

# FOOD SAFETY RISK MISPERCEPTION

## LESSONS LEARNED AND WAY FORWARD

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### INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

Food-borne diseases and food poisonings are attracting a lot of attention in Vietnam due to repeated episodes of adulterated and unsafe food practices, which have been receiving widespread media attention. Various food scares have happened including cyanides and phenol residues in seafood in central coast of Vietnam since an environmental disaster occurred in April 2016, pesticide residues in vegetables, antibiotic and banned veterinary residues in meat etc. The Vietnamese media has given a lot of attention to food safety issues when famous people passed away at young ages from cancers. Since 1<sup>st</sup> April 2016, an official program entitled “Say no to contaminated foods” has been broadcasted daily on national television during two primetime slots – 7:30 am and 8:30 pm [1]. In this poster, the authors wish to briefly present some aspects of the food safety risk communication, misperception, lessons learned and way forward to improve risk communication in Vietnam.

### FOOD SAFETY RISK COMMUNICATION AND RISK MISPERCEPTION IN VIETNAM

Risk communication regarding food safety is often poor, not based on scientific evidence from risk assessment, which makes consumers even more frightened about the foods they purchase. To communicate risk effectively, it is important to understand the psychology of risk perception. People encounter information from different sources about chemicals detected in food. Consumers normally do not think about risk in the same way that risk assessors understand risk. Risk perception is complex and driven only partly by factual evidence. Food technologies often involve ‘fear factors’ that make them seem more worrisome than other risks. For example, eating pesticide-contaminated vegetables is (incorrectly) perceived as being riskier than riding a motorbike. Fear factors include distrust of large companies, dislike of ‘unnatural’ processes and uncertainty over unfamiliar dangers. People tend to worry more about risks caused by factors over which they feel they have no control, while being much less concerned about factors linked to their own behaviours. Consumers in Vietnam also usually pay more attention on chemical hazards over biological hazards in foods. However, recent studies in Hung Yen and Nghe An provinces showed that while sulphonamide, chloramphenicol and B-agonist (Salbutamol) were present in some pork samples available at wet markets, but the risks to the consumers were minimal; whereas high level of *Salmonella* in cut pork (44.4%) could induce the potential health risks for the consumers [2,3,4].

### LESSONS LEARNT

- ✓ The marked difference in how experts and the public view food safety risks does exist and has real consequences.
- ✓ People usually too concern about hazards and confuse between hazards and actual health risks, which the later largely depends on the level and duration of exposure. As consequences, opportunities are lost and scarce resources are spent managing minor problems, while the major issues go to the back of the queue.
- ✓ Effective regulation of risk poses challenges, and our natural tendencies to misperceive risk need to be countered by better evidence on the risks and the psychology of risk perception.
- ✓ Risk communication that builds on empirical evidence of, and interactive exchanges about, consumer understanding, as well as on food risks and benefits can help consumers make informed decisions.

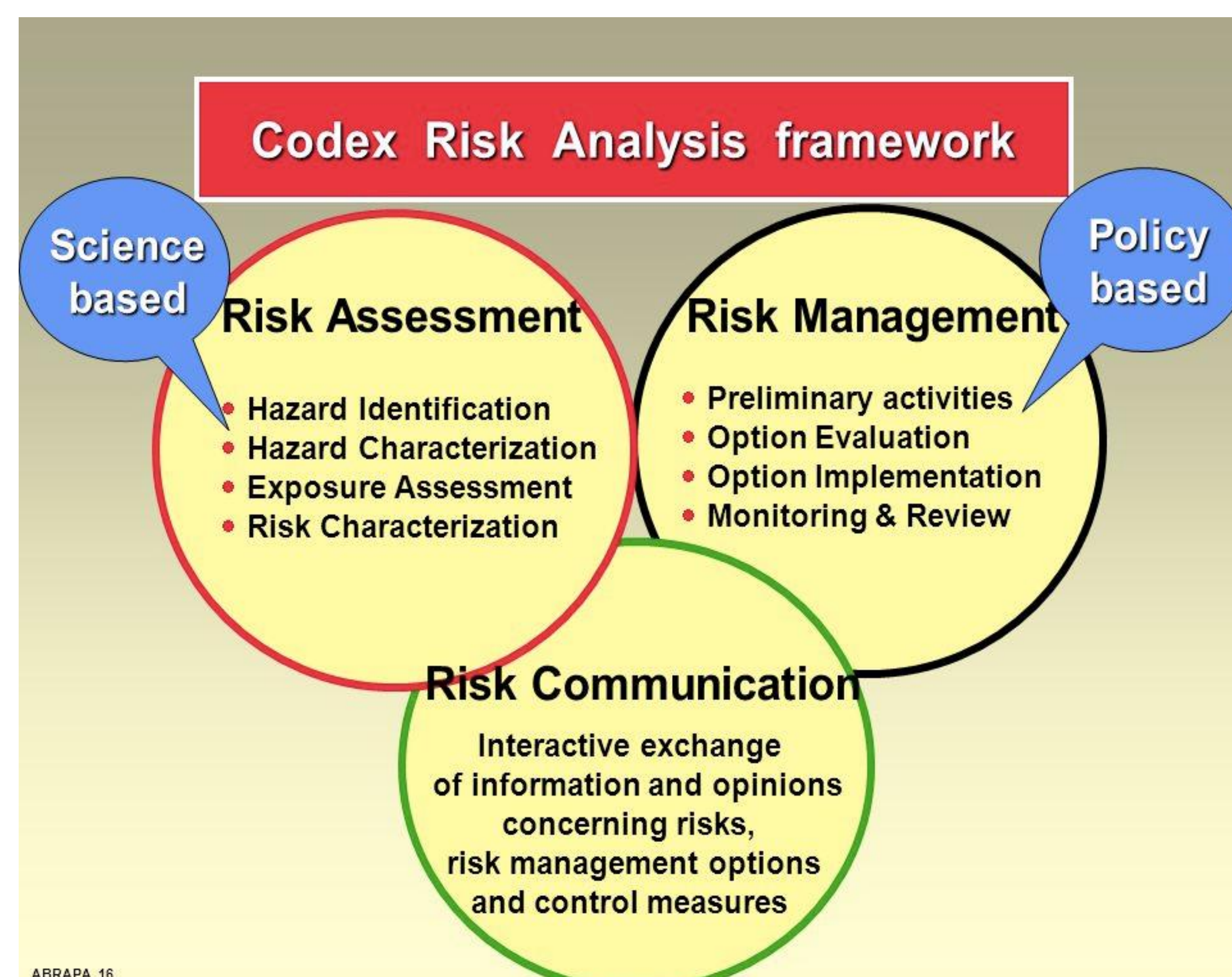


Figure 1. Food safety risk assessment, risk communication and risk management (Codex)

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✓ The risk assessment of chemical, biological and physical hazards in foods is crucial for providing scientific information to inform risk communication activities.
- ✓ Risk communication on food safety issues should be well integrated into the risk-based food safety management system in Vietnam, as specified in the Food Safety Law 2010.
- ✓ The involved ministries and related agencies should develop a coordinated plan to communicate in one voice with all affected parties during food safety crises so that the public and related stakeholders can receive timely, clear and accurate information to avoid unnecessary panic.

### REFERENCES

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