

State's roles in ensuring food safety in Vietnam

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Abstract:

People are more and more interested in safety food, because food affects life and existence of human. Nowadays, unsafe food supply is killing the Vietnamese. The big problem is processed food. We're being killed not by *E. coli*, *Salmonella*, or *Campylobacter*, but the nutritionally hollow contents of the bags, boxes, and fast-food clamshells that pass as nourishment.

Legislation has been drafted giving the VFA authority to help prevent foodborne illnesses and deaths. But much of our food supply remains unsafe; with at least 35 Vietnamese annually going to early graves from diet-related conditions and the VFA doesn't have the clout or will to help to change it.

So which solutions for food issues in Vietnam today?

Keywords: Food safety, current situation, reasons, breakthrough solutions, Law on Food Safety

1. Introduction

From past to present, food plays a very important role for the growth and survival of human beings. Food provides the essential nutrients for human life: vitamins, minerals, energy, and other nutrients [1]. However, if we use unsafe food, it will be the cause being harmful to humans and race.

At present, the world in general and Vietnam in particular, a large number of population strata is very interested in the issue of food safety: from consumers to scientists and managers. So, the management of food safety is both urgent and long-term, this is large, complex task and involves many agencies [3]

Food safety to protect the health of the people is one of the important tasks, so it needs steering drastic by Party, Governments. It is the responsibility and right of organizations, individuals and every citizen in producing and trading food. Last time, the Party and State have many policies for Food Safety. June 17th, 2010, The National Assembly promulgated the Law on Food Safety No.55/2010/QH12. To implement the Law of Food Safety, the Government issued the National Strategy on Food Safety for the period 2011-2020 and vision to 2030.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Documents synthesizing method: Documents are synthesized from some resources such as: reports of Dong Nai People's Committee, of Vietnam Food Agency (VFA), and of National Agro-Forestry-Fisheries quality assurance sub-department of DongNai province (NAFIQASD).

2.2. Investigating some companies, firms in Dong Nai province and other provinces: Authors chose some companies, firms that produce, buy and sell or exchange food to investigate: products, trade, process of producing,...

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Current situation of food safety in Vietnam

Ensuring food safety has been concerned by the local government, however the current situation show that food safety issue are worrisome, food poisonings are still occurring and affecting the lives and health of people.

Through the survey, the authors overview the current situation of food safety in Vietnam, such as:

- *Unsafe of food alarming in the present.*

In recent times, food poisoning is taking place consecutively that is harmful to consumers' health. Products such as rice spirits 29% vol of the Ha Noi 29 Import-Export Company, the ingredients of this product is 30% alcohol, 70% water, and the other flavors [3]. Or poisoned spinach in specialized areas in Thu Dau Mot city (Binh Duong province, Vietnam) and areas of specialized vegetable in Northern region. Department of Plant Protection said the cause is due to the vegetable growers have used a large number of pesticide to spray the vegetables and pesticide residues in vegetable is higher 100 times than the permitted level [7].

➤ *The use of unsafe flavors in manufacturing and processing food are now very popular, and tends to increase.*

Across the country, the area of safe fruit and vegetable is very few, about 8.5% of the total area of vegetables, and 20% of the total area of fruit trees [8]. Foods containing toxic substances, preservatives,

Table 1. The infected and died human during 2009 – 2013 by unsafely food

Indicators	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	Sum	Average/year
Total (times)	152	175	148	168	160	803	161
Number of infected people (People)	5.212	5.664	4.700	5.541	5.238	26.355	5.271
Number of died people (People)	35	51	27	34	28	175	35

(Source: Bureau of Food Safety - Ministry of Health, 2014)

In the first months of this year, food poisoning occurred in many places (Lao Cai, Binh Duong, Chau Thanh, Hau Giang, Ba Ria - Vung Tau, Dong Nai,...) [3], in which typically a food poisoning occurred in Panko Vina Co., Ltd. (My Phuoc 1 Industrial Zone, Ben Cat District, Binh Duong) at 15:30 pm 17th January, 2014 and as a result there were 159 worker that were hospitalized [7]. Or food poisoning from collective kitchen of Lac Ty Co., Ltd (Hau Giang) made 46 people were hospitalized [6].

