

*(Draft Prepared by NEAT Korea)*

# **Report of the NEAT Working Group Meeting “East Asia Cooperation and Human Security in the Post COVID-19 Era”**

**23rd July 2021**

## **Rationale**

The COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 requires multifaced and multidimensional response measures for its devastating and complicated nature. It resulted in more than 250 million confirmed cases and 4.5 million deaths in nearly every country on earth as of now (mid-August). To prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus, most countries had to close their borders and even block the inter-regional movements of people within a country. The world of so-called interdependence and globalization quickly gave its way to a world of nationalism and selfishness and thus, the practice of cooperation between and among countries worked only in a limited manner.

From the beginning, lack of PCR testing kits and medical instruments seriously undermined the capacity of many developing (and even developed) countries to cope with the situation and still paucity of vaccination prevails most regional countries except for a handful of vaccine affluent states. Under such grave threats of public health and human lives, huge negative impacts of the pandemic readily spread out to every important aspects of human life. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that the life of no single human being on earth was absolutely free from the devastating impacts of the pandemic.

What is more grave is that biological/medical experts agree that COVID-19 will turn into an endemic and outbreak repeatedly with numerous variants. Recent surge of confirmed cases in various parts of the world marked by the spread of the more infectious Delta variant implies that the pandemic will not be over and we should hammer out the ways to coexist with the COVID-19.

The efforts and cooperation of ASEAN+3 countries towards the construction of an East Asian community (EAC) have been carried out in various fields such as economy, socio-culture, and political security, bringing about notable achievements. Restricted by the acute power politics between the Northeast Asian states, non-traditional security issues, instead of traditional ones, have attracted increasing attentions from the mid-2000s. In 2005, the leaders of the APT shared concerns on the various non-traditional security challenges including natural disasters, terrorism, maritime security, transnational crime, health security (in line with the outbreak of SARS and avian influenza), and energy security. They acknowledged that the APT framework was a nice platform for the cooperations to counter the challenges.

The Corona crisis, again, has alerted East Asian countries to pay increased attention to human security issues. The theme of the working group meeting, e.g., “East Asia Cooperation and Human Security in the Post Covid-19 Era” is timely and appropriately reflects the urgent needs of the times. The lessons we have learned from the past experiences of struggling against the COVID-19 pandemic made it clear that the pandemic requires multilevel - local, national, regional, and global - response measures and that the ASEAN+3 can provide a nice cooperative mechanism for East Asia to enhance human security in the post COVID-19 era.

## On Discussion

Participants of the Working Group suggested sharp observations, interesting analyses and discussions, and insightful policy recommendations to cope with the pandemic. Since the corona pandemic has had a significant impact on such a wide array of human life and social relations, each speaker selected a variety of topics. They range from conceptual bases of human security in the ASEAN and East Asian context to the superpower competition in the region, economic impasse, and gender discrimination, etc.

Building on an Asian aphorism that 'a crisis is an opportunity', a viewpoint that the pandemic crisis is a great opportunity to revive the idea of pursuing East Asian community, which has faded into an old-fashioned ideal amid the recent highly acute regional superpower competitions and strong nationalism, has

suggested. It also views the pandemic as a chance to realize the ideal of human security, i.e., “freedom from want” and “freedom from fear.” Discussants expressed their sympathy for the viewpoint.

The WG members acknowledged that regional cooperation is essential in responding to the threats of the virus, encouraging economic recovery, mitigating the adversities of the socially under-privileged people. Due to differences in geographic features, population size, level of economic development, political system, medical infrastructure, ITC facility, 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 some others successfully keep the confirmed cases consistently low, at least for now. While policies to mitigate the pandemic are similar, implementations as well as the effectiveness of policies varies. Generally, the least developed, poorest, and weakest countries tend to be affected in severest manner.

As impact varies considerably from country to country, it also varies within a country from sector to sector. The poorer and more vulnerable social groups tend to be severely affected. For example, female tend to be affected more negatively than male. Job security and income, double burden, education, and gender based violence, as well as various mental and physical health problems undermine female's quality of life further.

International hardship such as the strategic competition between China and the United States will have various effects on East Asia's response and preparedness to pandemic. Even in the serious situation of the Corona crisis, the international community may face the problem of leadership, which makes it difficult to respond to other crises facing mankind, such as economy, climate change, and has the potential to further expand the damage from them.

The APT governments need to work closely together. It is important to recognize that no one is safe when not everyone is safe. The followings 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. Employing the concept of human security will play a guiding roles not only in looking for effective responses to the virus, but in paving the ways for enhancing readiness to future pandemic.

## Recommendations

It is acknowledged that the cooperative spirit of ASEAN+3 needs to be revived and applied to engage in transcending state-centric and nationalist power politics and to enhance mutual understanding and common response. Building on the strengthened solidarity among APT countries, political will and commitment for stronger regional cooperation in responding to the public health as well as economic crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic need to be demonstrated.

In order to enhance the effectiveness of East Asian states' response to the lasting pandemic, existing cooperative mechanisms must enhance their capacity to protect the human security of East Asian people. Mechanisms ensuring adequate supply and equal access to vaccine and sharing medical instruments need to be installed and the investment in the public health capacity of the ASEAN countries are necessary. From a longer perspective, East Asia needs to develop its own regional institutions, processes and protocols to protect and respond rapidly to future pandemics.

Achieving such objectives are precipitated by

- strengthening information sharing among APT member countries to ensure faster learning and implementation of best practices of the successful cases.
- upgrading 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).
- 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.
- enhancing preparedness for future pandemic by

- establishing a framework of institutional readiness for APT countries to interface with WHO and International Red Cross in the wake of future pandemics.

- trying to link up all national Red Crosses and Red Crescents in APT.

- expediting the establishment of ASEAN Regional Center On Public Health Emergencies And Emerging Diseases as a central body for pandemic preparedness.

While ASEAN officially adopted the notion of human security in developing the institutional mechanisms to cope with the pandemic, ASEAN+3 has not yet. For that purpose, WG suggest that APT need to:

- acknowledge that current challenges of COVID-19 pandemic as a human security issue. It should be recognized that the complexity and interconnected nature of the pandemic require human security approach for further aligned regional responses and prevention measures by the ATP processes.

- intensify efforts to enhance adequate financing to mitigate the health, economic, social, political, security and psychological impacts, which diverts recourses from arms and military spending to healthcare, social services and peacebuilding.

- set up an “APT reserve of essential medical supplies”

- task the APT Ministers related to human security to develop the “APT Human Security Initiative” to ensure non-discrimination, transparency, respect for human dignity, climate commitment. Special attention should be paid to the needs and vulnerabilities of the underprivileged such as women, indigenous peoples, refugees, stateless, and asylum seekers, etc.