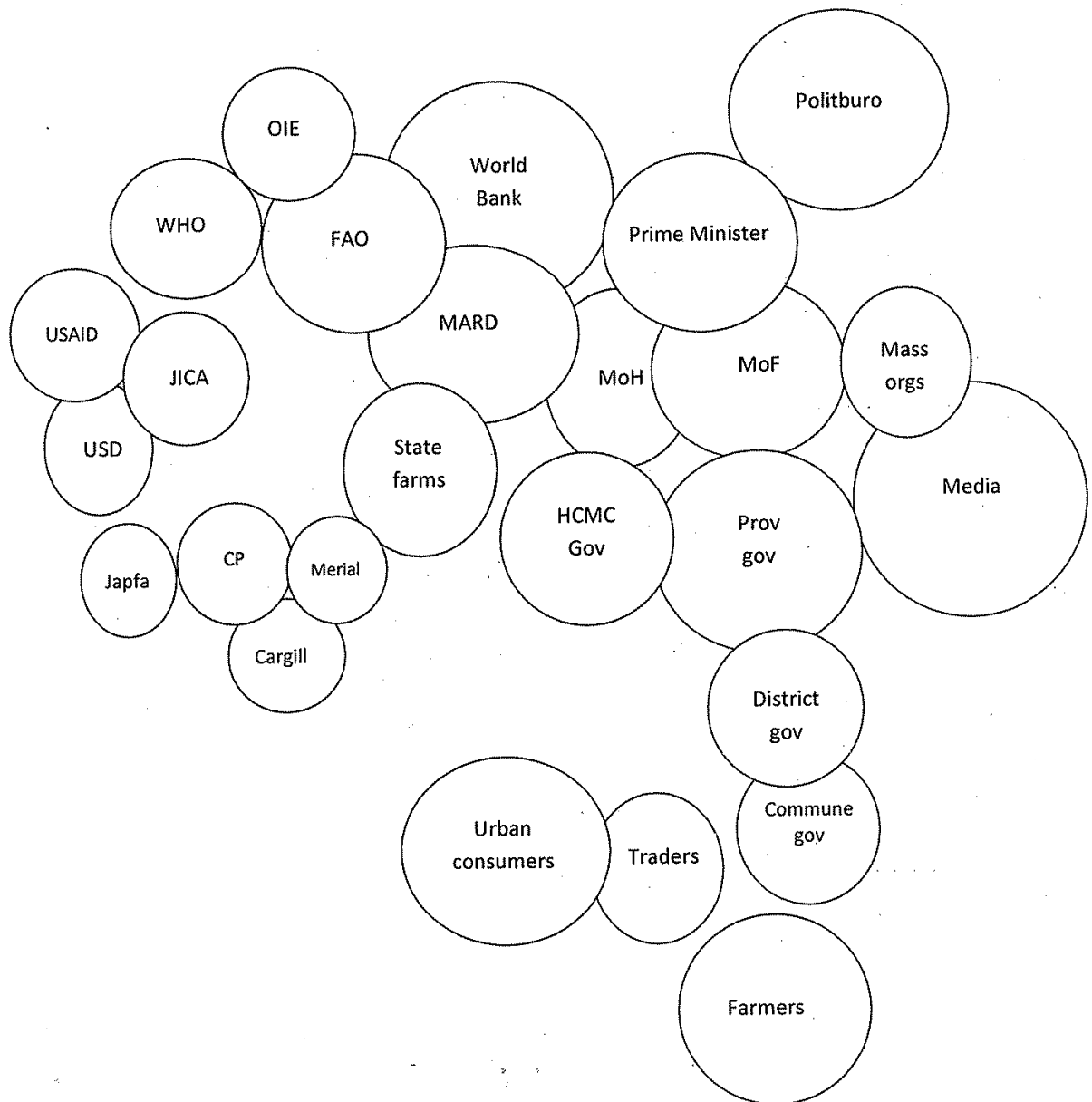
The timeline below is constructed primarily from newspaper reports in *Tuoi Tre* (Youth), a newspaper with the largest circulation in Vietnam, and *Nong Thon Ngay Nay* (The Countryside Today), a newspaper devoted to rural issues, from mid-2003 to early 2008. Some events are based on foreign news sources, official reports, and my own interviews. There were six waves of AI outbreaks between 2003-2008, with the first wave (late 2003-early 2004) being the most devastating.<sup>11</sup>

The timeline is not to show how outbreaks came and went in Vietnam from 2003-2008. Rather, I intend to show, through a chronology of policy events in response to AI outbreaks, how policy narratives, together with configurations of actors, networks, and interests, shifted over time against the backdrop of epidemiological events (see Figure 1 for a power networks map). As readers go through the chronology, I hope they can observe the close interaction between global, national, and local forces related to the AI problem.

### Figure 1: Mapping Actor Networks

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<sup>11</sup> The division of the timeline into six waves is based on the general distribution of outbreaks and is not intended to define clear-cut epidemiological events.



**The First Wave<sup>12</sup> (late 2003 to March 2004):**

28 April 2003: The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared Vietnam to be the first country in the world that had successfully controlled SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome).

June 2003: The first AI outbreaks took place in Ha Tay province and were quietly contained.

August 2003: MARD confirmed by tests that the outbreaks in June had been caused by AI but did not make the information public. MARD Deputy Minister Bui Ba Bong would reveal this event in an interview five months later (*Tuoi Tre*, January 12, 2004). He would claim that Vietnamese veterinary law prohibited MARD from announcing the disease in August 2003. The public announcement of an

<sup>12</sup> During this wave, outbreaks occurred in 57 out of 64 provinces, causing about 44 million birds to be killed by the disease or culled.

epidemic was allowed in the case of new diseases only after the government had tried but could not stop it. Because the outbreaks were apparently under control then, Mr. Bong reasoned, it would be “illegal” to make the event public.

16 December 2003: First cases of suspicious chicken deaths were reported to the Sub-Department of Animal Health (SDAH) of Tien Giang province in the Mekong delta.

2 January 2004: *Tuoi Tre* first reported outbreaks affecting chicken farms in several provinces in the delta.

4 January 2004: The SDAH of Tien Giang province held an emergency meeting but still maintained that the disease was not Avian Influenza.

5 January. 2004: Mr. Bui Quang Anh, director of the central Department of Animal Health (DAH) suggested that governments in affected provinces offer financial support to farmers as an incentive for culling.

7 January 2004: Many provinces established steering committees for AI disease control and prevention. MARD established a Steering Committee and sent urgent telegrams asking provinces to act quickly.

8 January 2004: At a press conference, Deputy Director of DAH Nguyen Van Thong said the government knew the disease that caused the outbreaks but refused to name it. He hinted that the same disease had occurred recently in South Korea and Hong Kong.

9 January 2004: MARD Minister Le Huy Ngo officially informed the OIE of AI outbreaks and asked for help from the international community.

12 January 2004: The WHO office in Hong Kong confirmed that three out of six blood samples of sick Vietnamese were positive of H5N1 (two had already died by then). At a press conference held by the National Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology (NIHE), the WHO Representative in Vietnam said that WHO had been monitoring the situation in Vietnam and would send additional support. The FAO also announced that experts would soon be sent to Vietnam to help.

15 January 2004: MARD Minister Le Huy Ngo called on provinces not to hide outbreaks, while Deputy PM Nguyen Tan Dung sent an urgent telegram ordering local governments to act quickly and resolutely to control the epidemic. The Ministry of Health (MoH) announced the 18<sup>th</sup> case of “Type-A flu” that had caused 13 deaths by then. Ho Chi Minh City government announced the three-No policy (No to keeping, selling, and eating chicken) and said it would offer 15,000 VND (\$1) per chicken culled.

26-28 January 2004: The OIE and FAO organised an emergency meeting of Asian countries’ health and agricultural officials in Bangkok. Organisers called for donors’ support because “the world has a stake” and because “poor countries urgently need financial and technical assistance” (FAO/OIE 2004). The conference made recommendations on the strengthening of preparedness, control strategies, regional cooperation, and rehabilitation.

31 January 2004: Returning from Bangkok, MARD Minister Le Huy Ngo mentioned “dai dich” (literally “great epidemic”, translated from “pandemic”) for the first time. He called for the enforcement of a 3km radius of culling areas.

On the same day, the “National Steering Committee for AI Disease Control and Prevention” (NSCAI) met, presided over by PM Phan Van Khai. After discussion, PM Khai ordered culling only in areas around outbreak sites, not nation-wide culling. He wanted the epidemic to be contained by the end of February while agreeing to offer 5,000 VND (30 cents) per culled chicken as “aid” to farmers.<sup>13</sup>

Nine Kentucky Fried Chicken stores in HCM City reopened with an all-fish menu after having been closed for 13 days.

4 February 2004: 48 provinces were now affected by the epidemic. At the monthly Cabinet meeting, PM Phan Van Khai assigned Cabinet members to several teams to travel immediately to the provinces to monitor the situation.

5 February 2004: The FAO organised an emergency meeting in Rome. Vaccination was recommended as part of a broader strategy to control the epidemic.

6 February 2004: The VCP Politburo met to give direction to the government and to mobilise Party organisations against the disease.

8 February 2004: MARD issued Telegram no. 5, advising local governments to cull only at outbreak sites (as opposed to within 3 kilometers of the sites).

10 February 2004: At the workshop on vaccination organised by NIHE, officials mentioned a “flu epidemic” with 200 cases of pneumonia nationwide, of which 17 tested positive for H5N1. This virus had caused 11 deaths by then. The Institute’s director Hoang Thuy Long said that culling the entire national chicken stock might be necessary if it was confirmed that the disease could spread from chickens to people.

11 February 2004: In an urgent cable, PM Phan Van Khai ordered provinces to allow the passage of poultry feed that had been inspected by SDAH to provinces not yet affected by the epidemic.

In an interview, the Head of the Epidemiology Department in DAH Hoang Van Nam denied that MARD’s Telegram no. 5 contradicted the policy of culling within a 3km radius. Citing different policies of Japan, Indonesia, and Thailand on the matter, he said the 3km rule was based on the rate of contagion. If this rate had been faster, a 10km radius might be appropriate. Dr. Nam said it would be up to the provinces to decide; the greater the radius, the safer.

At an international press conference on the AI epidemic in Hanoi, DAH Director Bui Quang Anh was optimistic about the initial success but the WHO representative, Pascale Brudon, countered that it was too early to say.

A Conference on measures of safe processing of poultry meat was organised by five line Ministries (MARD, Health, Science and Technology, Resource and Environment and Commerce) in Hanoi. For the first time officials promoted eating chickens if safety rules were followed. As indicated in how “safe processing” practices were prescribed, the Conference was to help big producers, not small holders, to sell their stock.

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<sup>13</sup> The Vietnamese word is “ho tro”, which is a euphemism for compensation that would suggest government’s generosity, not responsibility, for making the payment.



1 March 2004: At a session of the National Assembly, MARD Minister Le Huy Ngo declared mission accomplished: the AI epidemic had been quelled by the end of February as the Prime Minister had wanted. By that day, 40 provinces had not seen an outbreak for 10-26 days.

7 March 2004: A workshop on measures to restore the poultry stock was organised by MARD in HCM City. Financial assistance was recommended to help poultry producers restock.

5 April 2004: Several SDAHs admitted failure in stopping the illegal chick trade in their provinces. Chick prices reportedly doubled in a few weeks.

20 April 2004: DAH officials warned of a second AI epidemic.

April 2004: MARD Minister Le Huy Ngo was censured by the VCP's Central Committee for his "lack of responsibility" in a corruption case that ended with a death sentence (later commuted) for a state-owned enterprise director under MARD supervision and three prison sentences (later suspended) for two MARD Deputy Ministers and a Director General. Mr. Ngo would soon step down as Minister of MARD.

To sum up, the first wave witnessed a 180° turn in Vietnam's AI policy. Prior to January 2004, MARD top leaders had tried to cover up AI outbreaks to avoid hurting tourism (Delquiny 2006; interview, December 2005, Ho Chi Minh City).<sup>14</sup> Officials were forced into action by *Tuoi Tre* reports on outbreaks and by the speed with which these outbreaks spread throughout the country. Even then, the central government still kept an effective lid on information and no officials dared to mention the name of the virus until MARD Minister had first informed the OIE. Official cover-up then quickly shifted to a narrative that emphasised Vietnam's determination to fight AI and to cooperate with the international community. The new narrative generated positive responses from donors immediately. The Prime Minister's order to stop the epidemic by the end of February displayed the usual bravado style of Vietnamese leaders but could be interpreted as a calculated gesture to impress foreign donors. Within the government, MoH, which had played the central role in the SARS crisis, led the initial phase. MARD wanted to protect the poultry stock from culling, but dared not defend its position openly. By the end of the wave, MARD, which had always been more powerful than MoH, had regained leadership in the policy process. Within MARD, the DAH quickly became the focal point of action.

### **The Second Wave (from July to November 2004)<sup>15</sup>**

1 July 2004: Fresh AI outbreaks were reported.

14 July 2004: Outbreaks had now spread to seven provinces. MARD officials talked cautiously for the first time about the possibility of using vaccines to fight the epidemic.

3 August 2004: The World Bank and the Japanese government approved a loan to Vietnam for the AI Emergency Recovery Project.

Sept 2004: FAO released its recommendations on the prevention, control, and eradication of HPAI in Asia.

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<sup>14</sup> Vietnam played host to the Southeast Asian Games in December 2004 and some informants mentioned this sport event as contributing to the government's cover-up decision (interviews, Hanoi, December 2005).

