

# **Tourism Crisis Caused By Covid-19 And Policy Responses In Vietnam**

**By**

**Ho Nhu Ngoc**

School of Housing Building and Planning, Universiti Sains Malaysia,  
11800 Gelugor, Penang, Malaysia

**Shida Irwana Omar**

School of Housing Building and Planning, Universiti Sains Malaysia,  
11800 Gelugor, Penang, Malaysia

## **Abstract**

This study focuses on the Vietnamese Government's response to tourism crisis caused by COVID-19 pandemic that affected the tourism industry from 2020 to 2022 and measures the impacts towards these responses based on the Tourism Disaster Framework Model (TDFM) developed by Faulkner (2001). The paper finds that the tourism policy responses implemented by Vietnamese Government were accord with the "elements of disaster management responses" which could be clearly identified through the "phases in disaster process" proposed by Faulkner's TDFM. However, their policy responses did not correspond to the "principal ingredients of the disaster management strategies" suggested in Faulkner's TDFM. The paper concluded that the Governments need to have in place a national plan of tourism crisis management in order to respond effectively to future tourism crisis and the Faulkner's TDFM is useful to build such mechanism.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, tourism crisis, tourism policy, Tourism Disaster Framework Model, Vietnam.

## **Introduction**

In modern life, the world is prone to uncertainty and is becoming more turbulent due to not only a larger population but also more powerful technology and greater disregard for natural resources (Richardson, 1994; Rosselló et al., 2020). Although important, tourism is a fragile sector and easily affected by external and internal crises. A crisis in the tourism sector eventually causes a downward trend in tourism business activities, including arrival numbers, tourist revenues and each visitor's length of stay. Globalisation has positive effects on the expansion of the market share and profitability of the tourism sector. However, it induces greater instability on the global scale due to the "Butterfly effect", presented by Edward Lorenz in 1993 (Faulkner, 2001). As a consequence of worldwide integration, the global challenges arising from the health crises during the 2000s, including SARS in 2002–2003, MERS in 2015 and Avian Flu disease in 2018, had a considerable impact on economies worldwide, especially the tourism and trade sectors (Segura et al., 2019).

Most recently, in December 2019, the COVID-19 outbreak was an unprecedented event that had never been experienced outside wartime. In comparison to SARS or previous crises in world history, the impacts of COVID-19 have been wider, stronger and more long-lasting. Under the pressure of the pandemic, governments have placed embargoes on movement within each country and closed their borders during the spread of the pandemic (Kaczmarek et al., 2021). International tourism has vanished, while domestic tourism has seen a limited increase.

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Facing this obstacle, during the pandemic, the governments implemented different strategies and policies in response to the crisis in tourism and the sector was expected to recover quickly in the early phase of post-COVID-19 (Tran et al., 2020). According to the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), the importance of the strength and resilience of the tourism sector has been emphasised through the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic (World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2020b). In the context of tourism crisis management research, the scholars have focused mainly on the response and recovery phases, and the majority of lessons came from developed countries but omitted developing countries (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019).