➤ *Food smuggling, unknown origin, still circulate widespread in our country*

In spite of strict control of the authorities, but the phenomenon of food smuggling still complicated, increasing the risk of unsafe food hygiene. Smuggled food unknown origin was not only risks a major influence on consumers' health but also affect the production and circulation of production. The smuggled foods include: organ toxic materials, all kinds of seafood, foods cooked sausages, honey, sausages, ... [5].

Besides smuggled food, smuggled food additives is also a worried problem because it affects food safety and hygiene. The Ministry of Health said that at present, 90% of food additives consumed in Vietnam are smuggled [4]. Currently, the amount of food additives produced in the country only account for 5-10% of the total consumption of food additives on the market, over 90% are imported. Of

additives, food coloring flavors are being circulated in the market, such as: soy sauce containing 3-MCPD, fish sauce containing urea, fresh seafood marinated by urea to preserve, eggs and milk containing melamine, pig skin whitened by bleach [4]; melon seeds, chili powder and coloring flour containing Rhodamine B, dried fruit from China poisoning lead, sausage containing carcinogenic substances, formaldehyde used to soak rice noodles, spring rolls containing borax , horticulture residues of plant protection; spirits made at home[8].

➤ *The phenomenon of food poisoning still occurs regularly in industrial Zones and at the collective kitchens, and no sign of reducing.*

According to statistics of the Bureau of Food Safety - Ministry of Health (VFA), the period from 2009 to 2013, on national average there are 161 food poisoning cases occur a year, with an average of 5.271 people infected a year [3].

these, only handful of import are under quota, the rest is ... smuggled [3]. Moreover, the Ministry of Health also said, more than 90% of food additives being consumed in the domestic market are imported from 20 companies from: the U.S, France, Switzerland, Thailand, Indonesia and especially China (accounting for approximately 30% of total imports food additives) [3].

Currently, Vietnam allows to use 23 groups of food additives with 337 substance, including aromatherapy [2]. In fact, the number of official import food additives only supplies a small part of the consumer demand. Food additives are very popular but they are not been statistically, especially additives smuggled from China across borders, sold in retail at counters. The use of toxic food additives, smuggled food additives with unknown origin is very common; this causes serious damage to the health of consumers. The test results on the use of food additives in recent times show that, up to 15.6% of food samples are positive for borax, 13% of sample contain preservatives exceeding permitted level and 12% of food samples contain alkaline color [4]. The medical experts warn that the using of toxic food additives with small amount can cause poisoning chronically; high dose will cause poisoning acute [9]. For example, with 1 gram of borax can cause diarrhea, vomiting, prolonged use of the substance will accumulate and impact serious on the health, with 15g would be died ... [9]. Therefore, the management and control food

additives will limit poisoning food for generations.

3.2. Causes of the situations above

Unsafe food in Vietnam is at alarm level. People say that all food from meat, dairy, fruit, and even rice contain toxins being harmful to human health. Current situations can be derived from the following main reasons:

- *Lack of uniformity in implementing cleaner production processes in the food production chain*

In order to have food safety, the food production must meet safety requirements: using the safe feed, safe livestock/crop processing, safe storage ...However, in Vietnam, food production is just good at some phase above. For example, stages of rearing do well but lack of the facilities to do harvest stages: the danger of infection will start from here. Or processing phase is implemented well but it is not good at preservation, distribution, sale because of risk of bacterial infections. Therefore, when food poisoning occur, consumers or agency is difficult to determine the main cause.

In addition, the application of good manufacturing process is also very slow. Of the total area of fruit trees, and vegetables, the safe production area is very limited. Number of farmers trained Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) is not much and not effective. Although some exporters companies apply GAPs such as EUREPGAP, Vietnam have not built GAP, GVP, GHP, GMP,... for each industry yet.

- *Organize structure to control food safety and hygiene, unreasonable, overlapping equipments both insufficient, and poor.*

Currently in Vietnam there are 5 management agencies on food safety: Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Industry and Trade, Ministry of Science and Technology and the Ministry of Natural Resources, Environment, and People's Committees of provinces and cities. Due to the overlap management, it is difficult to blame the agency. For the provincial level, they established the Food Safety and Hygiene Department of Health, but no guidelines on organizational structure. So every unit have a different organizational structure and staffing quantity whether the functions and duties are a similar.

In addition to the restrictions on the organizational structure, the lack of equipment and expertise is one of the causes of food insecurity: confirming the safety of food, testing residues of plant protection drugs, nitrates, heavy metals and bacteria present in food. For qualitative and quantitative hazard, they need a laboratory to test. Vietnam only has 11 national analysis units to test

food safety, even some provinces have not lab yet. Moreover, most of these facilities are located in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City; so sending samples away will increase the cost and time of testing.

