

Report of the NEAT WG Meeting

ASEAN Plus Three and COVID-19 Pandemic: Country Responses and Regional Cooperation

Hosted Online by NEAT Indonesia

Wednesday, 14 July 2021

I Overview

1. The COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 has significantly affected the lives of hundreds of millions of people in the world, including in ASEAN Plus Three (APT) countries. The surge of cases since July 2021, marked by the spread of the more infectious Delta variant, forced countries to activate emergency measures. While the public health impact is immediate, the pandemic also brought about enormous impacts on the economy and other sectors.
2. All APT countries must grapple with the multidimensional challenges brought by the pandemic. Due to differences in geographic features, population size, level of economic development, political system, and many other aspects, the pandemic is experienced differently by APT countries. Some are hit very hard, threatening the public health infrastructure into the verge of collapse, while others successfully kept the cases consistently low, at least for now. While most of the policies to mitigate the pandemic are similar, there are some variations in the policies and their implementation, as well as in the effectiveness of such measures.
3. APT leaders recognize the importance of regional and international cooperation in coping with the pandemic. At regional level, ASEAN had convened its Special ASEAN Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 that resulted in the Declaration of the Special ASEAN Summit on COVID-19 of 14 April 2020. The Declaration declared maximum commitment on a group response to the pandemic in a show of solidarity of a Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN. The ASEAN Plus Three (APT) leaders also released a Joint Statement of the Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) at the same time, boosting ASEAN's multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder, whole-of-community approach to manage the plethora of pandemic challenges and uphold APT's shared commitment to strengthen solidarity, enhance cooperation and mutual support in mitigating the pandemic and its negative socio-economic effects. Such collaboration is

crucially needed to cope with acute equitable resource distribution needs during crises situations such as the current pandemic.

4. Building on this foundation, there is a pressing need to learn from the different experiences of APT countries and to improve regional cooperation among APT countries. With this in mind, NEAT WG on ASEAN Plus Three and COVID-19 Pandemic: Country Responses and Regional Cooperation comprising experts from the APT countries gathered online on 14 July 2021 to share their knowledge, experience, and ideas on the mitigation of COVID-19 pandemic in their respective countries as well as at the regional level. The WG discussed and exchanged views on best practices as well as challenges in the efforts to cope with the pandemic. The WG further deliberated on a set of recommendations for APT cooperation in responding COVID-19 and future possible pandemic.
5. The list of NEAT participants is at [Annex](#).

II Lessons Learned

6. While acknowledging the uniqueness of the situation in each APT country, the WG agreed that there are some key best practices that are proven to be significant in ensuring the success of policies in responding COVID-19 pandemic. In general, it is recognized that pandemic preparedness of the public health system as well as other related institutions before the pandemic is a crucial factor. The swiftness and decisiveness in the early period of the pandemic also make a significant difference on the trajectory of the pandemic. Experiences with previous public health as well as other crises contributed to the readiness of countries in responding to the pandemic.
7. The WG also further stresses the importance of testing and tracking. An adequate level of testing and effective tracking are important to ensure that we know exactly the extent of the impact of the pandemic, which is crucial to develop effective measures. APT countries with strong testing and tracking are generally more successful in mitigating the public health impact of the pandemic.
8. The WG believes that institutional capacity is also a crucial factor which shapes the effectiveness of pandemic response in APT countries. Some APT countries are unable to realize the full potential of their resources and policies due to institutional problems, such as multisectoral and multilevel coordination.
9. Another impact lesson is the importance of clear and effective communication to ensure that the public has access to credible information. Transparency is the key to gain public trust, which is crucial in ensuring the effectiveness of any measures in responding to the pandemic. Without clear and effective communication, the spread of fake news and hoaxes are hindering the efforts to cope with COVID-19.

10. Several APT countries are leading in the innovative use of new technologies to support the efforts to cope with the pandemic, such as tracing applications. The use of these technologies significantly increases the effectiveness of pandemic response. The WG believes that there is potential to further develop and expand the use of these technologies through regional cooperation.
11. The WG believes that regional cooperation is essential in supporting economic recovery during and after the pandemic. It is generally recognized that the recovery appears uneven across and within countries, and subject to possible elevated risks including the spread of new variants and different paces of vaccination. Against this backdrop, regional unity and cooperation in both multilateral and bilateral formats are important to mitigate the unevenness of recovery between different APT member countries.
12. The WG acknowledges that there is a problem in the availability and the equality in the access to vaccines, which is essential in the fight against the pandemic. It is important to drive regional cooperation to ensure adequate supply, equality of access, as well as effective distribution of vaccines.

