

ASEAN solidarity and response in the face of COVID-19

Two things are clear as we approach mid-year; that COVID-19 has irreversibly transformed the world and that, consequently, there is a long road ahead to recovery. With Eid observed quietly amid physical distancing, anxiety has crept up in the region over the uncertainty of when life can return to normal, but also with timid hope that, with the region so far managing to avoid the scale of catastrophe observed elsewhere, it can now gradually prepare for the new normal.

The year 2020 remains important for the region, although not in the way it has now turned out. The mid-term review of the implementation of the 2025 ASEAN Community Blueprints is being conducted this year, an important exercise to assess progress, identify challenges and address implementation gaps.

The region also expects to see the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which would be the world's largest trade agreement involving almost every key economy in Asia, boosting the region's global economic standing.

However, the region now also finds itself faced with the unprecedented task of addressing the health and socio-economic costs of COVID-19. ASEAN member states must juggle between managing public health risks and their respective economies until an effective vaccine or treatment is found, while still having to keep in step with ASEAN's community-building and regional integration agenda.

With more than 89,000 total confirmed cases and 2,700 deaths as of May 30, the region seems to be doing better relative to other hotspots around the world. The real number, however, is likely to be higher. The economic impact will likewise be significant, with the region expected to grow by just a meagre 1 percent compared to 4.6 percent in 2019. In addition, millions are expected to lose their jobs, and for a region with a large informal sector and where social protection is not evenly developed, the costs on livelihood will be high.

ASEAN member states have responded to COVID-19 globally, regionally and nationally. And while some states have taken action more swiftly than others, responses have been introduced at unprecedented speed and magnitude. The quick response and information sharing among ASEAN health officials, robust collaboration between ASEAN and the World Health Organization and engagement with external partners, such as the ASEAN Plus Three, the European Union and the United States, proved critical during all stages of the outbreak, including through exchange of timely data and information on prevention, detection, control and response measures.

On the economic front, the region was prompt to jointly commit to keep the market open, ensure the normal flow of trade and supply chain connectivity, particularly for essential products, and work together to mitigate the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19. Such demonstration of regional commitment is crucial in the absence of a coordinated global response and in light of the pressure to turn inward. The commitment to working together was echoed at the sectoral level, particularly with those hardest hit or at risk such as the tourism, labor and agriculture sectors.

For ASEAN, the task at hand is to translate these commitments into concrete actions including through the development of a post-pandemic recovery plan, as called for by leaders at the Special ASEAN Summit on COVID-19 on April 14. Such plans will need to address the steps needed to reopen the economy and

society, recover from both the health and economic crises and work toward long-term resilience and competitiveness.

The early stages of reopening would be critical. Information sharing and coordination is imperative to ensure that efforts to resume economic and social activities are coordinated with health and safety protocols in place. This is also where regional coordination can add value given the level of integration in ASEAN and the possibility to better coordinate on border management, such as gradual easing to allow movement of people.

For the recovery stage, those hardest hit may need extra help, such as micro, small and medium enterprises, workers who have lost their jobs and those in the most affected sectors such as travel, tourism and hospitality.

On the demand side, it is important to restore business and consumer confidence as swiftly as possible.

The need for broad stimulus measures will continue, and this may be more difficult for economies with limited fiscal space. To this end, support from multilateral and regional development banks, as well as domestic financial institutions to ensure liquidity in the financial markets, will help shoulder the burden.

Over the longer term, much work will need to be done on strengthening the health systems, social protection and insurance, digital infrastructure — both hard and soft, and a rethinking of how we have valued our essential sectors and workers thus far.

As a consequence of physical and social distancing, the pandemic has, in turn, accelerated the adoption of technologies into all aspects of our lives, offsetting — at least partially — the productivity loss from travel and movement restrictions.

Digital technologies will continue to play an important role in the recovery process and beyond. Nevertheless, we have seen that digital technologies can augment but not replace human and social interactions. The continuing use of digital technologies further underscores the urgency to address the digital divide across and within ASEAN member states, in terms of infrastructure, skills, or rules and regulations. At the same time, this raises the imperative of addressing the concerns of data owners and technology users over privacy, security and ethics.

In sum, the pandemic has brought two things into realization. First, that effectiveness shall not be pursued at the expense of resilience and sustainability. Second, in an interconnected world, a global crisis requires global cooperation.

Tackling the pandemic and its socioeconomic impact demands solidarity and action at all levels. The global and regional community will need to work together; and not just governments, but also the private sector, research communities and civil societies.

This is the time to strengthen multilateral cooperation by proactively working on the necessary reform and leveraging global expertise and mechanisms as appropriate in the recovery efforts while placing our people and their well-being at the core. To this, ASEAN has much to offer.