
COVID-19 POLICY MEMO

TO: FOREIGN MINISTERS OF ASEAN AND THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE ASEAN SECRETARIAT

FROM: ASEAN INSTITUTES OF STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (ASEAN-ISIS)

SUBJECT: ASEAN COOPERATION IN FIGHTING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, IN REGIONAL AND CROSS-BORDER ASPECTS

DATE: 9 APRIL 2020

A. WE RECOGNISE:

- How the COVID-19 pandemic has rapidly swept across the globe and our region with rising numbers of infections and deaths in many countries;
- How ASEAN governments have sought to respond urgently at the national level to the health crisis;
- How measures to cushion the economic impacts and improve social cohesion are also needed, and are emerging from some ASEAN countries;
- How ASEAN has inaugurated our ASEAN Community since 2015 to be, amongst other goals, economically integrated and a Community of peoples.

B. IN RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, ASEAN SHOULD:

- Reinforce and deepen its commitment to ASEAN Community in a spirit of cooperation and solidarity;
- Seek each ASEAN member to increase the transparency of their national circumstances as a basis for ASEAN-wide collective efforts and encourage assistance, within the limits of resources;
- Establish measures to address cross-border flows and interdependencies;
- Extend assistance and the sharing of experiences and approaches, including information regarding the flow of people across borders, especially to protect vulnerable groups;
- Develop dialogue and deepen partnerships with key partners in the region
- Begin to assess lessons learnt from COVID-19 and look in the longer term towards strengthening and revitalizing public health care services

C. WE OFFER THESE RECOMMENDATIONS:

To address: (1) Immediate needs on implementing health measures; (2) Essential cross border issues and supply chains; (3) Increasing exchange of information and understanding of efforts taken by member states at the national level; and (4) Institutional needs for ASEAN dialogue and cooperation.

(1) HELPING WITH HEALTH MEASURES AND IMPLEMENTATION

1.1 **Testing must be a Priority:** More accurate assessments of COVID-19 infections are essential and mass testing should be a priority. ASEAN should aim for the entire region to have sufficient levels of testing as a basis for national and regional policymaking. To assist with this, test kits that are reliable in quality and sufficient in quantity must be made available.

1.2 **Assistance for Testing:** Some ASEAN member states and partners currently have comparatively sufficient test kits. Brunei, Singapore, and Viet Nam, have already made donations of test kits. Some ASEAN countries are also receiving test kits from China and other donors. Assistance and donations to other ASEAN member states facing shortages are to be encouraged, commensurate with ASEAN community and solidarity and within the limits of their resources.

1.3 **Sharing Infection Prevention and Control Experiences:** ASEAN countries need to exchange their successful lessons in combating the disease, particularly detection, quarantine, and treatment measures to enable robust actions at home and to prevent continual transmission among regional countries.

1.4 **Sharing Know-How for Contact Tracing:** Know-how for contact tracing should also be shared. One example is Singapore's contact tracing app [TraceTogether](#) that traces through mobile phones through Bluetooth. Using technology can help other ASEAN members with contact tracing among their citizens, given the widespread nature of mobile devices in Southeast Asia. As more members develop tracing capabilities, the effort can be scaled up for cross-border and ASEAN-wide, regional tracing.

(2) CROSS BORDER AND SUPPLY CHAIN ISSUES

2.1 **Communicating Cross Border Restrictions:** All ASEAN member states are currently implementing national measures that restrict cross border travel for persons and also for some goods. As conditions change over time, additional and tighter measures may be needed or eased. Given the high flows of cross-border movement of people across ASEAN, these national measures should be effectively communicated. Where possible, these should be consulted with immediate neighbours. Where clarifications are requested or changes are made, the implementing government should give notice and respond as soon as possible. Such efforts are especially for land crossings where there are heavy volumes of movement.

2.2 **Repatriation of Foreign Workers:** There are many ASEAN citizens working abroad and, if they so choose, they should be assisted to return to their home country. They should be accorded fair treatment and due protection irrespective of whether they are documented or undocumented workers. There may be ASEAN citizens in 3rd countries outside of ASEAN, where their home country does not have an embassy or consulate, and fellow ASEAN countries with such representation should be encouraged to lend their assistance, within limits of their capacity.

2.3 **Special Attention to Refugees and Displaced Persons:** Settlement facilities for refugees and displaced persons are at high risk of COVID-19 transmission. There are also asylum seekers and refugees who are highly mobile and off the grid. Special efforts should be made by relevant authorities to assess and stem the spread of the virus. Authorities should extend testing to these groups of people and consider opening up public healthcare amenities to all undocumented persons for the duration of this pandemic. Diseases do not distinguish if one is a citizen or not.

2.4 Supply Chains for Medical and other Essential Supplies: The supply chains for essential medical equipment such as face masks and ventilators should be protected. Export bans to a fellow ASEAN member state of such items and their intermediate materials and inputs must be avoided. Instead, where the exporting country may face a shortage of such essentials, with due consideration to domestic needs, an arrangement should be reached for equitable sharing and win-win outcomes.

