In Focus: ASEAN’s Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has presented ASEAN with an unprecedented challenge and been disrupting almost the region’s economic and social activities. With a number of ASEAN Member States (AMS) still seeing a surge in new cases, the impact continues to be felt across various sectors and industries such as tourism, transport, and also food industries. While a number of national policy responses have been introduced by AMS, collectively ASEAN also recognises the urgency for region-wide response to address the issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As highlighted in the Declaration of the Special ASEAN Summit on COVID-19, it is critical for ASEAN to develop a coherent, multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder and whole-of-ASEAN Community response to the pandemic. To do so, the ASEAN Leaders has outlined the areas that need to be addressed collectively by ASEAN in the declaration, which include the action plan to strengthen the public health sectors and emergency response in ASEAN; mitigate the economic and social impact; and also strengthen cross-pillar and cross-sectoral coordination in developing a concrete and comprehensive action plan and policy responses that will be reported to the Leaders at the 36th ASEAN Summit.

About the Bulletin

ASEAN for Business is a bulletin published by the Enterprise and Stakeholder Engagement Division of the ASEAN Secretariat.

This bimonthly bulletin provides quick updates on specific topics related to the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) for businesses operating in the region.

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1 Data as provided by the ASEAN BioDiaspora Virtual Centre as of 20 May 2020 at 2:00 PM (GMT+8).
Strengthening the public health sector

One key component of the ASEAN response to COVID-19 is to strengthen cooperation in the health sector, focusing mainly on technical exchanges, information sharing, and updates on policy-related measures in responding to COVID-19. This was implemented through the operation of the ASEAN Emergency Operations Centre Network for public health emergencies (ASEAN EOC Network) as the coordination centre among AMS crisis centres and the ASEAN BioDiDiopa Virtual Centre that does the big data analytics and visualisation. The latter complements the national risk assessments, readiness and response planning efforts. Most of these data and information are available and updated regularly on a dedicated page on the ASEAN website.

Mitigating the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic affects many sectors with tourism, travel/transportation, and manufacturing being the most disrupted sectors. Moreover, the global and regional supply chains are also affected and disrupting the flow of medical supplies, food, and medical equipment, which are crucial during the time of a pandemic. To ease the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic, the AMS Governments have introduced measures covering stimulus packages, financial assistance, capacity building, and tax exemption targeting both businesses and individual citizens alike.

Following the statement made by the ASEAN Economic Ministers (AEM) in response to the outbreak of COVID-19, effort is underway to develop a concrete plan of action to implement the commitments highlighted in the statement. The plan of action will aim to keep ASEAN markets open, ensuring the smooth flow of essential goods including food, medicines, medical equipment and essential supplies, as well as to strengthen supply chain connectivity in the region.

At the same time, the ASEAN Ministers of Agriculture and Forestry (AMAF) is also working to implement the commitment to improve storage, preservation, transport and distribution technologies and infrastructure to reduce food insecurity, food nutrient loss and waste.

As part of the commitment, AMAF is also working to continuously implement effective and transparent information sharing through the ASEAN Food Security Information System (AFSIS) and ASEAN Plus Three Rice Emergency Rice Reserve (APTEER).

Aside from the focus on supply chain, other sectoral bodies under the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) are also working closely to develop and implement follow-up actions based on the ministerial statements. In the tourism sector, for example, the ASEAN National Tourism Organisations (NTOs) are working to implement clear policies and measures to bolster the confidence in the tourism industry, and developing the post-pandemic recovery plan for tourism sector.

Ensuring a coherent, multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder and whole-of-ASEAN Community approach

Understanding the interconnectedness of multiple elements of disruptions caused by the COVID-19 requires ASEAN to strengthen its cross-sectoral and cross pillar coordination, especially, to ensure that all sectoral bodies’ follow up action would be aligned and to avoid unnecessary duplications. Failure to do so will further complicate ASEAN’s efforts to recover from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recognising the importance of a multi-stakeholder, multi-sectoral, and comprehensive approach to effectively respond to COVID-19 pandemic, the ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group on Public Health Emergency (ACCWG-PHE) was established as the main platform that coordinates ASEAN’s overall response to public health emergencies. The working group aims to enhance ASEAN’s responsiveness to act promptly and effectively in the control of the disease through multi-sectoral and whole of ASEAN Community engagement. Supporting the ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC)’s role as the main monitoring body, the ASEAN Secretariat has also been tasked to serve as the regional coordination hub that facilitate networking and exchanging of timely information among ASEAN bodies. To this end, the ASEAN Secretariat is also facilitating input and recommendations from the business community, through the ASEAN Business Advisory Council and its Joint Business Council members.