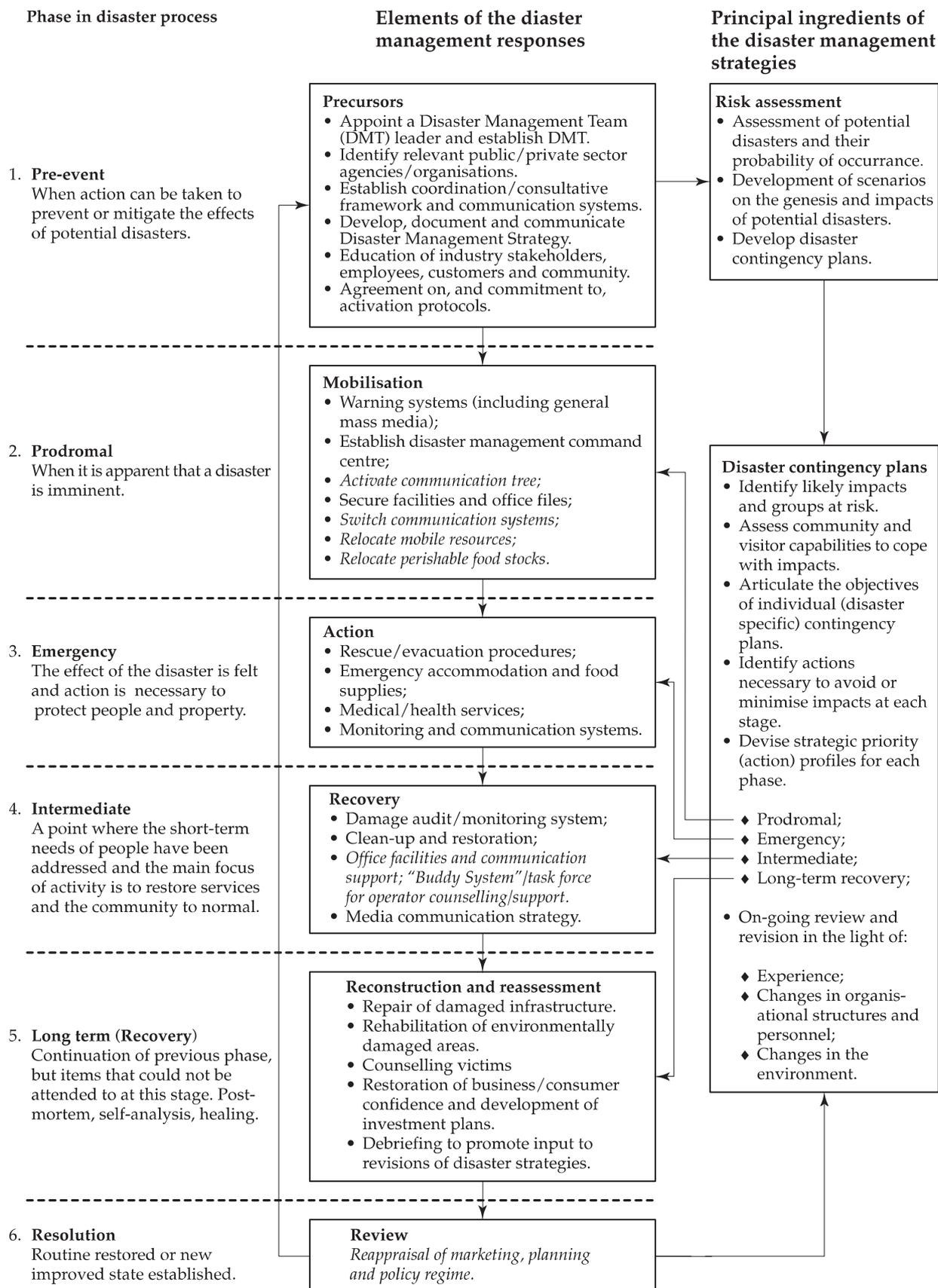
In context of Vietnam, the crisis caused by COVID-19 occurred from the early 2021 to the middle of 2022, Vietnam's government and tourism stakeholders were compelled to deal with a high threat to the routine operations and survival of tourism businesses. Several strategic responses were implemented by tour operators (Do et al., 2022) and the hotel sector (Hoang et al., 2021; Le & Phi, 2021). The State implemented many policies to rescue the economic sectors, including the tourism sector. However, previous studies focused on lessons from private enterprises, while investigations into the policy response of the government to COVID-19 are limited. Quang et al. (2020) examined the government's actions based on data collected from government media sources, while investigating the readiness of the tourism sector in Vietnam during the recovery stage of COVID-19. Nevertheless, the pandemic in Vietnam became more challenging in 2021 when the government had to impose a lockdown on the entire country. Thus, many important policies that were approved by the State from 2021 to 2022 were left out in these papers.