<sup>15</sup> During this wave, outbreaks took place in 17 provinces and caused about 80,000 poultry deaths.

21 October 2004: An emergency meeting was organised by MARD with representatives from 13 provinces to discuss the danger from waterfowl (especially ducks).

This second wave was short, but it shattered the pretension of central officials that they had eradicated the virus by February. These officials began to realise that, unlike SARS, the AI virus might be endemic. Government incompetence was publicly exposed as officials failed to anticipate the quick move by chick producers and traders to resume their businesses. Aid and loans from donors started to flow into Vietnam, creating the pressure, and enabling the planning, for large projects.

### **The Third Wave (from December 2004 to April 2005)<sup>16</sup>**

10 January 2005: The NSCAI convened a meeting as fresh AI outbreaks were reported in 13 provinces.

13 January 2005: WHO Representative Hans Troedsson in Vietnam declared that H5N1 was more dangerous than SARS and called for urgent and strict measures of control.

20 January 2005: Director of the National Institute of Animal Health (NIAH) Truong Van Dung said that the government had approved a pilot project of vaccination using vaccines imported from Holland.

17 February 2005: As the epidemic subsided, MARD officials adopted a new policy by which no declaration of victory over the epidemic was to be made, but the government would quietly allow restocking after 21 days had passed with no new outbreaks reported. Another measure was adopted (perhaps to prepare for vaccination), which required the registration of all poultry farms with local governments. Those with less than 300 fowls would register with hamlet governments; those with between 300-1000 birds would register with commune governments; and those with more than 1000 would do so with provincial SDAHs.

23-25 February 2005: WHO, FAO, OIE, and MARD organised an international conference on the AI epidemic in HCM City. FAO recommended six combined measures to contain the epidemic. One of these measures was vaccination, which was to be implemented only under certain conditions and together with other measures. New MARD Minister Cao Duc Phat said that vaccines from China and Holland were being tested for possible use while several international experts advised caution about vaccination. Representatives from the World Bank, Japan, and the European Union promised millions of dollars to support Vietnam.

5 April 2005: The NSCAI met and advised the government to launch a vaccination campaign nationwide. In interviews, DAH officials cited successful tests and recommendations by WHO "and other international agencies" to support this decision.

18 April 2005: A workshop on the lessons learned after two years fighting the AI virus was organised by MARD in Hanoi. Deputy PM Nguyen Tan Dung declared that the government was willing to cull the entire national duck stock (51 million ducks) if necessary. Deputy Minister of MARD Bui Ba Bong said vaccination would first be carried out in two provinces of Nam Dinh and Tien Giang (provinces most "successful" in fighting the epidemic) before being implemented nationally.

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<sup>16</sup> This wave saw outbreaks in 36 provinces with about 2 million birds killed or culled.

18 May 2005: Ministry of Finance (MoF) and MARD agreed to raise “aid” to 15,000 VND for a culled chicken or duck (thought to be equivalent to 70% of market value).

July 2, 2005: Hanoi Core Statement, a joint product of donors and the Vietnamese government that laid out the principles of collaboration, was issued. This statement was drafted “to localise the conclusions of the High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness held in Paris in March 2005 (the Paris Declaration) to reflect the circumstances in Vietnam.”

4-6 July 2005: FAO/OIE/WHO Consultation meeting on AI and human health in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

1 August 2005: The vaccination campaign began in Nam Dinh and Tien Giang. Three kinds of vaccines (two from China) were used. A shortage of vaccines occurred after four days because the actual number of farms and poultry turned out to be twice those previously registered.

13 Sept 2005: The vaccination campaign in Thai Binh also experienced a shortage of vaccines because many more chickens existed than known by planners.

Compared to previous waves, this wave witnessed a closer cooperation between international donors and the government through the increased amount of aid and the political support donors offered to Vietnam’s comprehensive vaccination campaign. Despite lingering reservations about vaccination, donor organisations fully backed Vietnam’s vaccination decision. Domestically, however, the decision was announced but not subject to any serious discussion. For example, the costs of the campaign were never mentioned in the press or other domestic public forums. Top leaders (e.g. Deputy PM Nguyen Tan Dung) continued to make bravado statements. Implementation problems, which were not discussed much when the decision was made, immediately emerged in the pilot provinces, but the campaign went ahead anyway.

### **The Fourth Wave (from October to December 2005)<sup>17</sup>**

06 October 2005: The vaccination campaign was launched nationwide. In Dong Thap and Long An provinces the campaign was carried out in the middle of the flood season when the only means of transportation available for many areas was boats.

12 October 2005: The World Bank issued a report on the costs of AI control in Vietnam, strongly supporting comprehensive vaccination for at least two years, even if in the short term vaccination could not prevent the recurrence of outbreaks. “Vaccination is needed in Vietnam as the first phase of a medium to long-term strategy in an effort to eradicate the disease” (Dinh, Rama and Suri 2005).

15 October 2005: PM Phan Van Khai ordered the preparation of an emergency plan in the case of a pandemic.

17 October 2005: WHO, FAO, UNDP, and MARD signed an agreement by which international donors were committed to contributing \$2.2 million to Vietnam’s \$7 million program to cope with AI. It was made known that the government planned to carry out vaccination through 2006. Farmers would not have to pay for vaccines imported from China at the government’s expense, but they were

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<sup>17</sup> This wave witnessed outbreaks in 21 provinces with the loss of around 4 million birds.

expected to pay for their vaccines from 2007 once (government officials assumed) they had “developed awareness” about the AI threat.

19-20 October 2005: FAO-USDA Workshop on immediate assistance for early warning and response to AI in Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Indonesia, and China was held in Bangkok, Thailand. At this workshop, a DAH official presented the AI situation in Vietnam and estimated that \$4 million was needed for various “technical priorities”. He concluded his slide show with this blunt appeal for money: “The challenge is BIG and we need more from you!”

26 October 2005: The MoH publicised a draft emergency plan to prepare for a pandemic. This plan predicted 8 million Vietnamese (10% of the population) would be infected in a pandemic, with a mortality rate of 10% (800,000 deaths).<sup>18</sup> The plan cited the WHO’s placing Vietnam in Category 3 (H5N1 human victims received virus from animals) in a six-level scale of pandemic danger.

28 October 2005: The Fatherland Front convened a national conference to launch a campaign aimed at mobilising people to comply with the emergency plan. Nationwide rallies were planned for people to sign their pledges not to slaughter and eat sick poultry.

7 November 2005: The Prime Minister issued Resolution no. 15, ordering the mobilisation of the entire political system to implement the emergency plan.

17 November 2005: In an interview, Deputy Minister of MARD Bui Ba Bong said that the government wanted to increase “aid” to farmers to cull their poultry, and would do so if it could secure funding from international donors at the upcoming Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Hanoi (November 2006).

23 November 2005: MARD and MoF requested the Prime Minister approve the payment of 5,000 VND (30 cents) per bird to farmers who possessed more than 500 fowls and who were not in outbreak areas but could not sell their poultry because of market conditions.

The Bank of Agriculture and Rural Development announced that it would extend loan terms, reduce monthly interest rates by 0.15%, and offer loans of up to VND 50 million (about \$3,100) to poultry farmers without collateral.

28 November 2005: Deputy PM Nguyen Tan Dung declared that culling the entire national poultry stock of 200 million was not an extreme scenario.

29 November 2005: MARD’s Department of Livestock Production (DLP) Deputy Director Hoang Kim Giao said that culling the entire national poultry stock would be a big mistake. This was a rare occasion when a MARD official contradicted his superior in public.

30 November 2005: MARD (for the first time since 2003) held a conference in Tien Giang on measures to improve the sale of poultry products. Deputy Minister of MARD Bui Ba Bong promised to ask the government to pay processors to buy healthy poultry for processing and keeping as frozen meat to be sold when the epidemic was over.

14 December 2005: PM Khai signed the Emergency Plan for Pandemic Preparedness.

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<sup>18</sup> A MoH informant said that this mortality estimate was based on data of the 1918 Spanish flu provided by the U.S. Center for Disease Control (interview, Hanoi, June 2008).

1 January 2006: Tariffs on imported frozen meat were reduced to 20% from up to 60% for some categories.

5 January 2006: Hundreds of villagers in Dong Anh district on the outskirts of Hanoi protested at their commune's office, charging officials of embezzling "aid" money by inflating the number of chicken culled.

13 January 2006: The WHO Regional Director Shigeru Omi declared in Tokyo that the world was closer than ever to a pandemic.

18 January 2006: Donors' Conference in Beijing pledged an aid commitment of \$1.9 billion to fight AI. Vietnam issued the Integrated National Operational Program for Avian and Human Influenza for 2006-2008 (the "Red Book").

3 March 2006: MARD announced that the government planned to build a national system of slaughterhouses by 2007.

April 2006: The Prime Minister approved the setting up of a Tripartite Task Force to implement the One-UN plan in Vietnam.

May 2006: Vietnam issued the Integrated National Operational Program for Avian and Human Influenza for 2006-2010 (the "Green Book"). The program called for funding of \$250 million to be divided evenly between MoH and MARD.

28 July 2006: MARD held a conference on waterfowl keeping in Tien Giang, discussing whether to allow farmers to raise waterfowl again.

During this wave, Vietnamese cooperation with donors intensified with greater assistance. Within two months, the WHO's request for Vietnam to produce a national plan for a pandemic was answered. Donors also improved coordination of funding and strategies through preparing the Red Book and Green Book. Donors and the government made some progress in implementing the One-UN plan in Vietnam. With the pandemic preparedness plan concluded, MoH yielded the limelight to MARD, now tasked with leading the vaccination campaign. Tough talks of culling every bird were heard again from top leaders, but MARD officials did make some efforts to help big poultry producers and processors.

### **The Fifth Wave (from December 2006 to November 2007)<sup>19</sup>**

1 December 2006: MARD's DLP Director Nguyen Dang Vang claimed in an interview that vaccination had helped Vietnam avoid AI outbreaks for a year to this date, whereas Thailand was suffering from fresh outbreaks because she rejected vaccination.

20 December 2006: Fresh outbreaks were reported.

8-9 March 2007: FAO-MARD Workshop was held in Hanoi on the future of poultry farming in Vietnam after HPAI.

May 2007: A new wave of outbreaks occurred in Northern provinces.

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<sup>19</sup> About 270,000 poultry were killed or culled in this wave.

11 May 2007: Italy-produced vaccine against H5N2 (for Muscovy ducks) was found to be of poor quality. DAH ordered a temporary stop to using this vaccine.

28 May 2007: MARD-organised special workshop with 32 provincial representatives discussed the new outbreaks and called for “honest” vaccination.

4 June 2007: A second human case of H5N1 was hospitalised in a month after no cases in 17 months.

25 July 2007: The Luong My case was exposed by the media. This case began with the deaths of chickens from H5N1 in several farms in Dong Thap province which received their vaccinated chicks from Luong My, a state farm under MARD supervision. Luong My at first denied responsibility and blamed the Trovac vaccine imported by Merial. Merial responded by pointing out that Luong My bought only 320,000 doses of Trovac while selling millions of chicks in the same period. There were also mismatches in the record and dates of vaccination and sale. The imported vaccines by Merial had in fact expired before the sale of chicks to Dong Thap farmers took place. Apparently many vaccination certificates were obtained by Luong My from corrupt SDAH officials without actual vaccination. The chicks supplied by Luong My were funded by Japanese ODA for restocking, and Luong My won the contract without going through a fair bidding process as required. Luong My's director was later allowed to retire.

This wave of outbreaks was of low intensity but it exposed the fragile results of vaccination only a year after so much hard work and resources had been thrown into the campaign. As outbreaks returned and new human casualties were reported, doubts emerged about the effectiveness of vaccination as a strategy to control AI. The donor-government relationship remained close as donors' funding continued not only on vaccination but also on other activities such as restructuring. Facing rising implementation problems such as corruption and dishonest reports, central officials refused to admit failure and blamed local subordinates for all the problems. By late 2007, fatigue had set in as government manpower and resources at all levels were stretched thin in the campaign. The two-year period planned for vaccination neared its end but no exit strategy was on the horizon. Given the sporadic newspaper reports of farmers' resistance to, and circumvention of, vaccination, it was a concern to donors and policymakers that farmers would not be willing to pay for the cost of vaccines once the government stopped the campaign.

### **The Sixth Wave (from December 2007 to March 2008)<sup>20</sup>**

28 December 2007: A new human victim of H5N1 who had eaten dead chicken meat was hospitalised.

28 January 2008: Four provinces experienced AI outbreaks.

February 2008: Four human deaths of H5N1 occurred during the *Tet* festival.

27 February 2008: Outbreaks occurred in 8 provinces. The MARD Minister proposed to raise the amount of “aid” to farmers from 15,000 VND to 70% of market value of a culled chicken.

16-18 June 2008: FAO-MARD's workshop on international AI research was held in Hanoi. The vaccination campaign was hailed as a success by many presenters but doubts were expressed

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<sup>20</sup> No tally of losses is yet available.

privately by some participants. Many agreed that it was time for Vietnam to adjust its vaccination program to focus only on high-risk areas, but no MARD officials were heard advocating such a policy. Vaccination will continue through 2009.

During this latest wave, the official narrative lost its sense of urgency and direction—a sign of fatigue and internal disagreement due in part to the failure of vaccination to prevent outbreaks. Collaboration between donors and the government shifted to the restructuring of the livestock sector. The decision to continue vaccination for another year appeared to be made by default. Even though doubts were privately expressed, no donors publicly questioned the vaccination policy.