2.5 Increasing the Pool of Essential Resources: Further efforts should be made to increase resources of medical and other essentials. Vietnam has begun producing another variant of a test kit and Singapore is trying to develop test kits that will be much faster and simpler to deploy. Where appropriate, joint sourcing can be considered and/or joint production by two or more ASEAN member states, including switching over manufacturing lines for the production of these essential products.

2.6 Other Essential Exports/ Imports: National export control measures as part of emergencies responses among ASEAN should be implemented in a way that the supply chains for food and other essential goods could be secured and allowed to function. The needs of smaller and more import-dependent countries should be recognized and protected.

2.7 Involving the Private Sector: While governments must act and lead, they should also endeavour to collaborate with the private sector. Especially on points 2.4 to 2.6, their capacity and knowledge in production, logistics and other necessary skills can complement government capacities.

(3) INCREASING EXCHANGE OF INFORMATION AND UNDERSTANDING

3.1 Sharing Information: As tests increase in quantity and accuracy, ASEAN member states should share and publish transmission and other data in a timely manner. This can be continually updated in the special video conference meetings held among ASEAN Health Ministers. Efforts should be made to harmonize standards and levels of information so that the situation across the region can be better assessed and policies can be made based on such information. For example, in counting the numbers of cases, ASEAN member states and their partners will have to agree on whether to count all who tested positive or only those who are admitted to hospitals for treatment.

3.2 Screenings at Border Crossings: COVID-19 screening standards should be established and harmonized at a high standard; this effort can assist particularly to prepare for cross border travel to restart within ASEAN and with its partner countries. Authorities should confer as progress is made towards accurate, faster and easier test kits for border crossings.

3.3 Sharing Best Practices, Present and Future: Efforts should be made to identify, share and learn from best practices in health policies and its implementation. Dialogue should include policies that impact the most vulnerable, especially the poor and the elderly. A “menu” of recommendations should be shared by relatively successful countries. It is also an opportunity for ASEAN states to build up their healthcare systems and make them adequate, accessible and affordable.

3.4 Dialogue on Economic and Financial Interventions: As each ASEAN member state implements monetary and fiscal responses, these efforts should be discussed in view of the regional interdependencies and the possible reaction in global financial markets. There must be a regional approach in mitigating the economic fallout, to protect and strengthen the ASEAN market. Especially with many Asian countries facing the prospect of recession.

(4) INSTITUTIONAL NEEDS FOR INCREASED DIALOGUE AND COOPERATION

4.1 **Showing Leadership:** ASEAN governments should demonstrate greater leadership and cohesion during this crisis while drawing on regional and international expertise. Cooperation at both the leadership and senior official level needs to be clearly communicated to all stakeholders, especially ASEAN's citizens. They need to know and see that collaborative efforts are in motion and that Southeast Asia as a region is in this together.

4.2 **Deepening Dialogues by Virtual Means:** ASEAN should utilize appropriate means by telecommunications to allow for virtual dialogues that are more frequent and can go deeper than in-person meetings. These must include all levels of leaders, policymakers and officials, and all ASEAN member states, with immediate assistance where there are infrastructure gaps.

4.3 **Preparing for the ASEAN Summit:** With the ASEAN Summit postponed until June, the ASEAN community committees and coordinating council should use this time to develop substantive plans to demonstrate political will and practical cooperation and assistance – not only for the health issues but on the economic and other dimensions.

4.4 **Enhancing ASEAN Plus Partnerships:** ASEAN will do well to work not only amongst its members but to organize itself to initiate and lead cooperation with its dialogue partners. This can be done through existing arrangements, including ASEAN + 3 and RCEP. China, Japan and South Korea have each taken early and relatively effective efforts to address the outbreak and have manufacturing capabilities and capacity that can increase the availability of medical and other essential products. These countries, together with Australia and New Zealand, have deep interdependencies with ASEAN in the movement of people and in supply chains and should find ways to work together more closely.

4.5. **Expanding Wider Regional Cooperation:** ASEAN should initiate cooperation and support from other partners through existing ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the ADMM Plus and the EAS. This should help strengthen regional capacity in pandemic response and promote sustainable and resilient health systems.

D. CONCLUSION

The ASEAN-ISIS Network recognises the urgent need for increased cooperation and coordination among ASEAN-Member States to mitigate the fallout of the COVID-19 Pandemic. While national measures are the primary response, ASEAN can supplement this with regional efforts for dialogue, exchange and cooperation. This memo highlights the immediate areas for ASEAN collaboration, especially cross-border measures for ASEAN peoples and for essential supply chains. We have also identified the ways in which increased dialogue and the exchange of information can strengthen ASEAN and boost cooperation with regional partners.

ASEAN has not only endured past crises but emerged stronger and more integrated. By rising to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic in practical and essential ways, ASEAN can move forward as a strengthened community and a leader for the wider region to serve the peoples of the region.