Using the example from Vietnam's tourism policy responses to COVID-19, the focus of this paper is on how a country can cope the international crisis rather than solutions individual operator might adopt in these circumstances. Faulkner's tourism crisis management framework was applied to outline and analysed each stage of the response by the government from pre-pandemic to post-pandemic in Vietnam. The paper provides an original insight on the efforts and the responses of tourism sector in developing country where the government possess limited financial power.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Tourism Crisis Management***

Generally, crisis management is defined as the response to a crisis through special campaigns by affected organisations. Human and financial resources are used to overcome difficult situations and reduce the damage (Henderson & Ng, 2004). In fact, crisis management is no longer a question of how and when an issue arises, but is related more too when and how it will be solved. Most of the research on tourism risks, crises and disaster management focuses on the "response and recovery" stages, and emphasises the use of the power and resources of the government to respond to a crisis (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019). A knowledge management framework for tourism crises and disasters can be developed based on lessons from typical crises that occurred in the past (Mistilis & Sheldon, 2008). Currently, Faulkner's framework (Faulkner, 2001) is the most widely cited in tourism crisis and disaster management research. The author presented a framework of the tourism community's responses to crises (Figure 1). The framework provides an approach to responses to disaster and



**Figure 1:** Faulkner's tourism disaster management framework. Source: Faulkner (2001, p. 144)

*Other detrimental circumstances, and includes six phases, namely pre-event, prodromal, emergency, intermediate, and long-term (or recovery) and resolution:*

1. The *Pre-event* phase is when action can be taken to prevent or mitigate the effects of potential disasters. A disaster management team (DMT) leader should be identified and appointed. This leader can take decisions about the set of actions that would develop and inform the disaster management strategy. *Risk assessments* can be undertaken to assess the potential disasters and the probability of their occurrence, to develop scenarios on the genesis of the impacts of potential disasters and to develop disaster contingency plans.
1. The *prodromal* phase is when a disaster is imminent. Disaster management responses during this phase include establishing warning systems, disaster management command centres and secure facilities. These are necessary actions to avoid or minimise the impacts of disaster.
2. The *emergency* phase is when the effect of the disaster is felt, and action is necessary to protect people and property. Many actions should be implemented, including establishing rescue or evacuation procedures, emergency accommodation and food supplies, medical/health services, and monitoring and communication systems.
3. The *immediate* phase is a point at which the short-term needs of people have been addressed and the main focus of activity is to restore services and the community to normal.
4. The *long-term recovery* phase is a continuation of the previous phase, but items that could not be attended to quickly are attended to at this stage, such as post-mortems, self-analysis and healing.
5. The *resolution* phase is when routine is restored or new and improved conditions are established.

During the prodromal, emergency, intermediate and long-term recovery phases, diverse disaster contingency plans should be made to specify and devise strategic priority action profiles for each phase. Disaster contingency plans identify the impacts and groups at risk, assess community and visitor capabilities to cope with impacts, and identify actions necessary to avoid or minimise the impacts at each stage.

## **Methodology**

Data was compiled from official websites of the Government of Vietnam (GoV); the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (MCST) and the VNAT (a government body under the control of the MSCT). Each government body in Vietnam publishes its approved documents on its online website in the folder “His thong van ban” [documents system]. To screen the appropriate materials for this study, an advanced search was used for the timeframe from December 2019 to March 2022. The keywords were applied, including “COVID-19”, “du lich” [tourism], “khach du lich” [tourist], and “tro cap lien quan dich COVID-19” [subsidies related to COVID-19]. As result, 15 policy documents related to tourism were chosen as research materials for analysis and synthesis. A content analysis was applied to identify the Vietnamese government’s tourism policy in response to COVID-19. The findings were constructed based on the four phases of Faulkner’s tourism crisis management framework, including the pre-event, prodromal, emergency, and intermediate phases. Vietnam opened its

borders on March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022, so it has just started its long-term recovery. The long-term recovery and resolution phases will be addressed in the discussion section.

## Findings

### *Tourism and COVID-19 in Vietnam*

Vietnam is prominent as one of the most famous destinations in Asia. According to the statistics of the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (VNAT), the tourism industry has undergone sustainable development during 60 years from 1990 to 2019 (VNAT, 2020). The scale of the international market has expanded steadily, from 250,000 arrivals to 18 million arrivals in 2019, a 72-fold increase. Meanwhile, the number of domestic tourists has been constantly growing over three decades, from one million in 1990 to 85 million in 2019, an increase of 85 times. Consistent with the expansion of tourist arrivals, the accommodation sector and travel agencies in Vietnam have developed remarkably with there being 30,000 hotels and 2,667 travel agencies in 2019.

Under pressure from COVID-19, the tourism sector in Vietnam shared the same picture as global tourism, with the international market having vanished, and the domestic market being diminished due to the restricted interstate movement (Vu et al., 2022).