To sum up, the review of the timeline since 2003 has highlighted major shifts in Vietnam's AI policy. The government's initial response was an attempt at cover-up, until the scale of outbreaks made cover-up untenable. At this point, officials became open to collaboration with donors and in fact aggressively sought foreign assistance for stamp-out, compensation, vaccination, and restructuring. Stamp-out policy at first applied the 3km rule, but was later softened to apply only to the sites where outbreaks occurred. Compensation for culling was initially little, late, and deliberately framed as charity but not compensation. Over time the government has raised compensation to a maximum of 70% value for a culled bird.

Throughout 2004, there was no policy of vaccination and officials thought that the disease could be controlled quickly. As outbreaks returned again and again, a turnabout occurred in 2005 when policymakers authorised a comprehensive vaccination campaign. The campaign was initially planned for two years, but is now extended into a third year without any clear exit strategy. It is apparent that farmers would not pay for the program to continue as policymakers had originally hoped. Prior to the emergence of AI, the government had already talked about the industrialisation of livestock production. Because AI outbreaks were blamed entirely on smallholders, officials accelerated their plans for "concentrated poultry production." Initially these plans were understood as having all production facilities concentrated in areas selected to ensure biosecurity. Recently policymakers have realised that concentrated production would increase rather than reduce risks. They have thus shifted to strengthening biosecurity at farm level instead of creating special poultry production zones in each commune.

Donors' support for Vietnam has been driven primarily by the pandemic threat. Once they were informed of this threat, Vietnamese policymakers took it to their hearts and made considerable efforts to cooperate with donors on human health policies. After the government abandoned its policy of cover-up, it formed close partnerships with foreign donors which provided substantial financial and technical assistance to Vietnam's AI response. Policy changes, such as the 3km rule in stamp-out, increased compensation, vaccination, and strengthening biosecurity at farm level, bore the marks of foreign advice and were funded in part by donors. Over the four years since 2004, there have been gaps between Vietnam's policy and donors' advice but both sides have been willing to accommodate each other. Vietnam grudgingly increased "aid" to farmers while some donors put aside lingering doubts over whether to endorse Vietnam's expensive and risky vaccination campaign.

Given what we know about Vietnam's political economy, what were the underlying narratives that constructed Vietnam's policies in response to AI? How did the major characteristics of the political system, including state domination, fragmented authority, farmers' marginalisation, and aid dependency, play out in the policy process? Below we turn to examine the key narratives that figured

prominently in the political discourse throughout the events. These narratives will shed further light on the political interests behind various issues and policy options.

## KEY NARRATIVES OF THE EPIDEMIC

From interviews, documents and the Vietnamese media, five public narratives of the epidemic can be identified.<sup>21</sup> They included: the power narrative, the nationalist narrative, the populist narrative, the technical narrative, and the protectionist narrative. These narratives were associated with, and conveyed the specific interests of, particular actors or groups of actors (see Figure 1). Each narrative was expressed in distinct tones and attitudes. All five narratives were related to an anticipated pandemic that was thought to be likely unless the AI epidemic on poultry could be controlled. Besides the public narratives I will discuss a critical narrative that was expressed only in private interviews. This critical narrative was heard from practically every group of stakeholders involved, from central officials to ordinary citizens to foreign experts.

### The Power Narrative

This narrative was propagated by two particular groups, namely central officials and state-sanctioned journalists. It stressed the serious threat from AI primarily in terms of human health if the pandemic were to happen. The message was that harsh policies, regardless of costs, were justified because of the risks involved. The narrative framed the problem as arising not only from the epidemic, but also from disobedient local officials and an ignorant public. It was typically conveyed in a firm and serious tone, and sometimes expressed as blatant threats. It was aimed at generating compliance with central policies of mandatory culling and vaccination. Through the narrative, central officials asserted their power and control over the situation, regardless of reality on the ground. Underlying the narrative was a main paradox of Vietnamese transition noted above. Since reform began, more powerful provincial politicians and Vietnam's greater aid dependency had combined to weaken the power of the central state. Institutionally and organisationally, however, the Party-state still dominated and sought to dominate society.

By focusing exclusively on the risks from the pandemic, the narrative obscured other issues such as the financial losses farmers suffered from the epidemic and from the policies to control it. A big part of the narrative was addressed to local officials who were portrayed as ineffective in implementing central policies, ignorant of the stakes involved, negligent or unable to enforce policies, and dishonest in reporting results of vaccination. An example of this narrative can be found in PM Phan Van Khai's urgent telegram on February 18, 2004 sent to People Committees' Chairs and Ministers in his Cabinet:

In recent days several provinces have achieved some control over the epidemic and we see fewer fresh outbreaks. Although the situation is still complicated and the danger remains, some provinces have become complacent, not vigilant, and not firm in their measures to contain the disease... The Prime Minister [hereby] demands that [all provincial leaders and ministers] concentrate all their efforts to carry out effectively the Politburo's and Prime

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<sup>21</sup> Ian Scoones and Paul Forster define narratives as "policy story lines which frame the problems and (sometimes) solutions in particular ways."



Minister's decrees to contain the epidemic by the end of February (*Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, February 19, 2004)

The Prime Minister viewed the problem as stemming neither from the disease per se, nor from his arbitrarily set deadline. The problem was his subordinates who he did not trust. His narrative was widely deployed by other central officials who loved to blame local subordinates for any policy failures from compensation to vaccination. In response to numerous complaints from farmers about compensation, MARD Deputy Minister Bui Ba Bong declared:

To say that the provinces lack money is incorrect because the central government has permitted the use of budget funds to pay for culling at the rate of 15,000 VND per bird. If any provinces lack money they may tap into the emergency budget and request the Ministry of Finance for assistance. I can assure you that there is sufficient fund to aid culling ... I want to emphasise that there should be no difficulties in terms of the availability and procedures of funding because this is the top and urgent priority of the central government and all provinces. If there are delays or difficulties, it is because local officials do not carry out the rules correctly (*Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, November 17, 2005).

After a fresh wave of outbreaks in early 2008, MARD Deputy Minister Bui Ba Bong again pointed to provincial governments as the problem:

The most worrying thing right now is that outbreaks occurred on small scale and are scattered but the rates of infection and mortality of human cases are high. There were five deaths of H5N1 in the first two months of 2008, which equalled the entire year of 2007. The epidemic has returned because many provinces are not focused and determined in spreading propaganda, preventing and fighting the disease. To correct this situation, MARD Minister will censure those provincial departments of agriculture and rural development that have allowed the epidemic to come back. The Minister will report to the Prime Minister those provincial leaders who have not resolutely directed the anti-epidemic efforts. I'm sure that the Prime Minister will discipline a few Chairs of provincial People's Committees... (*Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, February 28, 2008).

Yet there was more than just the passing of blame in these statements by central officials. Mr. Bong's statement also diverted public attention away from the possibility that the vaccination program, the centrepiece of central policy, had not achieved the desired impact. More broadly, when the Prime Minister and other central officials lambasted their local subordinates, the narrative implicitly suggested an opposite picture of central officials: hard-working, far-sighted, responsible, powerful, and determined to fight the epidemic at any costs. As central officials repeatedly stressed the importance of compliance and the serious consequences of behaving otherwise, the narrative had the subtle effect of affirming state power in the eyes of both the Vietnamese and foreigners.

The power narrative dominated the national discourse throughout despite occasional setbacks. These setbacks occurred when it was exposed that central policies were regularly ignored or circumvented by local governments and farmers. When these stories were published, the emperor suddenly became naked. Humiliated central officials typically responded with angry denials and more threats. The narrative thus conveyed the power struggles in crisis situations between central and local governments, and between the state and farmers. Central officials dominated the narrative which might give the wrong impression that they were in effective control of the situation on the ground. At local levels, however, ordinary people acted with their own systems of values and

incentives that did not conform to expectations by central bureaucrats. Many urban residents continued to eat poultry blood pudding and tried to hide their pet birds from government culling teams. Armies of traders on motorcycles bribed the police to sneak their unvaccinated poultry into the big cities, and about half the vaccination doses were reportedly thrown away unused by farmers. As one informant put it, “if the government wanted people to do A, they did B” (interview, Hanoi, June 2008).

The power struggles involved not just central and local officials. International agencies played an indirect role in enhancing state power. Central officials frequently cited advice from the WHO and other donors to back up the government’s harsh policies. The very term “Dai dich” [Great epidemic] that dominated the national discourse during 2005-2006 came from foreign sources. The terms and scenarios conjectured by WHO officials were in fact scary. In January 2005, WHO Representative in Vietnam Hans Troedsson told the Vietnamese government that:

The danger of a new pandemic is lurking and can emerge any time now. Until now there has not been a case of H5N1 spreading from human to human but we need to prevent that from happening. All the relevant agencies and organisations must collaborate with citizens to maintain strict and urgent control over poultry, waterfowl and people infected with H5N1 (*Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, January 14, 2005).

At the opening of the Second FAO/OIE Regional meeting on Avian Influenza Control in Asia in Ho Chi Minh City on February 23-25, 2005, WHO Regional Director Shigeru Omi warned his host country that:

It is difficult to know when the bird flu epidemic would become a pandemic affecting human society, and how many people would die. If that happened, societies would paralyse because too many people would be infected or would stay home for fear of being infected. Economic damages would be enormous (*Tuoi Tre*, February 23, 2005).

Another key actor who helped construct this power narrative was the state-owned media. Newspaper headlines and contents were effective in conveying the seriousness of the risks and the threats to those who did not comply. Reporters frequently sided with central officials to ostracise disobedient local governments, ignorant farmers, greedy traders, and reckless consumers of poultry meat. The media played an effective role throughout as a propaganda and mobilisational tool of the state. As a resident of Nha Trang commented about the culling scene he had seen on television, “I saw teams of 2-3 people wearing protection gear who chased and beat to death every single healthy chicken. The image of these chickens trying to run away from death was frightening and lingered in my mind for days.” He then asked the state television station not to show such images on TV (*Tuoi Tre*, Readers’ Column, February 17, 2004). An NGO officer working on AI-related communication projects likened the state media’s communication strategy to that of Hitler: “If you say the same thing again and again, people will eventually listen” (interview, Hanoi, June 2008). All informants agreed that the state media were effective, although not all thought that the propaganda was too brutal. A foreign veterinarian who worked for a large donor and who was sympathetic to Vietnam’s vaccination program, actually said that he was moved when seeing on TV the scene of para-vets vaccinating village chickens in the rain (interview, Hanoi, June 2008).

In sum, the power narrative constructed by central officials and the state media represented the power struggle between the central state and local governments, and between the Party-state and society. This narrative told us that the Party-state still dominated the system even though authority

was fragmented. While being dependent on foreign aid, the Party-state benefited from the collaboration with donors on AI policy which helped enhance its power over society. The narrative was not only a tool for central officials to pass blame on to local officials, but also a means to assert state power. The narrative was not based on empirical realities on the ground, which could be widely different from official claims. The power narrative was one of the two major narratives constructed by central politicians; the other was the nationalist narrative to be examined in the next section.

### **The Nationalist Narrative**

This narrative was primarily about the greatness of Vietnam as a nation. As with the power narrative, the nationalist narrative was produced by central officials and the state media. As seen in two examples below, this narrative exaggerated praise for the Vietnamese government from foreigners who often did so for diplomatic reasons. The first example was WHO's praise for Vietnam's "success" in coping with the SARS epidemic in 2003, which received extensive coverage by the state media. Newspapers ran bold headlines such as "Today, WHO Will Recognise: Vietnam Is the First Country that Eradicates SARS." In an interview conducted two hours prior to WHO's announcement, Professor Le Dang Ha, the Director of Institute of Tropical Diseases, said with bravado that "WHO's acknowledgment showed how wonderful Vietnam's healthcare system was!" Asked how Vietnam "could eradicate SARS while other richer countries haven't yet been able to do so," this professor-official explained:

Right after the first case was diagnosed we opened our door to the WHO and coordinated with them to implement necessary measures ... Our government did not hesitate to spend as much money as needed ... The people were panicked at first but thanks to our honest propaganda they have learned how to protect themselves by complying with the 10 guidelines the MoH provided (*Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, April 28, 2003).

To be sure, the WHO had good reasons for praising Vietnam's effective response to SARS. At the same time, the bloated self-congratulation displayed a strong Vietnamese taste for foreign praise and the tendency among many officials to take kind words from foreigners literally.

A second example of the nationalist narrative was the reaction to comments made by billionaire Bill Gates and his wife who were in Vietnam in 2007 to offer funding for public health programs. Their trip took place just as Vietnam was trying to justify its poultry vaccination campaign in the midst of recurring outbreaks. The state media loved Gates' praises of Vietnam at his meeting with PM Nguyen Tan Dung in Hanoi. A newspaper headline read, "Bill Gates: Vietnam is Model of Children's Vaccination for the World" (*Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, April 4, 2007). In the article, Gates was quoted as saying, "Despite having been to so many countries in the world, I have never seen such an effective model of vaccination as Vietnam."

The nationalist narrative tried to convince the Vietnamese that a victory over the AI epidemic was a matter of national pride and honor for Vietnam. The promoters of this narrative claimed that, through her determined and effective actions to prevent the pandemic threat, *even at great costs to her people*, Vietnam was able to show the international community that she was a responsible and cooperative player. This was why Deputy PM Nguyen Tan Dung declared at an emergency government meeting on the AI epidemic that:

The [central] government demanded that local governments must view [fighting the bird flu] as a special task, as the top-priority political task that must be attended to. [All officials] have to focus on directing and carrying out comprehensive measures to prevent and control [the epidemic], with the goal of stopping it in the shortest time possible, not to let it infect human beings as the WHO has warned (*Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, January 20, 2005).