III Recommendations

13. The APT governments need to work closely together. It is important to recognize that no one is safe when not everyone is safe. The following are key recommendations to promote APT cooperation in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as possible future pandemics, and in supporting post-pandemic recovery in APT member countries:
 - 1) Strengthen the solidarity among APT countries and demonstrate political will and commitment for a stronger regional cooperation in responding to the public health as well as economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - 2) Enhance the effectiveness of existing cooperation mechanisms and frameworks such as ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund, ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework and ASEAN Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies for Public Health Emergency (RRMS).
 - 3) Develop regional cooperation in ensuring adequate supply and equal access to vaccines. APT should consider pooled procurement for COVID-19 vaccines. For the long term, APT also should consider initiatives to develop the capacity of APT member countries to produce vaccines.
 - 4) Develop regional mechanisms to help develop pandemic preparedness of APT member countries. This includes:
 - a. Expediting the establishment and operationalization of ASEAN Center for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases (ACPHEED) as a central body for public health emergencies preparedness and response.
 - b. Investing in public health capacity.

- c. Strengthening information sharing among APT member countries to ensure faster learning and implementation of best practices.
 - d. Developing protocols and procedures at the regional level, such as: (i) regional standard of transparency in pandemic situations, (ii) regional protocol on border closure and lockdowns and (iii) regional protocol on migrant people protection during pandemic.
- 5) Enhance capacity building through exchanges and visits between experts in APT member countries, establish long-term cooperative mechanisms for health personnel training, and consolidate the sustainable partnerships between APT member countries.
 - 6) Strengthen science and technology cooperation, as well as transfers on technologies proven to be essential in dealing with pandemic, such as vaccine production, oxygen concentrators, Artificial Intelligence, robotics and drones, digital and mobile technologies.

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Annex
List of Participants of the NEAT WG Meeting

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Cooperation*

14 July 2021

NEAT Country	Name of Participants
Co-Chairs	
Indonesia	Dr. Shofwan Al Banna Choiruzzad Universitas Indonesia
	Dr. Evi Fitriani Universitas Indonesia
	Dr. Yeremia Lalisang Uninversitas Indonesia
Presenters	
Brunei Darussalam	Dr. Anie Haryani Binti Abdul-Rahman Director of Department of Environmental Health Service Ministry of Health Brunei Darussalam
Cambodia	Dr. Teng Srey Deputy Director of Department of Communicable Diseases Control Ministry of Health Cambodia
China	Prof. Youlin Qiao Director of Center for Global Health Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences
Indonesia	Dr. Sartika Soesilowati Airlangga University
Japan	Prof. Onimaru Takeshi Vice Dean of School of Interdisciplinary Science and Innovation Kyushu University
Lao PDR	Ms. Haknilan Inthalath Research fellow Institute of Foreign Affairs
Malaysia	Dr. Nabila binti Nasharudin Independent researcher
	Dr. Khor Swee Kheng Visiting Fellow ISIS Malaysia
Philippines	Prof. Joefe Santarita

	Asian Center, University of the Philippines
Singapore	Dr. Lim Tai Wei Senior Research Fellow adj. National University of Singapore East Asian Institute
South Korea	Dr. Lee Jaehyon Senior Fellow Asan Institute for Policy Studies
Vietnam	Dr. Le Trung Kien Director of Security and Development Institute of Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam
Observers	
Cambodia	Ms. Var Puthneath Deputy Director of Department of International Cooperation Ministry of Health Cambodia
China	Liu Renxue
Indonesia	Dr. Edy Prasetyono Executive Director ASEAN Study Center Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Indonesia
	Ms. Carolina Tinangon Ministry of Foreign Affairs Indonesia
	Ms. Mutaaririn Nurul Hidayah NEAT Indonesia WG support
Korea	Mr. Kim Hyung Jong
Malaysia	Dr. Khor Swee Kheng Visiting Fellow ISIS Malaysia
Philippines	Dr. Celia M. Rayes NEAT Philippines Country Coordinators
	Ms. Melalyn Mantaring NEAT Philippines Focal Person
	Ms. Jean Clarisse Carlos NEAT Philippines Focal Person
	Ms. Tina Ortiz Supervising research Specialist, PIDS