**The ASEAN Response to Covid-19 and the Way Forward**

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The World Health Organization (WHO) [declared](https://www.vifindia.org/article/2020/july/30/asean-response-to-covid-19-pandemic-an-assessment) the outbreak of the novel Coronavirus, a global health emergency in the People’s Republic of China on January 2020. Southeast Asia was one of the first regions affected due to its close geographical proximity and business travel, tourism, and supply chain links to China. In fact, the very first confirmed case outside China was detected in Thailand, on January 13, who was a Chinese woman traveler from Wuhan and it was sometime afterwards that Chinese government officially announced spread of this virus in its city of Wuhan capital of Hubei province.

Larger, developed nations have generally had the resources and infrastructure to deal with the pandemic and provide a sustainable solution for recovery. However, Less-developed countries, including emerging ASEAN nations (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam) began the crisis at a disadvantage, and COVID-19 exposed and often heightened their misery.

**The ASEAN response to COVID-19**

ASEAN countries were extremely quick to take remedial measures for checking the spread of this deadly disease, and although the pandemic hit the Asian region first, its countries—including emerging ASEAN nations —have to date [recorded](https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/asia-pacific/reimagining-emerging-asean-in-the-wake-of-covid-19) significantly lower transmission and fatality rates per capita than other regions due to their quick responses.

As a regional organization ASEAN also stepped in to work for a joint and coordinated response in meeting the challenges posed by COVID-19. ASEAN not only raised the awareness levels of its member countries but also liaised with international organizations and other countries to [respond](https://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2003/pr34/en/) at multiple levels for addressing the problems posed by the virus.

As a Chair of ASEAN for the current year, Vietnam led the efforts of the ASEAN nations in forging a response to the outbreak. It was as early as 15th February this year when the ASEAN [Chairman’s Statement on an ASEAN Collective Response to the Outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019](https://asean.org/chairmans-statement-asean-collective-response-outbreak-coronavirus-disease-2019/) was issued. The statement expressed deep concerns over the spread of COVID-19, and recognized it as a “public health emergency of international concern”, as declared by the WHO. The statement emphasized on extending help to countries around the globe in their fight against the spread of COVID-19 and also provide humanitarian support to China in the form of supplying masks and other medical facilities.

India’s [“Look East” policy](https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09289#metadata_info_tab_contents) which lays emphasis on beefing up cooperation with ASEAN in a diverse and extensive manner is playing a vital role in curbing the pandemic in the ASEAN regionand India has done its bit to help the nations to effectively fight with the Pandemic and [extended its support](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-announces-1-million-aid-to-asean-covid-19-response-fund/articleshow/79207359.cms?from=mdr)by donating $1 million aid to ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund at the 17th ASEAN-India Summit held virtually and affirmed India’s resolve to stand with the bloc in research and production of vaccines at reasonable prices.

Due to its previous experiences dealing with the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the avian and swine flues, ASEAN members take pandemic threats very seriously because oftheir devastating health and economic impact and cooperation with its external partners has gone a long way in dealing with COVID-19.

**Lessons to take from effective handling of other health emergencies in the past**

ASEAN made unprecedented efforts to coordinate and standardize their campaigns against SARS. The Health Minister of ASEAN nations together with the regional support of each other in their various meetings[issued](https://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2003/pr34/en/) a joint statement to combat the spread of SARS.A framework action plan was adopted by the Ministers which highlighted four priority areas such as guidelines for international travel; ASEAN SARS containment information network; capacity building for outbreak alert and response and public education and information. The Ministers also [requested](http://www.china.org.cn/english/international/66698.htm) the dialogue partners of ASEAN, WHO, and other international and regional organizations to mobilize financial and human resources and technical support in order to implement the Action Plan.

A special ASEAN leaders’ meeting in Bangkok was held to address the SARS problem. The meetings agreed on concrete measures to contain the spread of SARS, including the pre-departure screening of travelers and the sharing of information to trace people who may have come into contact with those already infected. They agreed to have follow-up meetings of officials and experts and had set up of an ad hoc ministerial-level task force to monitor enforcement of the decisions taken. Though implementation by some countries was initially weak in some areas because of capacity inadequacies but there was [strong sense of determination](https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/by-design-or-accident/fast-sars-action-shows-asean-not-just-a-talk-shop/BAA3B4806CC568F3F51D17B9599BE95E) on the part of all members to get this right at any cost.

**The Way Forward for ASEAN to deal with the Pandemic**

Southeast Asian economies in the late 1990s could attain loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and strived for economic recovery. However, in the present scenario, the international market may not be ready to support ASEAN’s growth and economy sufficiently. So, it is imperative for ASEAN economies to come together.Although Southeast Asian foreign ministers have discussed the setting up of a regional fund to respond to the pandemic but the fund is hardly going to be enough for the problem. The governments of different member states need to be more vigilant and adopt policies that are cost efficient to help in flattening the curve and best suited for the respective member state. Also, once ASEAN’s more medically equipped members manage to contain their outbreaks, they should start [extending help](https://www.globalasia.org/v15no2/focus/aseans-covid-19-response-why-minorities-and-the-most-vulnerable-matter_dominique-virgilroberto-lie) to other ASEAN neighbors who does not have as good health infrastructure and economy as them.

The optimal way for ASEAN to deal with the pandemic is to stand together and respond collectively as a regional bloc.To improve ASEAN’s response to the pandemic, ASEAN needs to prioritize it’s focus and firstly among these is regional reprioritization. ASEAN Member States need to prioritize the right to health and social protection, or security, for everyone, including the most marginalized and vulnerable. Reforming the system of social protection and incorporating it into the economic recovery plan post-COVID is essential to reduce the increasing poverty rate as a result of the pandemic. Learning from best practices in other countries is also important, especially in forming policies that include wider social and economic opportunities.

Secondly, they need to establish more targeted consultation and co-operation on public health policy, such as the regulations for quarantine, lockdowns or social movement restrictions and other related elements. This should be facilitated among ASEAN member states to further contain the pandemic and stop the spread to other regions within ASEAN. Consultations on public health policy to narrow the gap in health services among member states, and to better enhance the preparedness for future pandemics, should also be coordinated.

Third is reutilization of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) along with other relevant experts to monitor and advise member states on whether their medical, food and other needs have been distributed equally to ensure that no one is left behind. AICHR can also monitor gradual improvements made by member states to the right to health, such as minimizing the gap between healthcare capacity and preparedness for pandemics, while also improving access to healthcare services for all. As mentioned above, harmonization of AICHR work and existing health mechanisms in ASEAN can narrow the gaps in the fulfillment of the right to health among member states.

Lastly, the ASEAN Business Advisory Council can partner in the regional response to “engage the private sectors in delivering essential services and supplies and to support displaced workers in their value chains.”At the same time, the ASEAN Business Advisory Council and the AICHR can co-operate to provide guidelines to ensure the fulfillment of the UN Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights and other international human rights standards. It is highly important that the efforts are well-coordinated and integrated among all ASEAN member states and the post-multilateralism situation that happened in a global level will not occur in Southeast Asia and all Member States should work hand-in-hand.