On the other hand, the inspection and testing are not regular, continuous because of limited funding, so they only inspect and test the high-risk food businesses.

- *Restrictions of the law, the guidelines documents related to food safety.*

Although there is a lot of overlap document and no clear delineation of responsibilities between the management, the industry has shortcomings, not cover all field, there are gaps between the stages of management responsibilities associated keep a product. Some emerging field (such as functional foods, a number of toxic substances and micronutrients) is not clear in management guidelines, local details so they are difficult to make.

Besides, there are regulations that do not apply at the current time, such as commune can not have enough professional staff to perform physicals, evaluation units, and supply certificates. They prescribe a scale feasts on 200 people at granting county level, but the festival communes or hamlets is often over 200 people so district staff can not manage, and communes, hamlets is not competent to manage. The feast of the social organization, religion (churches, temples, pagodas) without specialized personnel permission cannot be inspected. The rapid tests are not sufficient legal basis to sanction and processed immediately. In order to avoid food poisoning occur, wait for the official results (usually long duration), the food was be consumed; the violation was not handled in accordance with the scale of the facility and its many other shortcomings that need to be adjusted, logical addition.

- *The enforcement of regulations on inspection and monitoring food safety has not been taken seriously.*

According to Decree No. 178/2013/ND-CP dated 14-11-2013 of the Government on sanctioning of administrative violations of food safety, the level of penalties for violations of regulations on the use of additives, Food additives, processing aids in food production, food processing is quite high, up to 100 million or higher. However, there are many offenders, but implementing penalties is not seriously.

In fact, during the inspection, sanitary inspection and food safety exist negative officers. Many officers "ignored" for the violations.

- *Awareness of people about food safety are limited, even consumers.*

Final reason, and as a consequence of the above reasons is people's awareness about food safety is still weak, business units ready violate regulation of food safety because of profit.

3.3. Breakthrough solutions for food safety in current period

Stemmed from food hygiene and safety and reasons presented above, a number of breakthrough solutions to ensure food safety in the future as follows:

➤ *Completion of legislation on food hygiene and safety systems:*

Congress should issues Law on Food Safety (still draft) and the guidelines under Law timely, appropriate (specified standards and regulations). That is the legal framework and basis for the construction of the local policy, planning and quality management plan. Besides, the laws enacted to unify, to avoid duplication of content, and implementation.

➤ *Planning zones to cultivate and farm safety.*

Each local must plan to cultivate and farm, based on geography and soil, economic characteristics - social, ... Promote establishment convergent areas for slaughtering livestock, poultry, construction food safety markets. Plan well will create proper orientation to propose other management solutions.

➤ *Consolidate the organization structure*

The organization structure must be organized throughout the nation from the central to the grassroots (existing provincial now). At the ward level, to strengthen specialized inspection systems (medical, veterinary, agricultural, market management) to inspect cargo, inspect product (currently this network is now very thin, hard to able to assume full responsibility). Establish a committee (not the steering committee) in each local joint coordination headed by a Vice Chairman for unity of action in the management of product quality goods, avoid spreading, shirking of responsibility, waste of money and manpower.

➤ *Increase resources and facilities:*

Have enough manpower, strong quality. Basis, the working facilities and equipment to be focused investment, creating favorable conditions for continuous operation 24/24 (the same as in hospital emergency direct or direct prevention) . Promote to invest capacity of the test facility locally. Allocate funding sufficient for operations and their assigned tasks. It should be permitted the units to retain a portion fines to invest more infrastructure to serve.

➤ *Promote professional training, and communication*

Strengthening training, educating, improve staff quality. Promote communication, education and healthcare to everyone and this is one of the fundamental solution, long term. Implement Physical examination, evaluation, supply certification. Strengthen inspection, testing and handling of all serious violations. Enhance international cooperation is absolutely necessary.

4. Conclusion

While we wait for the slow gears of government to step in with stronger regulation of what the food industry is allowed to package and sell as food, the way we eat is making too many Vietnamese people sick and overweight. What can we do in the interim?

In brief, survey above shows that unsafe food in Vietnam is taking place more and more complicating and there is no sign to stop. In order to prohibit unsafe food, central government and local authority need to carry out five solutions more and more soon.

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