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Recent Updates

The ASEAN Ministers for Agriculture and Forestry Issued a Joint Statement to Ensure Food Security in ASEAN Amidst the COVID-19 Situation

Deeply concerned with the potential impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on ASEAN's cooperation in food, agriculture and forestry and the disruption of food supply chain in the region, the ASEAN Ministers on Agriculture and Forestry (AMAF) issued a Joint Statement on 15 April 2020 reaffirming commitment to ensure food security, food safety and nutrition in the region during the pandemic. The AMAF pledged, among others, to minimise disruption in the regional food supply chain by working closely together to ensure that markets are kept open and transportation of agricultural and food products are facilitated.

17th Meeting of the ASEAN Trade Facilitation Joint Consultative Committee

The ASEAN Trade Facilitation Joint Consultative Committee (ATF-JCC) convened its 17th Meeting through videoconference facility on 25-26 April 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic was the key focus of the meeting, with the ATF-JCC reaffirmed its commitment to uphold supply chain connectivity for essential goods in the region, especially medical supplies, foods, and medical equipment. Additionally, the meeting also discussed the progress resulting from the trial run of the E-Platform for engagement with the Private Sector, which is expected to be launched in August 2020.

ASEAN Digital Trade Standards and Conformance Working Group Held Its Inaugural Meeting

The ASEAN Digital Trade Standards and Conformance Working Group (DTSCWG) convened its inaugural meeting on 28 April 2020 through videoconference. The Working Group was established in 2019 as a new working group under the ASEAN Consultative Committee on Standards and Quality (ACCSQ) to enable the standardisation of digital trade and e-commerce in ASEAN. At its first meeting, the Working Group commenced the discussion on the development of its work programme.

ASEAN Labour Ministers Issued a Joint Statement to Address the Impact of COVID-19 on Labour and Employment

Acknowledging the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ASEAN labour and workers, the ASEAN Labour Ministers issued a Joint Statement on 14 May 2020, that highlights the commitment to strengthen cooperation that includes safeguarding worker rights, protection of migrant workers, ensuring the facilitation of all workers access to health care services, enhancing cooperation with tripartite partners, and also to share best practices and lessons learnt among AMS.

ASEAN Senior Economic Officials Gathered to Discuss Progress of the ASEAN Economic Cooperation

ASEAN Senior Economic Officials Meeting (SEOM) held its video conference meeting on the 27-28 April 2020 to discuss progress of priority economic deliverables under the 2020 Viet Nam’s chairmanship of ASEAN. The meeting also discussed next steps to follow up the ASEAN Leaders Declaration at the Special Summit on COVID-19 that tasked the AEM and SEOM to develop a concrete plan to preserve supply chain connectivity amidst the current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. The SEOM also held its consultations with Dialogue Partners back-to-back with the meeting.

ASEAN Coordinating Committee on E-Commerce (ACCEC) Video Conference Meeting

The ACCEC Video Conference Meeting was held on 19 May 2020. The meeting discussed progress in the development of the ASEAN Digital Integration Index (ADII), and the progress of the ASEAN Agreement on Electronic Commerce ratification process. The meeting also agreed to organize “ASEAN Online Day” on 8 August to raise public awareness on cross-border e-commerce transactions and to promote consumer trust in e-commerce.
### Upcoming Events

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<td>The Special AEM’s Virtual Conference Meeting On COVID-19 Response</td>
<td>Virtual, 4 June 2020</td>
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<td>The 9th ASEAN Coordinating Committee on Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (ACCMSME) Meeting and Related Meetings</td>
<td>Virtual, 15-17 June 2020</td>
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<td>The 2nd Digital Trade Standards and Conformance Working Group Meeting</td>
<td>Virtual, 16 June 2020</td>
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<td>The 49th ASEAN Senior Transport Officials Meeting (STOM)</td>
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<td>The 31st Prepared Foodstuff Product Working Group (PFPWG)</td>
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<td>The 62nd ASEAN Working Group Intellectual Property Cooperation (AWGIPC) Meeting</td>
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