Stopping the epidemic was political not only because of the human and financial costs to Vietnam, but also because of Vietnam's international prestige. In response to complaints from farmers in the Mekong Delta about HCM City's policy of banning all chicken transport into the city, MARD Deputy Minister Bui Ba Bong said that the policy was correct because:

[The city was] a sensitive location with a large population; [a centre of] tourism and economic exchanges with foreign countries, and was the place where many foreign embassies [sic] were located. Farmers in the provinces [who complain] must understand this and be sympathetic [to the city government]. [In return,] MARD would recommend that the government help them properly (*Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, January 12, 2004).

The nationalist narrative served several possible purposes. First, it justified sacrifices to comply with central policies and projected central leaders as heroes. Second, appeals to nationalism helped distract public attention from the policy biases against farmers or from the failure of politicians to solve many serious problems facing the country's inadequate health care system. Third, the narrative could boost the legitimacy of the Party, which claimed to represent the nation. This narrative played to the legacy of the struggle for independence, when nationalism was an effective tool for the VCP to mobilise mass support. The collapse of the Soviet bloc in the late 1980s dealt a hard blow to the legitimacy of the VCP. The Party has since been trying to rebuild its legitimacy on a refurbished nationalist platform while socialism is allowed to fade into the background of its discourse.

The narrative was not exclusively about the pride of being Vietnamese. Frequently xenophobic attitudes were expressed toward foreign goods. Sentiments ran particularly high about the "illegal dumping" of Chinese chickens via Vietnam's porous northern border. These chickens were said to be old layers which were disposed by Chinese farms and which carried many disease risks. Because of cheaper prices, they were said to be hot commodities in Vietnam. In almost every wave of the epidemic since 2004, policymakers blamed Chinese chickens for some of the problems. The second wave of bird flu outbreaks in July 2004 was first thought to be caused by Chinese chicks, not by an endemic AI virus, as Dr. Nguyen Dang Vang, the Director of the National Institute of Animal Husbandry, said then:

I've heard the news of bird flu outbreaks returning to An Giang, Can Tho and Bac Lieu provinces. There are many causes of this, but I think [the main cause] is the illegal import of eggs from China through Tan Son Nhat airport. These eggs were brought to those provinces after being imported. The return of the epidemic is very dangerous and very alarming (*Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, July 1, 2004).

In April 2006, media reports of Chinese poultry (mostly spent hens) dumped in Vietnam led MARD Minister Cao Duc Phat to make a trip to the border to investigate the situation himself. He called for strengthening border inspection and vowed to take up the issue with the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi.

As the mouthpieces of central government, the media played a strong role in constructing and promoting this narrative. Reporters frequently went to the border area to investigate the matter and

published alarming accounts of a porous border letting suspicious poultry in from China. Foreign donors contributed indirectly to the narrative through their diplomatic praises that may have contained some truth, but that were turned into a tool to strengthen state power.

To sum up, as Vietnam responded to donors' appeals for collaboration against a potential global AI pandemic, officials mobilised nationalist sentiments to rally popular support for their policies. Foreign admirers of Vietnam were taken advantage of while critics were silenced. As with the power narrative, the Party-state effectively employed the state media for the construction of this narrative. Yet the state media, even while being subservient to state interests most of the time, occasionally fell out of line, as evidenced in the populist narrative examined below.

### **The Populist Narrative**

Unlike the power and nationalist narratives, the populist narrative was constructed primarily by (more progressive elements of) the media. In the foregoing narratives, the media played the role of mouthpiece for the Party-state and the tool of propaganda and mass mobilisation. In this narrative, a few bold newspapers played the role of the voice of the people. This role brought reporters into conflict with government officials, more often at the local than central level. The media's criticisms of officials could be quite harsh, but there were limits on whom they could criticise and how far they could go (more on this later).

The most common kind of populist narrative was sensational accounts of farmers' losses in the epidemic. In these accounts, reporters empathised with farmers but did not probe into the causes of their sufferings (see Box 1). There were also moving accounts of poor victims who were infected with H5N1 after having eaten dead chickens (Box 2).

**Box 1: “Look to the Sky and Cry to God”**

This was part of the title of an article which opened with the story of a family that had been known as successful farmers in a rural community in Da Nang. In the house, the journalist found the late-term pregnant wife and her mother who was over 70 years old, each sitting in a corner weeping as four government trucks took away their still-healthy 3,170 chickens to an incinerator for culling. The husband was wandering about the house “like a shadow” (*Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, February 6, 2004).

In another article entitled “Farmers Agonised because of Debt,” the focus was on the plight of farmers who could not sell their healthy chickens while sinking more deeply into debt every day. These farmers voluntarily registered their chickens for culling, but “many burst into tears when seeing their fortunes turned into smoke. Tens and hundreds of millions of VND worth of their chickens were gone overnight. Fifteen thousand VND for a chicken culled was like a drop in the ocean of debt facing these farmers” (*Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, November 18, 2005).

**Box 2: On their death beds**

“There was [a patient named] B. T. from Tien Giang who was only 18. When she was hospitalised, she told her mom that she would be home in time to sell fruits during the *Tet* festival. Then her condition just deteriorated by the day... and she died, leaving behind a debt of millions of VND for her family... After [her,] everyday there were new [H5N1] patients. They all came from remote rural areas; most were poor. ‘Infectious diseases are the diseases of the poor,’ a doctor once told me. That’s right, because those with money would not have to kill the chickens themselves. They would just go to the supermarkets... They would not feel sorry throwing away a chicken that looked sick or that had been killed by virus. They would not kill it, eat it, or dry it with chilli to save for later ... and to be killed by it.”

(Source: *VietnamNet*, January 23, 2005).

A second and less common kind of populist narrative involved public criticisms of officials who were blamed for corruption, incompetence, and mismanagement. In these occasions, reporters assumed they were speaking in the public interest and criticised officials for not doing enough to help people. These events happened only twice during 2004-2008; and each time criticisms lasted for only a few days before the newspapers involved switched back to propaganda. The first occasion took place in late December 2003 when the government still maintained the policy of cover-up despite a series of outbreaks in southern provinces. *Tuoi Tre* reporters first reported these outbreaks and then started to criticise officials for reacting too slowly to the looming epidemic. Attention-catching headlines captured the newspaper’s anti-official zeal: “Veterinary Departments are too Slow!” (This was a comment made by a local official quoted in the article) (*Tuoi Tre*, January 5, 2004); “People Sold their Chickens too Fast, [Veterinary Departments] were Overtaken” (this was an admission by the DAH Director Bui Quang Anh that the reporter wrung out of him) (*Tuoi Tre*, January 5, 2004); and “Local Authorities were too Slow to Respond” (another admission by the Director of the Regional Veterinary Department that oversaw the Mekong Delta) (*Tuoi Tre*, January 8, 2004).

*Tuoi Tre* reporters put pressure on local officials in several provinces by calling them every hour to ask whether they were aware of an urgent cable from MARD about the epidemic. The newspaper

reported, "Until 9pm on January 8, an official of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in An Giang province told us that he did not know about that urgent cable." In another piece, "at 8pm on the same day, we tried to contact Ms. Nguyen Viet Nga and Mr. Le Minh Khanh, director and deputy director of the SDAH of Tien Giang (using both their home and mobile phone numbers) but could not get a hold of them" (*Tuoi Tre*, January 9, 2004).

*Tuoi Tre* reporters did not stop with criticising local officials. They launched a bold attack on MARD Deputy Minister Bui Ba Bong who was also the Chair of the NSCAI. In a story entitled "What Does MARD Leadership Say?" it was described:

On January 8, 2004, our reporters were present at the office of [Mr. Bong], asking to interview him about the policy to prevent and control the disease. Mr. Bong sat in the back office (his secretaries sat in front) and flatly refused our requests. We had to pose our questions while he was standing at the door... [After curtly answering three questions from the correspondents and telling them to go and ask the DAH,] Mr. Bong ended the conversation and withdrew inside while telling his secretaries to accompany us to the documentation office for some relevant documents. We had no choice but to leave for DAH [at a different address] (*Tuoi Tre*, January 9, 2004).

The account painted an implicit picture of an arrogant and irresponsible official. Yet reporters did not go beyond an individual official to discuss the issue in depth. After this brief confrontation, *Tuoi Tre* joined other state media in supporting the government policy of stamping out and vaccination.

The second confrontation between state media and central officials took place when a fresh wave of outbreaks occurred in December 2007 after a year of nation-wide vaccination. Under a sensational headline "Shocking News: Bird Flu Virus no Longer Fears Vaccine?" a *Nong Thon Ngay Nay* article cited the data provided by SDAH Chief of Long An province Dinh Van The who revealed the low rates of protection found in vaccinated poultry in his province (and other provinces he knew of). The article then asked if the virus had mutated and cited some unnamed "experts" who called for a re-evaluation of the vaccination campaign "because, if not, billions of VND would be spent on buying the vaccines for nothing while the epidemic keeps coming back" (*Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, January 16, 2007).

This was the first time questions concerning the effectiveness of the vaccination campaign, a major national policy, were raised publicly, naturally putting MARD's top officials on the defensive. Under the headline "Vaccinated Poultry Still Die," DAH Director Bui Quang Anh was described as being furious on hearing the "shocking news" published the previous day (ibid.). Dr. Anh reportedly dismissed the SDAH Chief of Long An as having neither the capacity nor the authority to comment on the matter. DAH Deputy Director Hoang Van Nam was forced to admit in another interview that the vaccines being used could be replaced if found ineffective (*Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, January 17, 2007). With this admission, the reporter tried to corner Dr. Nam: "if vaccinated poultry still caught the disease, who would take responsibility (for the decision to use Chinese vaccines)?" Dr. Nam retorted, "We can't talk about responsibility here; no one should bear responsibility in this case. Because this problem is caused by an objective reason: the virus mutated into a new kind and no one could have prevented it from doing so..."

*Nong Thon Ngay Nay's* pursuit of those "responsible" continued for one more day. In an article the next day entitled "Vietnam's Strategy of Vaccination Used by Few Countries," the Chief of the Virology Department in the National Institute of Animal Health, Dr. Tran Si Dung, was quoted as

saying that the FAO had recommended three ways of using vaccines to fight the epidemic, but the government decided to use the comprehensive vaccination strategy, which he said was very expensive and used by very few countries (*Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, January 18, 2007). Another article entitled “Should We Continue the Vaccination Campaign?” pointed out the widespread false reports local governments made on the number of vaccinated poultry. Most local SDAHs were unable to ascertain, let alone control, the number of poultry in their jurisdictions. Farmers also resisted vaccination: in some cases the police had to be called in to provide cover for vaccination teams (ibid.).

In the populist narrative, the epidemic was caused not just by the virus but also by irresponsible officials. The narrative made it appear that, had officials been more responsible, had they cared more for their people, the epidemic would somehow have been contained. This kind of populist narrative could be found in only a few outspoken newspapers such as *Tuoi Tre* (Youth), *Tien Phong* (Volunteers), or *Nong Thon Ngay Nay* (The Countryside Today). The narrative was brief perhaps because higher officials quickly intervened behind the scenes to stop further public scrutiny into the policy process. Finally, as we saw in the two cases above, criticisms reached as high as a Deputy Minister but could never touch officials of higher ranks who generally are also members of the VCP’s Central Committee. Membership in this Committee offers the privilege of being under the shield of the Politburo: regardless of the official’s conduct, he or she can be publicly censured only if the Politburo has granted prior approval.

Despite their subservient status, the state media played an interesting role in the Vietnamese response to AI because they were an effective propaganda tool for the Party-state, but occasionally took the side of the people. *Tuoi Tre* reporters defeated the government attempt at covering up the first outbreaks, while *Nong Thon Ngay Nay* correspondents were the first to question the vaccination policy publicly. In these rare cases, conscientious reporters and editors provided the only check (albeit a feeble one) to the power of the Party-state.

The narratives discussed thus far have been constructed mostly by Vietnamese actors, i.e. government officials and the state media. Foreign donors contributed to the power and nationalist narratives only indirectly. The next section will take up the technical narrative in which donors played the central role in the construction.

### **The Technical Narrative**

This narrative was produced by foreign donors in collaboration with central officials. Since 2004 donors have been deeply involved in all steps in the policy process, including agenda setting, strategy formulation, implementation, and policy evaluation. Donors also assisted Vietnam in planning for both short-term emergencies and long-term sectoral reforms. Foreign help came in the form of financial support and technical expertise.<sup>22</sup> Numerous teams of experts have entered Vietnam, sometimes staying for months at a time to conduct research or to advise policymakers.

Main players were the World Bank and FAO. Among major projects was a \$6-million World Bank-funded two-year Avian Influenza Emergency Recovery Project to “strengthen Vietnam’s veterinary surveillance and diagnostic structure”. This project also paid for studies to evaluate results of vaccination and compensation policies. Under this project, the Bank provided early estimates of the

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<sup>22</sup> By the end of 2008, the total aid commitments for Vietnam were \$115 million (Jonas 2008).



damages due to AI and projected the costs associated with different policy options (Dinh et al. 2005). This World Bank study compared the (high) projected costs of vaccination against the potential damages of future outbreaks and suggested that vaccination was the most economic policy. The document was key to rallying donors' support for Vietnam's vaccination campaign. The Bank also helped fund a detailed study of the evolution and impact of AI in Vietnam (Delquigny et al. 2004), and sponsored a major policy paper on AI and food safety (World Bank 2006). FAO produced its own proposal for AI control strategy to Vietnamese policymakers (FAO 2005). FAO also sponsored research on post-AI restructuring (Thieme et al 2006; McLeod and Dolberg 2007) and on AI vaccine production in Vietnam (Smith 2007).

