Society-wide transitions are challenging to navigate, especially when the changes come quickly, as they have in Viet Nam. The population, now 94 million people, has steadily increased in recent decades, alongside rates of urbanization and incomes. GDP per capita is now close to US$2,000, and poverty rates are falling. The country is transitioning rapidly away from an agrarian society toward a globally connected, urban-centered, educated, middle-income country.

As more people flock to cities, with more money and more food choices than ever before, Viet Nam’s food systems, markets, and healthcare are also evolving rapidly, making food safety a high priority for the Vietnamese government. A4NH researchers from the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) have been working closely with government officials to better understand food safety hazards and assess risks. For the last four years, ILRI has been supporting a national Taskforce of Risk Assessment for Food Safety that brings together expert researchers and representatives from the relevant ministries of agriculture and health to work on priority topics of food safety risk assessment, to conduct hands-on trainings and real-world risk assessment case studies, and to develop curricula and teach at universities in Viet Nam. The Taskforce was institutionalized by a national university to have a formal role in implementing its activities. This Taskforce’s institutions contributed to the 2017 report “Food Safety Risk Management in Viet Nam: Challenges and Opportunities,” convened by the government. A4NH research provided critical evidence on the safety of perishable foods and the importance of traditional markets, the first-ever quantitative assessment of Salmonella in pork, and the first-ever cost assessment of foodborne diseases. Armed with this knowledge, researchers and officials are working with a coalition of national and international partners to improve pork safety by developing, testing, and promoting incentive-based interventions and recommendations that are equitable, sustainable, and scalable.

With this strong partnership and mutual interest in food safety as a foundation, A4NH and the Viet Nam National Institute of Nutrition (NIN), the leading institution under the Vietnamese Ministry of Health responsible for research, training, and implementation of food science and nutrition activities in the country, signed a memorandum of understanding in 2017 to strengthen their collaboration in food safety research.

At the signing, held in July in Hanoi, A4NH and NIN agreed to boost collaboration in characterization of food systems and testing of selected food safety innovations. This engagement will involve measuring food system transitions and sharing agricultural, nutrition, and health datasets; disseminating research findings and policy recommendations at the national level; and exchanging staff and scientific materials.

“We are very happy to be able to engage NIN as national public partner from Viet Nam to work on the key issues on agriculture for nutrition and health. NIN is a great partner who can help bring research evidence into policy at national level on public health side,” said Hung Nguyen, a senior scientist of A4NH and regional representative for ILRI in East and Southeast Asia.

Truong Tuyet Mai, the deputy director of NIN, said that A4NH and NIN will share knowledge and expertise relating to nutrition, food safety, and clinical nutrition. The agreement also allows the two organizations to work together to support partners, capacity development, and policy-influencing initiatives to benefit the people of Viet Nam.

Under this agreement, two parties will also utilize and leverage existing resources; collaborate on research and dissemination of good practices; provide policy guidance; boost collaboration with other entities; and jointly host seminars, workshops, and training events.

Following the signing, NIN and ILRI are ready to begin site integration for implementation and monitoring of joint programs and activities on food safety and antimicrobial resistance in 2018.