

Lockdowns in ASEAN : winning the pandemic war

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*Global Health Security:
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

Lockdowns in ASEAN: Winning the Pandemic War

By Jose M.L. Montesclaros

SYNOPSIS

With vaccines not expected to fully roll out until 2024, lockdowns remain a critical priority to save lives today. February 2021 marks the end of a year of COVID-19, and the opportunity to re-visit and improve the way lockdowns are implemented in the year ahead.

COMMENTARY

AT THE beginning of the pandemic in February 2020, lockdowns [were seen as a last resort, and even discouraged](#) by the World Health Organisation (WHO). A year since the pandemic outbreak, the ASEAN region is still struggling with a growth in infections of more than five per cent over the past week, adding up to [2.2 million cases today](#), and more than 47,000 deaths (as of 10 February 2021).

Lockdowns are still important today. While over [nine types of COVID-19](#) vaccines have already been developed, it will take time to expand production and to roll these out, with only two billion doses of the vaccines projected by the end of 2021; this leaves practically the remaining three-fourths of the world waiting. In fact, there are fears it may take until [2024](#) until the vaccines reach the poorest countries.

Dire States: Where Lockdowns Are Critical

The temptation is to wait for the vaccines to finish rolling out, and to not take action in addressing the pandemic now. This is because the clock for COVID-19 infections and

deaths continues to tick on a daily basis in over [221](#) countries, territories and cruise ships. It is also uncertain if new vaccines will be just as effective as in their original tests, against the mutated versions of the pandemic. For these, only time will tell.

Lockdowns are still needed, because COVID-19 is primarily an [urban disease-management problem](#). It thrives and grows exponentially within densely populated geographical areas, given the millions of person-to-person interactions occurring daily, whether in offices, entertainment or dining areas, on the streets, or in public transport. With every day that passes, where an effective lockdown is not implemented, the exponential growth in infections is expected to continue.

COVID-19 is feared because of the risk of death. COVID-19 infection is [not a death knell](#), however, since it has lower mortality risks than diseases like tuberculosis, or even the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS).

With only three per cent of cases resulting in deaths, the key reason for the large number of deaths out of more than 100 million cases is insufficient access to treatment at the local level. The management of local resources, is thus a key determinant of deaths. Each state has its own [maximum healthcare capacity](#), which is the combination of the infrastructure to provide due treatment, and the sufficiency of support to subsidise treatments, especially to poorer populace.

Thus, a telltale sign that a country has exceeded the maximum number of individuals that the state's healthcare capacity (both infrastructure and financial support) can accommodate is when deaths for every COVID-19 case are highest.

Currently, the situation in Indonesia, the Philippines and Myanmar is the most dire, with approximately 27, 21 and 22 deaths for every 1,000 cases, respectively. Making up two-thirds of the region's population, these are pulling up the average deaths in ASEAN to 21 deaths for every 1,000 cases. It is in these areas, where lockdowns are most needed.

Launching Effective "City-Level" Lockdowns

While some may consider lockdowns to be an impossible economic burden, it is important to highlight that [effective lockdowns](#) at the city- or subnational-level have allowed for arresting exponential growth in cases within a two-month period, learning from Singapore and China.

In both cases, the lockdown allowed for the number of active cases (total cases minus recoveries/deaths) to fall; this means the number of new infections per day were slower than (which takes about 14 days per person) the growth in the number of new infections occurring.

These can serve as learning points for other countries, to improve the way they have executed their lockdowns, learning from the past year. First, these countries implemented strict movement control policies.

Singapore is an island-state connected physically to Malaysia via a causeway, so this route was practically shut. Wuhan City is surrounded by other towns in Hubei Province,

China, making it more challenging to close off. Yet, strict movement controls within, into and out of cities were implemented from late January/early February until early April 2020.

Wuhan citizens needed clearance just to leave their homes, and all non-essential companies (including manufacturing plants), as well as schools, continued to be closed down, and road travel was also locked off and controlled across Hubei Province, minimising non-essential travel within the city, as well as into and out of it.

This required a “war-time” level of re-alignment and deployment of manpower, to actively monitor the movements of people at the time of COVID-19. In Wuhan’s and Singapore’s case, support of contact-tracing technologies was, and is still being used.

Crucial Role of Financial Support & Economic Security

The *coup de grâce*, which differentiates these countries from the rest, was their provision of financial support to maintain the economic security of individuals amid lockdowns.

Singapore leveraged approximately SGD100 billion (or 20% of its annual GDP) of its large fiscal reserves ([at least SGD800 billion](#)), providing individuals with [guarantees](#) of economic security by ensuring sufficient wages even as citizens stayed indoors, during its lockdown from early April until [end-May, 2020](#) when its “circuit-breaker” (lockdown) was lifted.

Lockdowns remain a critical priority today, and for some countries, the capacity to treat the continuously growing infections has already clearly been exceeded. In these cases, the option to wait for vaccines to roll out globally, entails a clear trade-off in the form of lives lost.

Learning from the past year, imposing more effective lockdowns, with stricter controls and due support to the economic security of individuals, should be treated as a crucial necessity.

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