Besides the Bank and FAO, WHO was involved in the preparation of Vietnam's Red Book, Green Book, and the National Strategy on Preventive Medicine to 2010. The WHO did not play as big a role as the Bank (which kept the purse) and FAO (which had close relationships with MARD, the chair of NSCAI). A WHO informant said that her organisation had to find out what was happening with AI in Vietnamese newspapers because the MoH did not provide the WHO with such information (interview, Hanoi, June 2008). The WHO office in Vietnam was the largest in the Western Hemisphere, but in terms of relationship with the host government, I was told that WHO offices in Laos and Cambodia enjoyed better relationships with those governments than the WHO office in Vietnam enjoyed with the Vietnamese government.

The technical narrative focused on issues such as risk evaluation, disease prevention, control strategies, vaccine tests, disaster planning, and the restructuring of livestock production to meet biosecurity requirements. Topics such as poultry trade, poultry production, and farmers' beliefs and risk perceptions appeared only occasionally in the narrative. The epidemic was treated as a technical problem, not as a power struggle, a political challenge, a measure of national greatness, or a chance to speak up for poorer people. The solutions were found in better planning, effective technical strategies such as vaccination, better research of risk perceptions, and (for many Vietnamese officials) the industrialisation of livestock production.

The technical narrative was produced by experts and researchers from various fields such as animal health, epidemiology, human health, communication, and agronomy, but animal health experts predominated. This was in part because of the relatively weaker roles of WHO-MoH compared to FAO-MARD. The dominance of animal health experts in the narrative stemmed also from Vietnam's bold decision of comprehensive vaccination, which grabbed most attention, absorbed massive resources, and quickly overshadowed other issues.

The technical narrative was wrapped in technical language and carefully avoided sensitive issues of power and struggles for resources. To the extent that politics was ever mentioned, it was to praise the Vietnamese government for its firm political commitment and strong direction. This narrative promoted technical solutions while recognising the importance of political correctness on the part of donors and foreign experts. Correctness was not only about being nice to Vietnamese officials by praising rather than criticising them, as seen in the report below by a FAO/World Bank consultant:

The vaccination campaign currently being undertaken in Viet Nam represents a massive commitment, and the GoV should be congratulated for the excellent work it has done in implementing this program so far. Already over 60 million poultry have been vaccinated and the first two rounds of vaccination have been completed in the two trial provinces of Nam Dinh and Tien Giang ... Experiences from the vaccination campaign so far can be used to

enhance vaccination elsewhere, and the following recommendations are not intended to detract in any way from the excellent work done so far by all levels of the veterinary services in conducting this major campaign... (Avian Influenza Emergency Recovery Project 2005).

More fundamentally, political correctness involved the promotion of donors' normative values within the political constraints imposed by the Vietnamese government as an (implicit) condition for collaboration. In almost every AI policy paper written under donors' sponsorship, equality of opportunities and popular participation were highlighted as policy goals. Yet these concepts were relatively new in Vietnam and contradictory to the normal practices of Vietnamese politics; most officials perhaps neither understood nor appreciated such alien concepts. These concepts were inserted into the policy process as principles that donors only hoped to be respected. The much praised Hanoi Core Statement on donors-Vietnam principles of collaboration provided a good example of political correctness. In this statement, the top principle on the list of six was "Ownership," i.e.:

The Government of Vietnam exercises leadership in developing and implementing its Five Year Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP) through a broad consultative process which integrates overseas development aid into mainstream planning. The Government of Vietnam further strengthens its leadership role in co-ordinating aid at all levels (Hanoi Core Statement, 2005).

Donors thus accepted the leadership of the government, especially in setting development goals. The sixth principle in this statement was about "Mutual Accountability," i.e.:

The Government of Vietnam and donors jointly assess, and carry out annual independent reviews, on progress in implementing agreed commitments on aid effectiveness and improved development outcomes through existing and increasingly objective country level mechanisms. Donors provide timely, transparent and comprehensive information on aid flows and programme intentions *to enable Government of Vietnam to present comprehensive budget reports to legislatures and citizens*, and co-ordinate aid more effectively (ibid., italics added).

Donors "enabled" the government to report to Vietnamese "legislatures" and "citizens," but whether the government did so or not was not donors' business.

In another, more concrete example of political correctness, a foreign consultant who organised a conference on AI research told me bluntly: "We brought researchers to speak to Vietnamese policymakers; what those officials did with the research was up to them" (interview, Hanoi, July 2008). Mutual accountability was between donors and the Vietnamese government, and perhaps between some donor governments and their citizens, but the accountability of the Vietnamese government to its own citizens was for the Vietnamese to discuss among themselves. This respect for national sovereignty is an important principle in international diplomacy, but in this particular case raised troubling questions because the foreign-funded part of the total costs of vaccination and other AI policies was a debt burden on ordinary Vietnamese who were not consulted on the policy. Assuming accountability away also had practical implications for the success of the vaccination programme:

because small farmers' concerns<sup>23</sup> were not addressed in this programme, they sought to circumvent it if possible, leading to about half the doses thrown away unused (interviews, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, July 2008). Even when the government succeeded in achieving some of its goals in vaccination, the lack of accountability meant weaker social groups would lose out. A critic of poultry restructuring policy said that the government plan to force small farmers out of poultry keeping would "kill the poor." He predicted that "the last egg and the last piece of meat these farmers were having would disappear" (interview, Hanoi, June 2008).

Efforts to enforce political correctness on the part of donors were part of the construction of the technical narrative. Proponents of political correctness would argue that collaboration would be impossible if donors sought to impose their values on Vietnam. This seems to be supported by the case of a recent capacity-building project funded by the Danish aid agency that (naively) sought to transform the Farmers' Union (VNFU) into a member-driven organisation (as opposed to its circumscribed role as a "transmission belt" in the political system). The project was bogged down for more than a year at the inception stage and was eventually terminated before its two-year schedule. Despite some achievements at the local level with farmers' groups, a candid report that evaluated the project wrote:

According to internationally best practice organisational change and development is contingent upon the existence of *drivers of change*. They can be external, relative to the organisation, or internal in which case they are in most cases understood as *change agents*. The existence and the identification of external and internal drivers of change is regarded imperative for successful change processes which normally will require a strong stimulus – a driver. The Team (of evaluators) has not observed any attempts to identify neither internal nor external drivers of change within VNFU, the Party, the Government, the VNFU members etc.

The implicit assumption that newly formed farmer groups could exert significant influence on the structure of VNFU as a driver of change by requesting new services is either overoptimistic or directly naïve. The farmer groups as organisational structures are in the infancy stage, organising the probably most vulnerable part of the rural population, and could at best in a very long perspective voice demands for a change of their organisation at the lowest organisational levels of the VNFU.

And assuming that a relatively modest ODA component can serve as a driver of change for a mass organisation is also extremely optimistic, although it is noted that the VNFU has signed the component description (Danida 2007, 7).

As this Danida project suggested, insistence that the aid recipient country embrace donors' values could backfire. At the same time, however, if donors ignored accountability issues, they could waste their aid while leaving a debt burden on the people the aid intended to help. The potential of waste was indeed great in the Vietnamese government's plan for new poultry slaughtering facilities and for new rules regulating poultry transportation in 2005:

The plan for poultry slaughtering and transportation should be based on the following principles:

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<sup>23</sup> A foreign consultant explained that farmers did not like vaccination because they did not like other people to touch their birds; because their birds (especially layers) became stressed after vaccination; and because they did not trust government officials (interview, Hanoi, June 2008).

- Set up concentrated slaughter units in suitable locations in the provinces in order to stop the small slaughtering activities in cities and towns.
- Ban live poultry markets in cities and towns; set up new markets far from residential areas; all poultry markets should be isolated from other commodity markets...
- Poultry or poultry products passing through the markets should be quarantined and certified.
- Strictly ban poultry and poultry products in areas having bird flu outbreaks.
- The transportation of poultry should be carried out by proper livestock transportation means, not by any simple means.

The detailed activities are planned as follows:

- From now on and before 2007, concentrated slaughtering houses and live poultry markets are to be set up in the following cities/provinces ... We should encourage the remaining provinces to implement the goals immediately but not later than 2010. In 2010, 100% of the provinces will have completed the organisation of concentrated poultry slaughtering.
- Small-scale poultry slaughtering, production, and trade in the rural areas or in private households must follow hygiene regulations and control of local veterinary office.

(NSCAI, Summary Report on AI Control in Two Years, April 18, 2005)

This plan for slaughterhouses said nothing about the likely impacts of the new rules on farmers and traders, and their likely reactions. The plan shot for specific targets and dates, making it appear as if the government were dead serious about the matter. The “suitable locations” were defined by administrative boundaries, ignoring how irrelevant these boundaries were to producers, traders, and consumers. Under this plan, it is likely that each province would receive a big sum of money to build nice-looking and expensive slaughterhouses that would be at best underutilised and at worst abandoned soon after being built. In this case, political correctness could make the majority of Vietnamese worse off even as more aid was handed out to their government.

While the technical narrative was backed up by the power of the central government and by the funds and expertise provided by international donors, it was expressed only in confined environments such as workshops, conferences, and meetings in big cities. An informant noted that farmers, businesses, and ordinary consumers were rarely invited to these meetings (interview, Hanoi, June 2008). Government officials expected representatives from Women’s Union and Farmers’ Union to “represent” farmers and consumers, but these representatives often thought and behaved like bureaucrats. Informants who were private sector executives or who worked with the private sector in livestock said the relationship between the government and the state media on one hand, and private businesses on the other, except in the southern part of the country, was usually cold and even hostile (interviews, Ho Chi Minh City, June and July 2008).

To be sure, researchers and consultants funded by donors frequently incorporated the views of underrepresented groups in their work. At the conference on international research on AI in Hanoi in June 2008, for example, there were several presentations based on careful surveys of poultry farmers

and traders on their beliefs, risk perceptions, farming practices, and behaviour toward the AI threat. Still, one would wish that these surveys had been conducted prior to the vaccination decision (the surveys in fact showed that making farmers accept vaccination was a huge challenge). In addition, it would be hard to find anything critical of high-level government officials or direct criticisms of national policy in donors-funded reports. Corruption, a topic that appeared quite often in the Vietnamese press and in private conversations (see more below), was rarely mentioned in the technical narrative for reasons of political correctness.

In summary, besides the government and the state media, foreign donors were key players in the policy process. They constructed the technical narrative that described the problem mostly in technical terms requiring technical solutions. The narrative carefully avoided issues concerning power and resource struggles over AI policy. The narrative was diverse but generally dominated by veterinarians. The narrative had a modest presence in the public discourse in the Vietnamese language due to political limits imposed on public debate and to the lack of media interest in technical issues. Government officials often did not go into specifics in their public comments or writings. Most reporters did not have sufficient technical training to ask technical questions or to explain scientific issues to readers. Yet because the narrative enjoyed enormous political and financial backing, it was one of the major narratives in the process. Below we will examine the narrative of a group that had the least influence in the policy process compared to the other players that we have discussed thus far (the government, the state media, and foreign donors). This group was the emerging feed and poultry businesses in Vietnam.

### **The Protectionist Narrative**

The protectionist narrative appeared even less frequently in public forums than the technical narrative, and carried far less weight in policy debates. It was expressed by a small number of (mostly foreign) feed and poultry businesses in Vietnam. Vietnam's livestock industry has grown rapidly in the last decade, and the sub-sectors with fastest growth rates are feed, poultry, and pork. Yet small and medium-scale production characterises these industries, and the largest players that could set market prices are foreign companies such as Thailand's Charoen Pokphand (CP) and Indonesia's Japfa.

Private Vietnamese producers rarely appeared in the narrative; they were often ignored by the state media. As one informant who was a business executive put it, the state media did not want to publish the views of private businesses because reporters and editors feared being accused of accepting money from those businesses (interview, Ho Chi Minh City, July 2008).

This narrative by industry lobbyists viewed the AI epidemic as both a challenge and an opportunity. A challenge because the epidemic caused demand for poultry to fall and prices to become volatile. An opportunity because these companies could buy and stock poultry meat at bargain prices and later resell at higher prices, because they could sell their chicks at inflated prices once the epidemic passed, because the epidemic destroyed their smallholder competitors, and because they could ask for increased government protection during the crisis.

Feed prices have fluctuated frequently during AI outbreaks, sometimes because of the outbreaks but often because of changes in global prices of raw materials. During early 2004 when feed prices increased sharply during the first wave of outbreaks, there were political pressures on feed companies to cut prices. When asked about the business, Mr. Le Ba Lich, who was a former MARD

official but was now the Chair of the Association of Feed Producers, tried to turn such pressures into protectionist policies:

The last wave of AI outbreaks obviously affected [our] 138 feed producers. The losses were as heavy as \$7 million (for CP) and as little as \$50,000 (for Thanh Binh Company)... [To help farmers restore production], we have first asked all companies to keep producing and supplying sufficient quantities of feed to the market. This will prevent feed prices from increasing. Second, we have suggested that the government reduce import tariffs for a number of inputs such as Lysine from 10-15 to 0-5%; corn from 5 to 0%; and supplementary inputs from 7 to 0%. If the government approves, [I'm sure] feed prices will fall by 3-5%" (*Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, April 6, 2004).

