
CARI Briefings: COVID-19 Economic Recovery Plan Series
How Can ASEAN Bounce Back:
Fostering Public Health Safety and Economic Resilience for a Borderless Community in
ASEAN
Media Release
(For immediate release)

Effective responses toward COVID-19 pandemic require country assessment of needs and priorities while ASEAN needs to strengthen the mechanism for immediate and accurate exchange of information

Kuala Lumpur, 4 August 2020 - CIMB ASEAN Research Institute (CARI) hosted the CARI Briefings webinar under its COVID-19 Economic Recovery Plan Series, titled “How Can ASEAN Bounce Back: Fostering Public Health Safety and Economic Resilience for a Borderless Community in ASEAN.” The session featured Datuk Dr. Noor Hisham Abdullah, Director-General of Health Malaysia.

Moderated by Tan Sri Dr. Munir Majid, Chairman of CARI, the discussion centred on Malaysia’s management of the COVID-19 pandemic, the country’s cooperation with ASEAN and the international community in addressing COVID-19, as well as how to strike a balance between public health safety and the survival of the economy.

1. Each country needs to assess and mitigate public, economic and social risks of COVID-19 impact

Dr. Noor Hisham noted that, “As each country in ASEAN is confronted by varying degrees of preparedness and challenges, in-country responses will have to take priority during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each country should assess its risk and rapidly implement the necessary measures at the appropriate scale to reduce both COVID-19 transmission as well as the economic, public and social impacts,” said Dr. Noor Hisham.

For example, Malaysia opted for targeted testing that focused on high-risk groups instead of the mass-testing. New daily COVID-19 cases in Malaysia came from being the highest in ASEAN within the range of hundreds back in March and April, to within single digits since early July. With the daily cases under control, Malaysia currently has the fourth-highest cumulative number of cases in ASEAN, behind Indonesia, the Philippines and Singapore.

“The Malaysian government gave space to the professionals to drive the fight and propose measures against the COVID-19 pandemic. Malaysia has also been fortunate in having Datuk Dr. Noor Hisham who leads a team of informed professionals dedicated to the fight against COVID-19 to secure our lives and to save our livelihoods. His sure hand and reassuring voice have given

the Malaysian nation a sense of comfort in these dark and challenging times,” commented Tan Sri Munir.

2. A successful COVID-19 policy requires an engaged community

“There are no shortcuts out of this pandemic. An empowered, engaged community that takes individual behaviour measures in the interest of each other is very critical to bring this pandemic under control. As the widespread effect of this pandemic goes beyond borders, by extension, cooperation at the regional level must be built upon consultation with regional constituents. In this case, we in Malaysia have been working with our ASEAN neighbours to curb the spread of the pandemic,” commented Dr. Noor Hisham.

At the regional level, the respective ASEAN members were able to come together and exchange insights in ensuring that their citizens are safe and border crossings are closed.

At the Special ASEAN Summit held via video conferencing, ASEAN member states committed to enhance effective and transparent public communication through timely updates of relevant policies, public health and safety information, and clarifications on misinformation. The ASEAN Health Ministers have also agreed to coordinate cross-border health responses, scale up the use of technology for efficient information exchanges, and strengthen and institutionalise preparedness. ASEAN countries have also discussed capacity needs and gaps in national responses that could possibly be supported through cooperation at the national or regional levels with dialogue partners such as China, Japan, Korea, the US and the EU.

3. Gaining people’s trust requires a comprehensive strategy that is clearly and regularly communicated

“With the risk of loss of income of individuals and businesses due to lockdowns, a reluctance to adhere to COVID-19 related government measures is understandable. A comprehensive strategy to mitigate COVID-19 must include initiatives that cover public health, social security and economic recovery. The most critical ingredient of any response is -- trust,” said Dr. Noor Hisham.

Across ASEAN, member states have implemented economic relief packages that include bank loan moratorium, wage subsidy, financing for small businesses, cash assistance for informal/gig workers, distribution of face masks, and subsidised COVID-19 testing. These strategies need to be communicated in a regular and transparent manner to gain trust and to stem out fake news, which risks negating helpful information released by the government.

The Quick Response Team of Malaysia’s Ministry of Multimedia and Communication has been actively debunking COVID-19 related fake news on social media since March 2020. Singapore

even convened a parliamentary select committee to investigate deliberate online fake news earlier this year.

Conclusion: Regional cooperation and economic resilience

“In the fight against COVID-19 there is no bragging right. A country, relatively successful at the public health end of the battle will still face serious suffering at its economic end - especially if it is an open economy like so many ASEAN countries,” said Tan Sri Munir.

“Economies that have been frozen by lockdowns are not going to be open to those easing out of those containment measures which are dependent on cross-border exchange of goods and services. Interdependence has no greater significance than when fighting a virus which respects no borders and boundaries,” he commented.

Tan Sri Munir reminded that in view of the possibility of a second wave of COVID-19 infection, ASEAN countries must further strengthen ASEAN’s information-sharing mechanism to allow for immediate and accurate information on local conditions and incentivise the private sector to increase the production of face masks and personal protection equipment (PPE) to a strictly-enforced ASEAN standard. When the situation begins to improve in the future, ASEAN should also adopt the available technology to develop an ASEAN-wide contact tracing system to support the reopening of borders and resumption of travel and tourism.

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About CARI

CIMB ASEAN Research Institute (CARI) was established in 2011 by CIMB Group. CARI is the first independent, transnational research institute dedicated solely to the advancement and acceleration of ASEAN integration.

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