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Preparing for Future Crises: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

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SYNOPSIS

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed modern lives on an unprecedented scale and severity, teaching us lessons in terms of national policy-making and multilateral cooperation. Drawing from the experiences of Singapore and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) may help us better prepare for future crises.

COMMENTARY

Singapore has pivoted to an endemic strategy in combatting COVID-19, having achieved a high vaccination rate and sustained a resilient healthcare system to tackle the virus. This has enabled the country to [ease mask-wearing rules and other restrictions](#). At the same time, Singapore faces other challenges such as climate change, transboundary haze, new communicable diseases, and their economic and socio-cultural consequences.

Such threats will come at a high cost, with potential [catastrophic impact on health and death rates](#), which could negatively [affect economies](#) around the world. These require urgent national action in addition to multilateral cooperation and the search for durable solutions. The COVID-19 crisis has clearly demonstrated the importance of preparedness and early intervention to avoid more devastating harm in the future. What lessons can we draw from the COVID-19 crisis to help us better prepare for future crises?

Agile Policymaking and Using Science and Data

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a learning opportunity on agile policymaking and governance. In the absence of vaccines and treatments during the early stage of the crisis, it was necessary to act decisively, including the implementation of lockdowns

and mass testing, to save lives. Countries which moved quickly to adopt strict measures before the virus could spread out of control were able to minimise death rates and avoid a collapse of the healthcare system.

Singapore has since moved away from the initial zero-Covid policy towards learning to live with the virus. Even so, the current approach remains a calibrated one that emphasises adaptability to an evolving situation. Supported by scientific evidence and data, new variants continue to be carefully monitored. An endemic policy also does not rule out the use of timely interventions in the future to manage sudden surges and seasonal outbreaks.

Globally, many governments also quickly rolled out various innovative digital technologies to facilitate timely public announcements, contact tracing, exposure notification, and social distancing measures.

In Singapore, for example, the [TraceTogether](#) and [SafeEntry](#) contact tracing programmes were rolled out swiftly, with their relative success supported by high digital literacy and high smartphone usage. By December 2020, TraceTogether achieved [more than 70%](#) take-up rate. However, the lack of digital literacy skills and access to computing devices and the internet among the elderly, lower-income families, and migrant workers remain a problem. This has to be addressed urgently. When schools were closed at the height of the pandemic, students from lower-income families [faced difficulties accessing home-based learning](#).

Similar principles of agile policymaking can be applied to other complex, constantly evolving crises. This means leveraging technology, science, and data to design flexible, adaptive, and innovative responses.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also pointed to the importance of promoting partnerships among relevant government, research, industry, and civil society groups to facilitate joint initiatives and promote a resilient community beyond the pandemic. The timely development of a range of diagnostic kits was made possible by [partnerships between healthcare providers and research institutes](#). One of the test kits, the Fortitude Kit, has been subsequently [deployed in more than 20 countries](#).

Public Trust Vital to Policy Effectiveness

Public trust and compliance are key to successful crisis management measures. An endemic strategy relies heavily on the population exercising social responsibility. For instance, the effectiveness of Singapore's Home Recovery Programme, whereby COVID-19 patients self-isolate, depends on the people's discipline in adhering to guidelines despite their pandemic fatigue. When there is high public trust, people comply more readily without the need for strict policing, even if the regulations imposed may bring them inconveniences. Policymakers would also be empowered to take actions decisively.

Unfortunately, there is a worrying trend of [populist anti-science backlash](#) across the world in reaction to pandemic restrictions. Policymakers will likely face similar anti-science sentiments and potential pushbacks, including from countries and national

leaders who [deny or downplay](#) climate change, when pressured to take climate action measures.

This highlights the importance of effective and consistent communications from the government, addressing misinformation, as well as regularly reviewing education and messaging policies, to keep communities engaged and informed. Effective communications must be timely, frequent, and accessible – before the public hears about developments and policy announcements from less credible sources which may lead to consternation or even panic. To prevent information overload, the messages put out should also be precise and easily understood. Finally, to maintain credibility, communications must be transparent, factual, and backed up by science and data.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also raised public awareness of society's vulnerability to nature and the need for science-driven policies and rules-setting. Many communities have gotten accustomed to daily inconveniences such as social distancing and mask-wearing measures for the public good. Potentially unpopular policies, such as tougher regulations on emissions and green taxes, can ride this momentum to garner public support, and promote awareness and individual responsibility.

Global Crises Require Multilateral Solutions and Collective Action

ASEAN member states and their partners have worked collectively to manage the COVID-19 crisis for two years now and, to prepare for future crises, it is essential to review the effectiveness of the grouping's plans and their implementation.

ASEAN's lack of a coordinated response when the pandemic first started, highlighted the weakness of existing arrangements for communicable disease occurrence in the region. Given that many countries were caught unprepared, the knee-jerk response was to quickly close borders in order to minimise transmissions and deaths. Unfortunately, this was done without prior consultation or warning, which led to migrant workers being [stranded](#), and often without social and financial support.

ASEAN was quick to recover. A Special ASEAN Summit and the Special ASEAN-Plus Three Summit were held in April 2020 to address the multifaceted problems brought about by COVID-19. Regional health mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Emergency Operations Centre Network for Public Health Emergencies, were activated to augment and enhance national measures and information sharing in a timely manner – such as in the establishment of hotlines and call centres in ASEAN member states. Singapore [donated US\\$100,000 to the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund in November 2020](#) and [S\\$7.9 million worth of medical supplies to the ASEAN Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies in October 2021](#).

ASEAN needs to maintain the momentum for pursuing multilateral solutions with its partners. Providing a platform for public knowledge sharing, ASEAN developed a [Portal for Public Health Emergencies with Canada and Germany](#). ASEAN, in cooperation with Japan, also recently operationalised the [ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases \(ACPHEED\)](#) which aims to standardise and accelerate the implementation of public health protocols across the region to keep policymakers updated and informed.

Even after the current pandemic is over, ASEAN must keep these multilateral lines of communications open and continue to share situational updates promptly, especially since new diseases and other variants of COVID-19 remain an active threat. ASEAN and Canada have already developed the [Mitigation of Biological Threats Programme](#), which prepares and responds to outbreaks and emerging dangerous pathogens. Going forward, such coordinated efforts can enhance regional capacity and credibility to prevent, detect, and respond to future crises and emergencies.

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