**Table 1:** *The timeline of COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam*

	<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>
<b>First wave</b>	January 23th, 2020	02 first positive cases of COVID-19 was found in Vietnam
	January 30th, 2020	National Commission of prevent and against to pandemic was established by Prime Minister
	March 17th, 2020	Vietnamese Government suspended visa issuance to foreigner
	March 21th, 2020	Vietnamese Government suspended foreigner entry
	April 1st, 2020	Vietnam announced social distancing at national level
	April 23th, 2020	National social-distancing was released. However, people had to follow the regulations to prevent and against to pandemic
<b>99 days without positives cases in community</b>		
<b>Second wave</b>	July 25th, 2020	New positive case was found in Danag, a hotspot tourist destination. Then 553 infectious cases was found in other cities and provinces
	July 28th, 2020	Social distancing in Danang
	September 11th, 2020	Social distancing in Danang was released
<b>55days without positives cases in community</b>		
<b>Third wave</b>	January 28th,2021	72 positive cases in community were found in Hai Duong. Social distancing was applied in Hai Duong.
	March 3rd, 2021	Social distancing in Hai Duong was released
<b>Virus COVID-19 variant Delta appeared</b>		
<b>Forth wave</b>	April 27, 2021	The forth wave of COVID-19 pandemic was spreading from Yen Bai
	May 31st, 2021	Social distancing was implemented in Ho Chi Minh city

October, 2021

Social distancing was released. Resume to new normal situation.

March 15th, 2022 : Vietnam resume all international flights and issues visa for foreigner

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According to the VNAT (2022), in 2021, 95% of tour operators had to stop their business; the occupancy rate for tourist accommodations was only 5%; and tourist revenue yielded 180,000 billion Dong, a decrease of 76% in comparison to 2019, contributing to 1.97% of the GDP in 2021 (in 2019, tourism contributed 9.2% to the GDP). On 15 March 2022, Vietnam reopened its borders and unconditionally welcomed international tourists. That day can be marked as a milestone in the recovery phase of Vietnam's tourism sector after COVID-19.

### ***Tourism policy responses to crisis caused by COVID in Vietnam***

#### ***Pre-event phase***

COVID-19 has come to be recognized as a “100-year disease” that challenged the attitude of Vietnam's tourism sector towards disaster preparedness. Before the pandemic, the tourism business was developing gradually and sustainably, and therefore, the Vietnamese government had no tourism disaster management plan in place, and neither did it have a nation-wide plan to cope with the pandemic. After the first and second waves of the pandemic, there was widespread appreciation for the need of a tourism plan to guide and assist stakeholders in responding to COVID-19. The third wave occurred during the Lunar New Year holidays in 2021. To prevent the spread of COVID-19 and ensure tourism activities prevailed during the holidays, the MSCT issued Dispatch 165/BVHTTDL-TCDL giving concrete guidance to all the cities and provinces. Likewise, Telegram 1850/CĐ-TTg was issued by the Prime Minister to strengthen and implement measures to prevent and control the outbreak during the Lunar New Year holidays in 2022. Based on these nation-wide guidelines, 64 provinces and cities in Vietnam implemented their specific preparedness strategy for the pandemic. It can be confirmed that the response of Vietnam's tourism sector during the third and fourth waves correlated to the pre-event phases of Faulkner's (2001) disaster process.

#### ***Prodromal phase***

At the beginning of the first wave, when the first positive case was detected on 23 January 2020, the State felt that there might be an outbreak of COVID-19 that could inevitably lead to a tourism crisis. One week later, Dispatch 389/CĐ-BVHTTDL was issued by the MSCT and Decision 125/QĐ-BYT was released to discourage Vietnamese people from traveling to those cities where the virus had been detected and warning against traveling to China. The warning information was also published in the mass media, including the newspapers, online and on television. However, at that time, tourism in Vietnam was still at its optimum and there was a lack of preparedness for responding to crises. While the government discouraged the Vietnamese people from traveling abroad, they launched and promoted the “Vietnam – Safe Haven” campaign to international tourists, and invited tourists to come to Vietnam. To welcome international tourists, The MOH implemented Decision 181/QĐ-BYT on “Guidance on surveillance and prevention of SARS 2” on 21 January, 2020. The guidance presented a framework for surveillance systems and responses to positive cases of COVID-19 detected at international airports. Nevertheless, the rapid rate of infection did not offer tourism organisations any chance to prepare a risk assessment or a pre-determined set of necessary actions and responses to the crisis during the first and second waves. During the third and fourth waves, both international and domestic tourists appreciated the risks of traveling, and thus, the warning announcements and systems remained activated.