After suffering from several waves of devastating outbreaks, MARD sought to help the largest private poultry companies by organising a workshop to discuss measures to improve the sale of chicken. At this workshop, Phu An Sinh Company Director Pham Van Minh said, "My company can process 8,000 chickens per day, but can only sell 1,500. The rest are kept frozen ... to wait for better prices. We have contacted farms in Ba Ria-Vung Tau province to buy all their [healthy] chickens at the price of 5,000 VND per kg<sup>24</sup> and, of course, we buy on credit." Huynh Gia Huynh De Company Director Chau Nhut Trung agreed:

We have run out of money. We've spent all our money buying up [healthy] chickens in Ho Chi Minh City [that found no buyers]. Now the government should offer us loans to do the same thing for other provinces. Instead of giving 10,000 VND to farmers for each [healthy] chicken to be culled, that money can be given to us to buy, process and store them" (*Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, November 30, 2005).

The government opened up the domestic meat market for foreign products in early 2006, in part to avoid inflation and in part to facilitate negotiations on Vietnam's accession to the WTO. Imported chicken rose sharply from 50 tons per month in early 2006 to 4,000 tons per month in early 2007, which caused concern for domestic poultry processors. General Director of Japfa Nguyen Quoc Trung said:

The protection tariff of 35% for imported whole chickens is acceptable, because ... if the value-added tax of 5% is added, they could not compete with chickens raised in Vietnam. But the current tariff of 20% on chicken wings and thighs ... allows them to be much cheaper than similar domestic products."

General Director of CP Vietnam Sooksunt Jiumjaiswanglerg added, "Besides [raising] import tariffs, Vietnam should apply quotas on imported poultry products, otherwise the domestic poultry industry would be disadvantaged, and even go bankrupt!" (*Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, March 28, 2007). After much lobbying behind the scenes, these businesses would get the government to raise import taxes back to the 2005 level at December 2008. Import tariffs on frozen meat are now between 17 and 40%.

To sum up, the protectionist narrative, which lacked its advocates in the government and which was generally excluded from policy debates, represented the recent emergence of private industries in livestock production in Vietnam. The narrative viewed the AI issue from a strictly business perspective but was often wrapped in terms of public interests. Together with the power, nationalist,

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<sup>24</sup> The normal price was less than 20,000 VND per kg, depending on market and season.

populist, and technical narratives, these five narratives were expressed in public forums under the constraints of public debates in Vietnam. They were constructed by actors who had at least some influence in the political system: officials, donors, the state media, and a few private businesses. For this reason these narratives lacked sharp critical edges. The interests of these dominant players sometimes collided but their shared interests in the status quo (transition at a politically acceptable pace) were sufficient to override such collisions. Below we turn to a critical narrative which was found only in private conversations. This critical narrative existed and was vigorous because large groups of stakeholders were excluded from the process and because there were no public forums for them (and in fact for anyone) to vent their frustration. This critical narrative can be seen as mere complaints by whiny people, but the complaints were so considerable across the full range of stakeholders that they formed an important narrative by themselves.

### **The Critical Narrative**

This narrative was voiced by various informants, from mid-level central officials to foreign experts, and from local officials to ordinary farmers. Those informants who were officials or experts acted in their private, personal capacity when they expressed their views to those they could trust. The narrative focused on three issues: endemic “corruption”, incompetent policymakers and their poor relationship with experts, and tension between Vietnamese and foreigners.

Corruption was often the big elephant in the room that everyone pretended not to see, but often complained about in private. The salaries of officials were extremely low compared to living expenses and average living standards in the cities.<sup>25</sup> An informant said that officials avoided speaking up or taking responsibility for policy because their livelihoods did not come from their salaries but from their “seats” (positions in the bureaucracy) (interview, Ho Chi Minh City, July 2008). Some seats cost a fortune to obtain.<sup>26</sup> Yet seats could bring many perks to their occupiers in a society dominated by state officials and in an economy with limited employment opportunities. One local official in Ho Chi Minh City told me a common joke that, if one had only a hoe, it would be easier to make a living digging in the courtyard of MARD than digging in the open rice field (interview, Ho Chi Minh City, July 2008). According to this informant, “seat security”, not the merits of a policy, was often officials’ most important consideration.

In part because salaries were too low, the system allowed officials to engage in many practices that smacked of corruption. A well-known example is the envelopes containing money distributed to participants at government meetings, handed to central officials when they took trips to monitor the implementation of AI policy in the provinces, given to reporters by (state-owned or private) businesses, or given to project appraisers from the state-owned Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development by farmers who had requested loans (interviews, Hanoi and Dong Nai, December 2005). This practice is so endemic that it has been called Vietnam’s “envelope culture”. While the envelopes often contain only lunch allowance, they could be (and were expected to be) substantial if

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<sup>25</sup> The basic salary of a mid-level researcher or official in MARD was about 800,000 dong, or \$50 per month (interview, Hanoi, December 2005).

<sup>26</sup> Recently the Party chief of Ca Mau province was sacked after it was reported that he accepted money in return for appointments to top positions in the provincial government. His case was never made public, but he turned in 100 million VND (\$6,000) that someone had tried to bribe him with. He also said that he could have collected 1 billion VND (\$60,000) for several appointments if he had wanted to (*Ha Noi Moi* [New Hanoi], April 22, 2008). The practice of buying appointments (*chay chuc*) appeared not uncommon (*Nguoi Lao Dong* [The Working People], April 28, 2008).

they were related to projects involving foreign elements, import contracts, or construction deals. While experienced foreign experts were well aware of corrupt practices, and sometimes blatant cases were reported in the Vietnamese media, corruption was not mentioned in such important documents as the Hanoi Core Statement which was supposed to be about the promotion of aid effectiveness and efficiency.

A second theme that came up frequently in many private conversations was policymakers' incompetence and poor relationship with academics and experts. Policymakers' limited knowledge of practical issues and their inability to think strategically were among the most common complaints. A local official in the Mekong Delta gave this example of how short-sighted and far from reality central policymakers were, "First they (the central government) banned poultry keeping, then they realised that this wouldn't work if they did not ban hatching. After banning hatching, they realised that they needed to close down the shops that made half-hatched eggs (ap lon<sup>27</sup>) too" (interview, December 2005). Many informants observed that central bureaucrats often acted in response to political pressure from above, not because they had their own views (interviews, Hanoi, June 2008). As one informant who criticised the policy of mass culling said, "The Minister (of MARD) is not facing farmers but his boss. He can't suggest options or say his own opinion." Another informant from the human health field said that some data and statements provided by MoH during the outbreaks were created or made by officials to impress their superiors, but did not reflect reality (interview, Hanoi, June 2008). A foreign consultant also observed that "Vietnamese officials take the (bureaucratic) hierarchy seriously."

While central officials deferred to those higher up, they behaved arrogantly to their subordinates and marginalised constituents. One informant complained about the "many kings" in the Vietnamese government who never admitted any mistakes (interview, Hanoi, June 2008). A business executive similarly criticised central bureaucrats for their penchant for lecturing other people (interview, Hanoi, June 2008). A government researcher said that "experts were allowed to speak, but were not listened to; if the big boss wanted to do something, everyone had to do it" (interview, Hanoi, June 2008). Despite the perks from their "seats", many mid-level officials and research staff became demoralised in this bureaucratic culture; one MARD official confided that he would have left his coveted job in the Ministry if he had been younger and had less family responsibilities (interview, Hanoi, June 2008).

A third theme in the critical narrative reflected the tension between officials and donors. Several MARD officials complained that many foreign consultants knew little about the issues they were supposed to give advice on (interview, Hanoi, June 2008). One official resented donors' recommendation of the 3-km stamp-out rule that he thought was excessive and caused significant damage to Vietnamese farmers (interview, Hanoi, June 2008). A government researcher criticised foreign consultants for their inability to offer concrete policy recommendations to Vietnamese policymakers (interview, Hanoi, June 2008). This person was disappointed that during the early waves of outbreaks the FAO made a U-turn from its normal support for smallholders to be a strong advocate of mass culling and vaccination.

Foreign consultants and experts had their own criticisms of Vietnamese officials. Several foreign informants criticised the unhealthy competition among government agencies for foreign funding. A consultant observed that "DAH played up pandemic risks to get a greater share of the budget from MARD" (interview, Hanoi, June 2008). "Vietnamese officials like to work with FAO (more than they did

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<sup>27</sup> Boiled half-hatched duck eggs are a favorite snack in Vietnam.



with NGOs) because FAO gives them projects,” one NGO consultant complained (interview, Hanoi, June 2008).

Although these complaints were frequent, they should not be understood as entirely true, fair, or accurate. Most officials were not corrupt. Many central officials were dedicated and competent. Many foreign experts expressed sincere respect and praised Vietnamese officials for their ability to work in such a difficult environment. One can dismiss the tension between foreign experts and government officials as expected in any collaborative relationship. Yet the private narrative touched on issues such as endemic corruption, policymakers’ incompetence, and the politicised process of policymaking, which the public narratives excluded but which could have critical implications for AI policies. Endemic corruption created legitimacy problems for central policy and encouraged farmers’ resistance. The demoralisation of mid-level officials and researchers could hurt policy implementation. In the long term, this phenomenon could lead to a brain drain from the government to the private sector. Young officials who were dedicated and talented have in fact deserted government jobs en masse in recent years.<sup>28</sup>

To fully understand Vietnam’s AI policy and explain the policy process, it is important to address both public and private narratives and the nexus of political interests underlying each narrative, which is the subject of the next section.

## **COMPETING INTERESTS AND POLITICS**

The narratives have offered some clues about how interests were aligned during the process of making and implementing policies to contain Avian Influenza in Vietnam. This process was initially driven by the local media interested in breaking news, which reported AI outbreaks in local farms before MARD could have intervened to cover up. Once the news broke, the central government was forced to declare war on the epidemic, just as international donors brought pressure to bear on Vietnam. During the entire process, the state-owned media continued to fuel public anxiety over the potential of a pandemic while the central government sought to control the situation by draconian policies of mass culling and comprehensive vaccination. There were occasional dissenting voices and alternative framings, but official policies were actively supported by international donors. The government at points backtracked from those policies because of disagreement among officials and difficulties in implementation. Resistance to central policies by local officials and farmers certainly had an impact on central policies even though it is hard to assess that impact. This section aims at analysing the interest politics behind the actor networks that formed during the process, and that are mapped in Figure 1.

### **The international donors-national politicians’ nexus**

This nexus was at the centre of the policy process and is represented by the cluster on the top of the diagram. International donors were motivated primarily by the concerns in donor countries about a

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<sup>28</sup> According to government data, 16,000 government employees (6,500 in Ho Chi Minh City alone) quit their jobs in five years (2003-2008). Only 10% of top college graduates went to work for the government. “Chi tang luong khong the giu noi cong chuc” (Raising salaries alone would not keep state employees), <http://www.xaluan.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=72226>, August 12, 2008.

possible pandemic. While sometimes donors disagreed with each other, in this case there appeared to be little disagreement. Besides the WHO, FAO, and OIE, the active participation of the World Bank in the policy attested to the high stake of the issue in powerful donor countries, especially the United States. Even FAO, which normally defended the interests of smallholders, jumped on the bandwagon. This offered credibility and formidable technical, financial, and political backing for Vietnam. Vietnam was not going to question such a “global consensus”; indeed, officials saw quickly how they might benefit from it.

Since Vietnam opened up to the West in the late 1980s, international donors had collaborated with the Vietnamese government and cultivated good relations with officials through regular official assistance programmes. The SARS outbreak that had occurred just a few months before AI made government officials believe more strongly in international collaboration on health matters. It also made WHO a household name in Vietnam. During the AI epidemic, donors exerted influence on the Vietnamese government through those existing collaborative relationships, using primarily indirect mechanisms. As we have seen, international donors heaped praise on the Vietnamese government, offered additional aid, invited Vietnamese officials to numerous international conferences, and provided advice on the ground about technical measures to contain the disease. This close relationship was evidenced in the following reply from a director of a Department in MoH, who was quite pleased when I asked his views of donors’ role in Vietnam’s AI response: “All our ideas were fully supported; all our requests for funds were quickly approved; [donors] have poured in a lot [of money].”

For such generous help, it was unsurprising when he added that “government officials [like him] thus saw their responsibility not only to the Vietnamese people, but also to the international [community]” (interview, Hanoi, June 2008). Strong donors’ support in fact encouraged Vietnam’s collaboration in producing the Hanoi Core Statement and in the implementation of the One-UN plan since 2005 (Vietnam volunteered to be one of five pilot countries). Those who were sympathetic to smallholders’ interests, such as the Vietnamese researcher cited above, could only complain in private about the powerful consensus on AI.

Besides money and praise, donors were also careful not to criticise Vietnamese officials in public. In public, experts and government officials would agree that the vaccination campaign was successful. Problems, including excessive costs, lack of an exit strategy, wastefulness of vaccines and low rates of protection found in certain tests, were typically framed as “challenges ahead” or mentioned only in private conversations (interviews, Hanoi, June 2008). Two examples are sufficient to convey the sense of how donors went out of their way to save face for Vietnamese officials. At an international conference in Hanoi in June 2008, an invited foreign consultant discussed vaccination as a strategy for AI control and said that having a bad vaccine was worse than nothing at all. The next day, when I asked the head of the donor organisation that invited the consultant whether the consultant was referring to Chinese vaccines as bad vaccines, the official immediately denied it but at the same time became visibly disturbed by what I had said. Somehow he missed that particular slide but told me that he would not want the Vietnamese government to “misinterpret the statement of the consultant as a criticism of Vietnam’s policy”. A second example took place at an international conference on livestock issues in Beijing in April 2006, where I presented a paper that compared Vietnam’s response to AI to that of Thailand. The main conclusion of my paper was that Thailand’s approach protected both the big poultry interests and small farmers, but Vietnam’s approach did not. Five MARD officials who were in the audience seemed to agree with me, but an official of a big donor in Vietnam confronted me after my talk and said that I was unfair to Vietnam.

Most informants agreed that the Vietnamese government's initial stamp-out policy was too harsh. On vaccination, by contrast, diverse views existed, ranging from supportive to critical. A consultant for a major donor said that Vietnam "deserved a huge amount of credit" for her successful vaccination campaign (interview, Hanoi, July 2008). When asked about Vietnam's vaccination policy, a consultant for another major donor said only that "vaccination was a good policy in an emergency" without elaborating further (interview, Hanoi, June 2008). Mr. Andrew Speedy, the FAO Representative in Vietnam, was perhaps as blunt as he could be when he spoke at the Workshop on International Research to Policy held in Hanoi in June 2008 saying that "Vaccination has been effective but costly in terms of resources and effort. The future strategy is clearly in question and decisions must be made." One foreign consultant with seven years working in Vietnam said that government policy was 80% correct and 20% incorrect (interview, Hanoi, June 2008). Another foreign consultant for a NGO described what she observed during the vaccination campaign: one syringe was used for the entire village; farmers were kept in a room waiting with their birds for two hours to receive vaccines; and farmers thought vaccination was sufficient to prevent AI without the need for other measures (interview, Hanoi, December 2005). This consultant thus questioned whether vaccination increased rather than reduced risks. In fact, even supporters of Vietnam's vaccination strategy admitted the unclear benefits and greater costs and risks of comprehensive vaccination compared to its alternatives such as ring vaccination. Few such supporters would defend the government's choice of Chinese vaccines and its failures to anticipate implementation problems and to prepare an exit strategy.

Among Vietnamese informants, a similar diversity of viewpoints existed. A MARD official said that there were many criticisms against vaccination yet the government did not find those arguments persuasive and did not have any better measure to fight AI (interview, Hanoi, June 2008). A MoH researcher expressed the view from the human health side: she thought spending on animal vaccination was not cost-effective and spending on upgrading facilities to prepare for the pandemic would be better (interview, Hanoi, June 2008). A Vietnamese consultant for a foreign NGO involved in livestock admitted that the vaccination campaign was successful but had concerns about its costs and the return of outbreaks (interview, Hanoi, June 2008).

In summary, the government and donors were at the centre of this very powerful nexus. A series of narratives, including power, nationalist, and technical, converged with this power network. AI policy flowed from this network whose members claimed to have (but had little) accountability to the majority of Vietnamese who were marginalised farmers.

### **The MARD-poultry business nexus**

MARD, provincial DARDs, and state-owned companies are close like family. Many companies are still under MARD's or DARD's direct supervision. Among those that have been "equitised", MARD and DARD officials own significant portions of shares in them. According to an industry informant, provincial SDAHs also act as paid promoters for products of state-owned firms (interview, Ho Chi Minh City, July 2008).<sup>29</sup> Judged by past behaviour, MARD officials would go to any lengths to bestow special privileges on these companies and to help them get contracts. State contracts are to be preserved for state-owned firms even if they cannot make the products or are not qualified technically (they would simply subcontract to companies without state connections). We have seen

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<sup>29</sup> A SDAH is legally allowed to receive a commission of 10 to 12.5% of the total sale for buying and distributing products from state-owned pharmaceutical companies. *VietnamNet*, February 28, 2005.

that restocking contracts receiving ODA funds from the Japanese government were granted to state farms without proper bidding process (the Luong My case). There is no reason to expect things to be different with future construction projects to build “concentrated” slaughterhouses and other “concentrated” livestock production facilities.

Foreign and private firms generally are not close to MARD but lobby MARD through two mechanisms. Many foreign feed companies employ former MARD officials such as Mr. Le Ba Lich who was quoted above. A second mechanism is through higher levels’ contact. For example, the USDA office in Hanoi sponsors many activities through which representatives from American feed companies can have lunch with a MARD Minister or other top officials in the Ministry. Other trade or embassy officials from other countries are likely to undertake similar activities if their national firms are involved in this sector. Thailand’s Prime Minister was instrumental in securing the entry of Charoen Pokphand and other Thai companies into the Vietnamese feed market in the early 1990s (interview, Hanoi, June 2008). Big foreign businesses are interested in tax breaks and protectionist tariffs, and sometimes do have the ears of MARD officials. They certainly played a role in bringing the tax rates on imported inputs such as corn and soybean cakes down recently, but this tariff reduction took place after a decade of lobbying and only when Vietnam was forced to make certain concessions to gain entry into the WTO (interview, Hanoi, June 2008).

Most Vietnamese officials (especially initially, but less so now) believed the AI threat was caused by smallholders and backyard farmers. As part of its strategy to eliminate AI, the government planned to reduce the number of poultry keepers from 8 to 2 million in the next five years. AI thus offered a golden opportunity for policymakers to accelerate their longstanding desire for the industrialisation of livestock production for export and import substitution. Given such a desire, one would expect big businesses to play a central role both in Vietnam’s efforts to control AI over the past four years and in the future, for industrialisation would not be possible without them. Yet these big businesses are foreign-owned and MARD leaders, like most top Vietnamese officials who started their careers under socialism, appear uncomfortable talking about, or associating with, those foreign firms in public. After decades fighting several bloody wars to defeat imperialism and to win independence for Vietnam from foreign control, it has not been easy for many of these older officials to embrace foreign (and even domestic) capitalists openly. The irony would be just too obvious if they behaved that way. Thus the government helped big poultry businesses during the AI outbreaks only as an afterthought after significant damage had been done with a tough policy such as “Three Nos”. Clearly the government’s patronage relationship with foreign donors trumped any concern it had for poultry businesses.

Until the next generation of Vietnamese leaders comes to power, big poultry businesses are not expected to enjoy greater influence in the policy process (as their counterparts in Thailand or Indonesia do). For the time being, the main patronage link in the poultry sector is between MARD, DARDs, and the former state farms and state-owned companies. Because these farms and companies are small and have little future, patronage is and will be limited.<sup>30</sup> One expects to see many petty but not massive cases of corruption to be discovered.

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<sup>30</sup> In other sectors such as telecommunications where large state companies predominate, patronage is massive.

## Local governments

Local governments played a complex role in the AI policy process. In most policy decisions, they were not consulted but were expected to bear consequences if those decisions were hard to implement. In policies such as culling and vaccination that stretched their capacity and that provoked intense resistance from farmers, local governments were in a bind. Except the large cities which had more reasons to fear a pandemic and whose leaders had better chances of promotion, most provinces appeared to go with the flow from the central government but only did what they could realistically do. This meant that they only acted when there were tough orders and abundant money flowing from the centre, but they would stop enforcing central policies when the flow slowed down.

Although the Prime Minister and other central officials considered controlling AI “the top-priority political task” and tried to convince foreign donors that Vietnam was serious about controlling AI, the central government needed local governments to implement its policies. Interviews suggested that many local officials thought central officials were incompetent, and that they disagreed with many central priorities. The head of a provincial veterinary department said that she had to “beg” her boss at the Provincial DARD to implement the Veterinarian Ordinance when it was enacted in 2004. Her boss just did not care. At the district level, it appeared even worse. A local veterinary official admitted that “it was routine practice” for district-level veterinary officials to issue certificates of animal health without sample testing as required by the Ordinance. It was not that all these district veterinarians were lazy or incompetent. During the vaccination campaign, many had to work 16 hours a day and seven days a week to vaccinate poultry (interview, Tien Giang, December 2005). It was just that they were paid little for their work while resistance from below was intense. As a local veterinarian official talked about the experience of animal inspectors, “they could come and inspect the animals, but the owners would refuse to pay for the service [as required by law]. If the inspectors refused to inspect without pay, farmers could easily sell the animals [without the need for certificates]. [The inspectors’ work was useless] like throwing a rock into a pond full of water fern”<sup>31</sup> (interview, Tien Giang, December 2005).

Not all local officials suffered. The AI epidemic offered ambitious leaders of large cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City a chance to showcase their leadership by appearing tough. As then-HCM City Party Chief Nguyen Minh Triet declared when there was criticism of excessive culling:

In our efforts to contain the AI epidemic as in other matters, we acted on our own within our authority and without waiting for [specific] directions from the central government. There are those who think that early culling could cause greater losses, but what about the tens of millions of city residents who could be infected? I dared to act, and I dared to take responsibility for my action. When receiving reports [from the city], the Politburo praised the city [leadership] for our rapid response” (*Tuoi Tre*, February 11, 2004).

Then-Deputy Chair of HCM City People’s Committee and Chair of the city’s Steering Committee for AI Disease Control and Prevention Mai Quoc Binh similarly claimed:

Our policy was not wrong. We knew when to attack and how to handle things... We ordered culling based on a scientific basis, neither on our emotions nor for arbitrary reasons. The city

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<sup>31</sup> She meant that the rock could split up the fern but the fern would stick together again right after the rock sank into the water.

is a sensitive place, and the epidemic could affect tourism and spread to our cows, pigs, and people; therefore, we had to be aggressive in order to stop it” (ibid.).

Even after the central government had started to encourage chicken consumption as long as cooked, Mr. Binh still maintained the city’s harsh policy, “Although the city government does not prohibit people from eating poultry, we warn them that eating poultry at this time is not safe and is dangerous to their lives and to the entire community” (*Tuoi Tre*, February 12, 2004). Tough policies against AI may have helped the careers of both officials. Since then, Mr. Triet has been promoted to President of Vietnam, and Mr. Binh has become Deputy Minister of the Central Inspectorate.

The AI epidemic was also an opportunity for many corrupt local officials to get rich. It appeared not uncommon for district veterinary officials to take bribes and issue false veterinary certificates, for village officials to inflate the number of poultry culled to pocket “aid” money from the central government, and for traffic police to harass poultry traders for money. A newspaper article in fact compared the issuing of veterinary certificates to the sale of vegetables at the market, and this phenomenon occurred in HCM City which boasted the toughest commitment to fighting the epidemic.<sup>32</sup> The embezzlement of state funds by the SDAH of Long An province was the only case known to occur at the provincial level.<sup>33</sup>

In sum, the role of local officials was insignificant in the formulation of AI policy but crucial in the implementation phase. The power of the central government only applied to the extent that it could mobilise resources to back up its policies. Local officials cooperated when they saw political or financial gains but dragged their feet otherwise.

### **Small farmers and urban consumers**

Central officials knew of the AI threat since August 2003 but chose to cover it up to protect tourism and did not do anything to prevent the disease. Once the epidemic spread, small farmers were totally left out of the process—except for occasional newspaper stories sympathetic to their sufferings. Compensation for culling was delayed and insufficient, in part because many provinces were not willing to provide the 50% matching fund as the central government ordered, or because they compensated only farmers who owned larger stocks (Riviere-Cinnamond 2005, p. 12).

Small farmers were generally blamed for the disease and became the targets of sectoral “restructuring.” Central officials wanted them to quit raising poultry through a government plan to reduce the number of poultry farmers from 8 million to 2 million (*Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, May 4, 2005). Some local governments proposed to force small holders out of poultry keeping by cutting off veterinary services or by denying compensation for culled birds (Thieme *et al.* 2006, p. 13). Smallholders of poultry were hurt by the loss of their poultry to the disease and the culling, and by the fall in poultry prices (although they might have benefited if they kept pigs because prices of pork tended to increase during AI outbreaks as customers shunned poultry).

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<sup>32</sup> “Giay kiem dich ban nhu ... rau,” [Veterinary certificates sold like ... vegetables], *Thanh Nien*, August 17, 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Long An’s SDAH Chief Nguyen Duy Long lost his job after being found to pocket 242 million VND (\$15,000) which was the commission his office received from buying and distributing medical supplies from the state pharmaceutical company for controlling AI. “Loi dung dich cum de tham o” [Corrupt officials profiting from the AI Epidemic], *VietnamNet*, February 28, 2005.

The government did act to help poultry producers, but their actions were either late or not aimed at helping small farmers. More than a month after authorising massive culling, the Prime Minister ordered provinces to allow the passage of poultry feed that had been inspected by SDAH to provinces not yet affected by the epidemic. Clearly this was a policy to help feed producers, not farmers (*Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, February 11, 2004). At about the same time, MARD and four other line ministries held a joint conference to issue procedures for the safe processing of poultry meat. This conference was designed to help poultry processors, not small farmers, to sell their products. In an interview after the conference, its chair, Deputy Minister of Science and Technology Bui Manh Hai, in fact said:

Eating chicken is safe if following our guidelines. [Following this conference,] we will call for the large businesses to import poultry processing lines that meet international standards [into Vietnam]... (*Tuoi Tre*, February 12, 2004; *Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, February 12, 2004).