### ***Emergency phase***

In Vietnam, the emergency phase of the first wave of COVID-19 was from 28 March to 7 May, 2020. There was no reaction from any tourist enterprise at this stage since the whole country was in a complete lockdown. During this phase, interstate travel was prohibited. Evacuation and safety procedures were managed by the Vietnamese government. Many international tourists were stranded in Vietnam due to the suspension of all international flights. The VNAT sent Dispatch 388/TCDL-KS and demanded that provincial tourism departments report on the number of international tourists who wanted to return to their country. Then, at the end of May, the VNAT, together with the Ministry of Transport, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Vietnam Airlines organised rescue flights. Dispatch 388/TCDL-KS also suggested that hotels give discounts on room and food prices for international tourists.

Unlike other disasters, COVID-19 caused a national lockdown and tourism crisis that lasted several months. Thus, the emergency phase lasted longer than in previous crises. Action to protect the people must be done at the beginning of the emergency stage of a crisis. However, protecting the business of tourist enterprises was complicated since the enterprises had to close their doors for almost two years. Thus, the MSCT sent nine official dispatches (five dispatches in 2020, and four dispatches in 2021) to the Prime Minister and other related Ministries to suggest solutions to help tourist enterprise and tourism employees (including freelance tour guides) affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. The Government approved almost all the suggestions from the MSCT. Many supported policies were implemented in 2020 and 2021, including (1) discounts on electricity bills for tourist accommodations; (2) discounts for rental of land for tourist enterprises and resorts; (3) extended deadlines for paying the VAT, company income tax, and personal income tax in 2021; (4) discounts for the submission of fees for tourism business licences; (5) discounts for the submission of fees for tour guide licences; (6) Resolution 68/NQ-CP “Policies to support businesses and employees directly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic”, giving liquidity support to employers and employees in tourism; (7) a policy to support liquidity for training and maintaining tourist employees; and (8) discounts for deposits of tour operators and agencies.

### ***Intermediate phase***

After the long duration of the lockdown during the emergency phase of each wave of the pandemic, Vietnam attempted to bring tourism activities back on track. Thanks to collaborations between the public and private sectors, the VNAT launched the “Vietnamese travel within Vietnam” campaign to stimulate demand for domestic tourism. The programme was designed to attract the participation of multilateral agencies, tourism associations and tourism enterprises, including airlines, hotels, and travel agencies. Thousands of tours, flight tickets and hotel coupons with discounts of 50%-70% were offered to domestic tourists. However, during the three first waves of the pandemic, concerns about being infected by the virus were still a big challenge to the Vietnamese people in making their travel decisions. Fortunately, in December 2021, Vietnam obtained herd immunity against COVID-19, and from 15 March 2022, the country opened its borders and lifted quarantine requirements for all foreigners. Since then, tourism in Vietnam has basically begun its long-term recovery phase.

## **Discussion**

In many respects, the reaction of the Vietnamese government to the tourism crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was effective. After the first two waves of the outbreak, the Government gained experience and was well-prepared for the next scenario of the crisis. Although the State did not have a crisis management plan in place during the pre-crisis and

prodromal phases, giving tourism stakeholders no time to prepare in the first wave, but with the slogan “No one left behind”, tourists were protected and rescued quickly during the emergency phase. In addition, the supported policies for tourist enterprises, tourist employees and tour guides mentioned above were implemented in a timely manner. These policies reflected the endeavour of the Vietnamese government to rescue the tourism sector.