Despite being neglected, small farmers were not powerless as a group. Their common weapon was passive resistance to, or active efforts to circumvent, state policies: buying and selling chicks despite the government ban; selling and even eating sick poultry to recoup the losses; hiding poultry from veterinary officials; and throwing away vaccines after promising to use them. A USAID-funded survey of duck farmers in 33 farms in 6 provinces in May 2008 showed that farmers rarely communicated with veterinarian officials except when these officials came to vaccinate their ducks (TNS Vietnam, 2008). Farmers did not inform local authorities immediately about the death of ducks, they only did so when it occurred in very large numbers. A farmer reportedly responded, "I don't want to pay for veterinarians as they do not have real experience like me. There is no need to inform anyone." Another said, "If the authorities compensate, I will inform them. Otherwise, I will throw [the dead ducks] into the river or bury them ... why should I tell anyone? To let them laugh at me?" Surveyed farmers did not fear AI, as one responded, "Why should I be afraid of ducks I have raised? When the AI epidemic had just started, there was a sleeping pheasant in the tree which died and fell down. People gave it to me and I ate it all." There were also occasional protests such as the one in Dong Anh district against local officials. There were no organised protests, however.

Urban consumers of poultry fared better than small farmers. The government's exaggerated fear of the pandemic did affect them through the increases in meat prices (not poultry but other kinds of meat) at the beginning of every new wave of outbreaks. Prices of poultry meat dropped during each wave of outbreaks which benefited those consumers who were not too scared to eat poultry. But tariff policy since 2006 that reduced protection for domestic chicken has helped make imported frozen chickens available at cheaper prices. On balance, they were not hurt as badly as small farmers. They had no organisation to represent their interests although one may say that government officials most of whom lived in cities and towns already have their interests closely aligned with those of urban residents.

In summary, central officials and foreign donors occupied the central stage in Vietnam's AI policy process. State farms and poultry businesses had only marginal influence on the course of policy. Local governments were important players who determined the successful implementation of central policies but did not have a say in the process. Except for a few opportunistic politicians and corrupt officials, local officials were not keen on implementing strict central policies in the face of farmers' resistance. For their part, small holders saw little stake in complying with central policies and avoided officials if they could.

## CONCLUSION: BRINGING ACCOUNTABILITY BACK IN

As one of the most affected countries, one of the largest aid recipients, and one which adopted the toughest policies, Vietnam is a crucial case study of the global efforts to control AI. This paper has examined the key events related to the AI outbreaks in Vietnam, the policy narratives about the events, and the power networks that constructed those narratives. We found Vietnam's AI policy process was characterised by top down/technical perspectives supported by the central government and foreign donors. These narratives reinforced the political and commercial interests of a national/international elite. While divisions and nuances existed, there was a close convergence of interests and perspectives between global and national actors. This powerful nexus pushed a particular approach that involved mass culling and comprehensive vaccination, and projected a narrative of success to the nation and the world.

Despite the popularity of Vietnam's success story, alternative and hidden narratives of those who were excluded from the process presented a different picture. Private conversations showed that corruption was endemic; local and mid-level officials had little confidence in the ability of central policymakers; mid-level officials and government researchers were demoralised because they were assigned demanding tasks but were not listened to; and significant tension existed between foreign experts and Vietnamese officials. The millions of Vietnamese farmers who were excluded and marginalised in the process had no choice but to comply, while a minority of them engaged in small acts of resistance, foot dragging, and obfuscation. A few enlightened members of the powerful state media launched direct but brief populist challenges to the dominant narratives. These alternative narratives helped explain the mixed results of vaccination and other problems with Vietnam's AI policy.

Based on a more nuanced understanding of the policy process, we now have explanations for the two paradoxes noted in the introduction. The first paradox is: why did a poor country pick the most expensive tool of disease control? We have found that foreign aid and the lack of accountability/public debate drove Vietnam to pick the most expensive strategy for controlling AI. In other words, Vietnam might be poor, but in this instance she was awash with donors' cash. Yet the estimated 50% of vaccination coverage achieved (while the campaign targeted 100% coverage) and the wide variation of protection rates of vaccinated poultry from AI (ranging from zero to 80%), raised serious questions about the wisdom of the strategy. Resources poured into comprehensive vaccination could have been used more efficiently on combined measures, including ring vaccination.<sup>34</sup>

The second paradox is, why did the country that threw lots of money at the problem and that employed the toughest policies perform no better than her neighbours? While more studies are needed, it is not quite clear that vaccination has reduced outbreaks in Vietnam, because neighbouring countries that did not vaccinate have seen fewer waves of outbreaks than Vietnam. Vietnam's lacklustre performance may in fact indicate what critics of vaccination had warned before the policy was adopted: vaccination could cause the virus to be endemic, and a bad vaccine was worse than no vaccine. To be sure, the resources poured into the fight against AI have not been completely wasted. Many lives have been saved and farmers' asset losses partially compensated. Many useful studies have been carried out; the technical capacity of Vietnam in coping with medical

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<sup>34</sup> The government recently changed its vaccination program to one focused only on high-risk provinces, which was what donors had suggested for some time.



emergencies has been greatly upgraded; and collaboration between the government and donors has never been better. The benefits for the majority of the Vietnamese are not clear, however. They might even have been better off without donors' money, some of it received in the form of loans which they will have to pay back in the future.

At a deeper level of explanation, we found the politics of transition in Vietnam useful to understand the policy process on AI. The country's leadership has adopted piece-meal market reforms while seeking to consolidate power after the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Mass demands for inclusion are generally ignored or suppressed. Policy is still made in service of national politicians now in partnership with foreign donors, provincial politicians, state-owned enterprise managers, and a few private companies with political connections. This politics of transition helped explain AI policy while being vividly highlighted by the AI case.

For donors, the main lesson from this case is the need to bring accountability back to aid collaboration. Vietnam's case suggests that many mistakes such as excessive culling and wasteful vaccination could have been avoided had accountability been given a higher priority by donors. The One-UN plan emphasises aid effectiveness and efficiency but pays inadequate attention to accountability issues.<sup>35</sup> Aid effectiveness and efficiency depend a great deal on accountability. If one asks for whom effectiveness and efficiency are, it is clear that the One-UN plan lacks mechanisms to assure that aid effectiveness and efficiency are not just for the interests of donors and government officials, but to serve the people of recipient countries. To the extent that donors are truly interested in such values as equality and participation, respect for national sovereignty should not prevent them from requiring foreign-funded national projects to submit to open public debates and a rigorous decision-making process in which marginalised groups have the opportunity to participate. While donors should not try to impose foreign values on Vietnam, they should not give the Vietnamese government full "ownership" and "leadership" of aid projects and require only "mutual accountability" between donors and the government, as the Hanoi Core Statement declared. Rather, co-ownership, co-leadership, and the government's full accountability to both donors and its people must be the principles of collaboration, despite the predictably intense struggle for the realisation of these principles.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> It is ironic and perhaps not coincidental that, as collaboration between donors and Vietnam has reached a new height in the last four years with the Hanoi Core Statement and the One-UN plan, the Reporters without Borders's press freedom ranking of Vietnam fell from 159 (among 166 countries) in 2003 to 168 (out of 173 countries) in 2007.

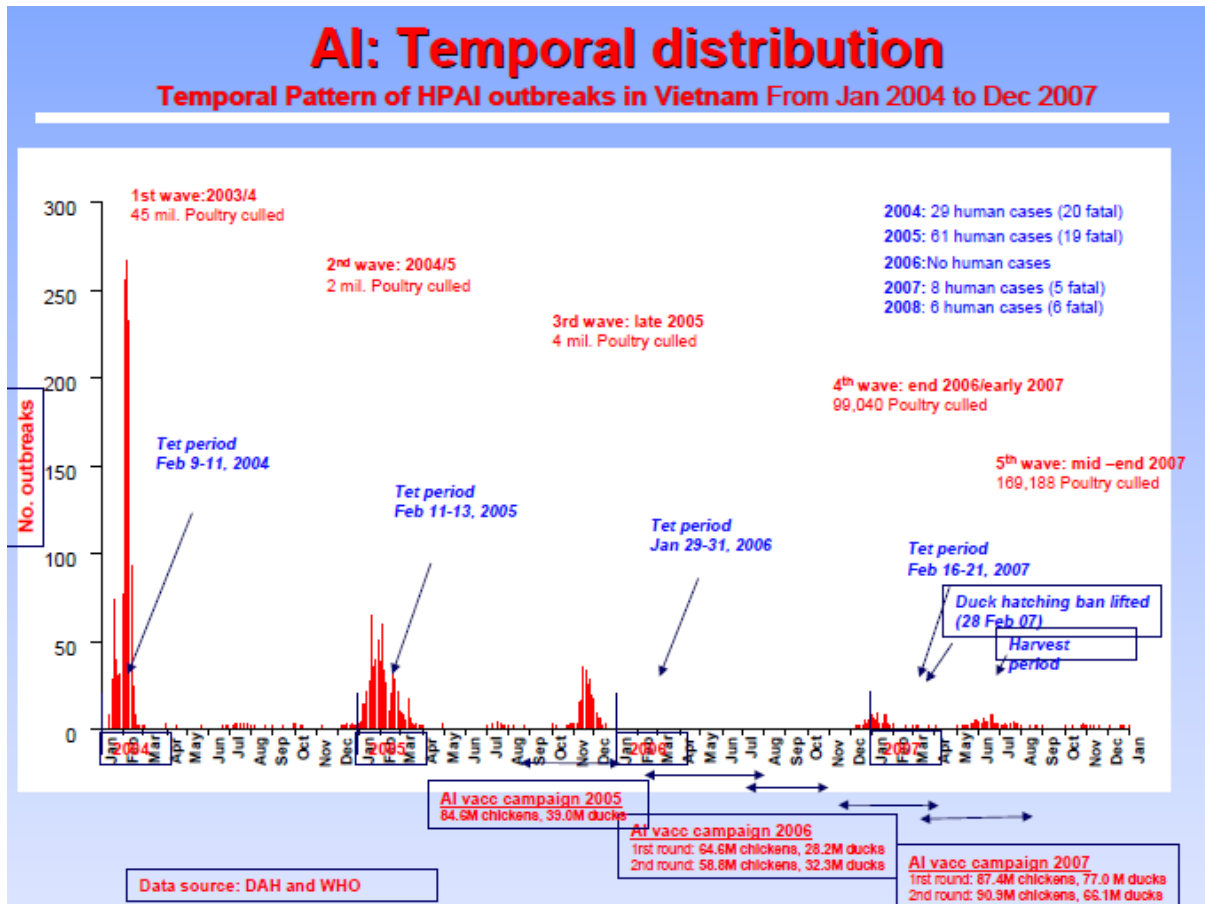
<sup>36</sup> In this struggle, UN agencies might have something to learn from the Japanese government which, in December 2008, suspended nearly \$1 billion of ODA (about 20% of total ODA committed by all donors for 2009) to Vietnam. Five months earlier, the Japanese government had requested cooperation from Vietnam in a bribery case in which a Japanese company admitted that it paid Mr. Huynh Ngoc Sy, the Deputy Director of the HCM City Department of Transport and Public Works, \$2.6 million (10% of the contract value) to receive a consulting contract for a major Japanese ODA-funded infrastructure project. The Vietnamese government refused even to temporarily suspend Mr. Sy for investigation, citing lack of evidence. After the Japanese company director was convicted in Japan, and the Japanese government decided to suspend ODA, within only a week Mr. Sy was sacked and the Vietnamese police reportedly began a formal investigation. For the decision to suspend aid, the Japanese government has received widespread praise from many courageous public intellectuals in Vietnam. However, the Ministry of Public Security responded (Decision no. 2039/2008/QD-BCA A11 on December 3, 2008) by upgrading the list of "state secrets" to include all information about infrastructure projects involving foreign partners, the biographies of officials from Deputy Directors up, bids submitted for construction projects, and complaints and inspectors' reports about those projects.

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# APPENDIX 1: AI TEMPORAL DISTRIBUTION



## APPENDIX 2: COMPARATIVE DATA FOR VIETNAM

National facts and figures	Total population	84,000,000
	Total land area (km <sup>2</sup> )	329,000
	First H5N1 outbreak	June 2003, Ha Tay; reported January 2004
	First human death, nos to date	December 2003; 52 deaths
	Numbers of poultry	245 million. Around 8 millions village households raise backyard chickens.
	Poultry export value	No data; negligible.
	Structure of industry (1-4)	Industrial: 20%; Semi-industrial: 15%; Backyard: 65%
	National GDP (purchasing power parity)	\$225.5 billion (estimated, 2007); per capita GDP: \$2,600 (2007)
	Agriculture as % of GDP (poultry industry as % of agri GDP)	20% (2007)
	Aid dependency (% GDP)	Donors' pledged aid was \$32 billion (1993-2005); 600 international NGO's assistance estimated \$100 million annually; ODA estimated for 2006-2010 to be \$11 billion, accounting for about 7% the national investment capital.
Politics, governance and political culture	Styles of decision-making in bureaucracy	Party committees rule; emphasises consensus, secrecy, stability
	Patronage politics and influence on policy	Intense patronage politics; development planning is a mechanism for rent distribution
	Political system – role of civil society	Communist system with totalitarian legacies – civil society is extremely weak
	State structure – level of decentralisation	Financially most local governments depend on the center; but political power is decentralised
	Regulatory cultures/styles	Top-down; severely restricted public discussion of policy

HPAI response	Major donors/international agencies involved in avian influenza	World Bank, FAO, WHO, USAID, OIE, ADB, JICA, Danida
	Foreign NGOs involved	Agronomes et Vétérinaires sans frontières (AVSF), AED, CARE, Abt Associates, etc
	Key interventions for HPAI control and response	Mass culling Compensation up to 70% of the market value Comprehensive vaccination since 2005
	Areas of government responsible – coordination	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Department (MARD), Ministry of Health, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Science and Technology, Ministry of Public Security
	Vaccine manufacturing capacity	Some, but not yet able to produce AI vaccine on large scale