It is forecasted that it will take the tourism sector in Vietnam at least two years to be restored to its pre-crisis routine. For its long-term recovery, Vietnam must firstly analyse and reconstruct its target markets to explore more niche markets and pay attention to domestic tourists. Besides promoting Vietnamese tourism to the international market, the “Vietnamese travel within Vietnam” campaign

**Table 2:** *Summary of Tourism Policy Responses to COVID-19 in Vietnam*

<b>Tourism Disaster Management Framework (Faulkner, 2001)</b>			
<b>Timeline Of Covid-19 In Vietnam</b>	<b>Phase in disaster process</b>	<b>Elements of the disaster management responses</b>	<b>Principal ingredients of the disaster management strategies</b>
First wave	Pre-event	No tourism disaster management plan in place. No nation-wide plan to cope with the pandemic. Dispatch 389/CĐ-BVHTTDL issued by the MSCT and Decision 125/QĐ-BYT issued by the MoH to discourage Vietnamese people to travel to China.	No risk assessment
	Prodromal	Decision 181/QĐ-BYT issued by the MoH on “Guidance on surveillance and prevention of SARS 2” that applied to International tourists Dispatch 388/TCDL-KS issued by the MSCT that demanded provincial tourism departments to report on the number of international tourists who wanted to return to their country.	No Disaster Contingency Plans
	Emergency	Dispatch 388/TCDL-KS also suggested that hotels give discounts on room and food prices for international tourists.	
Second wave of Covid-19	Intermediate	No tourism policy was issued	
	Pre-event	No tourism disaster management plan in place.	No risk assessment
	Prodromal	Suspending all international and domestic travels	No Disaster Contingency Plans

Third wave of Covid-19	Emergency	05 dispatches in 2020 sent by the MSCT to Prime Minister to suggest solutions to help tourist enterprise and tourism employees affected by the COVID-19 outbreak	
	Intermediate	the VNAT launched the “Vietnamese travel within Vietnam” campaign	
	Pre-event	Dispatch 165/BVHTTDL-TCDL issued by the MSCT on "Ensure the safety for tourist activities during the Lunar New Year holidays in 2022"	No risk assessment
Third wave of Covid-19 Prodromal		Telegram 1850/CĐ-TTg issued by the Prime Minister to strengthen and implement measures to prevent and control the outbreak during the Lunar New Year holidays in 2022	
		Suspending all international and domestic travels	
		Following Directive Number 16 issued by Prime Minister.	
Fourth wave of Covid-19	Emergency	04 dispatches in 2021 sent by the MSCT to Prime Minister to suggest solutions to help tourist enterprise and tourism employees affected by the COVID-19 outbreak	No Disaster Contingency Plans
	Intermediate	the VNAT launched the “Vietnamese travel within Vietnam” campaign	
	Pre-event	Following Directive Number 15 issued by Prime Minister	No risk assessment
	Prodromal	Following Directive Number 16 issued by Prime Minister	
	Emergency	Following Directive Number 16 issued by Prime Minister	No Disaster Contingency Plans
	Intermediate	the VNAT launched the “Vietnamese travel within Vietnam” campaign	

Should be activated annually. Secondly, under the stress of the outbreak, many tourist enterprises were forced to close their business and declare bankruptcy. Thousands of tourist employees became unemployed, and had to change their profession. The Government should implement a policy to encourage tourism education and training. Last, but not least, Vietnam should devise a national tourism product development plan focusing on the indigenous characteristics of each region and province.

Since the tourism sector is basically resuming its normal routine of the pre-crisis period, it is important to evaluate the crisis response policy process. This evaluation should be done at a

national level. It will be able to provide valuable evidence that may help the Government to prepare a crisis management plan.

## Conclusions

Tourism crisis caused by COVID-19 pandemic highlights importance to establish of a formal disaster management framework in order to prepare for the future crisis. This paper analysed the imperative tourism actions, policies and strategies employed by the Vietnamese government to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic using Faulkner's framework (2001). The findings indicated that during the third and fourth waves of the pandemic in 2021, the responses of the Vietnamese government were correlated to the pre-event, prodromal, emergency, and immediate phases of Faulkner's framework. Undeniably, during the first two waves, the Government focused mainly on dealing with the virus, and paid scant attention to protecting the economic sectors. In the future, when the country has restored its tourism sector, this research should be continued to evaluate the responses of the Vietnamese government in a full process, during and after the outbreak of COVID-19. Faulkner's framework has proved to be a good basis for the evaluation of the response process of tourism in a disaster. The framework might be applied to investigate not only natural tourism crises, but also human or health-related tourism crises.

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