

Enhancing International and Regional Cooperation to Mitigate the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic: A View From Indonesia

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The COVID-19 pandemic has forced countries to face a twofold challenge: protecting the health of their populations and of their economies. To meet this challenge, they and the world need to bolster cooperative efforts on two parallel fronts: strengthening international economic cooperation and enhancing the implementation of global health regulations.

ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF THE PANDEMIC

COVID-19's immediate economic consequences are severe and wide-ranging. Countries that implement mass quarantine and lockdowns have seen their economic activities dwindle and their unemployment rates soar. The situation is even more serious in developing countries that have massive informal sectors. Many are also struggling to handle the increased unemployment resulting from inadequate social protection systems.

The uncertainty surrounding the duration and intensity of the pandemic will only prolong the economic consequences. The economic shutdown, together with dwindling demand due to a loss of employment and inevitable consumption delays, is greatly diminishing business revenue. These in turn pressure banking and financial institutions, and any financial crisis will make the economic recovery more difficult. Even under a best-case scenario, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) estimates economic growth to drop to **2.4 percent** in 2020 and predicts a recovery only next year—provided the outbreak is mild and can be contained. The current uncertainty makes the situation difficult to predict. If the pandemic continues, the OECD's more **pessimistic modeling forecasts** global economic growth at only 1.5 percent, warning many major economies (such as Japan and the eurozone) of a recession, indicating a prolonged economic recovery.

Given all this, international cooperation is needed more than ever, in at least four areas.

The World Health Organization (WHO) and major powers should help facilitate global resource-pooling and technical assistance to countries with limited capacities. The pandemic makes it clear that countries are competing to secure supplies of medical equipment. Such competition exacerbates the crisis.

The major powers and international financial institutions should provide economic assistance to poorer countries, which face dire economic consequences. When demand is dwindling, government intervention

can help. Unfortunately, most developing country governments do not have the fiscal space for such interventions. The World Bank has prepared a \$14 billion package of fast-track financing to assist countries in their efforts to prevent, detect, and respond to the rapid spread of COVID-19. Many developing countries, though, need even more financial resources to sustain their economies during the outbreak. Additional and faster multilateral commitments are needed.

National governments should coordinate fiscal interventions. Individual countries have begun to initiate economic stimulus packages. The United States, for example, implemented a \$2 trillion program. Smaller countries have launched their own. All of these programs, however, will have global economic consequences, especially when a program is as large as that of the United States. This can adversely affect global financial and capital markets and hamper prospects for economic recovery. An internationally coordinated economic stimulus program is needed to keep harmful effects to a minimum.

National governments, multilateral and regional forums, and international institutions should increase cooperation and keep nationalism and protectionism at bay. In a crisis, economic nationalism and protectionism tend to increase. Countries should practice the opposite and take cooperation even further, including increasing international trade. Cutting tariff and nontariff barriers facilitates the logistics of necessary products to deal with the pandemic and to support immediate economic needs. It also prompts faster recovery by promoting demand and ensuring supply.

International cooperation can be facilitated at various multilateral and regional forums. The Group of Twenty Leaders' Statement in March calling for greater cooperation in safeguarding the global economy was an encouraging sign. It needs, though, to be translated into concrete action in close collaboration with other international institutions. The World Bank could also provide a platform for greater assistance to poorer countries. In addition, countries should accelerate all trade initiatives currently being discussed at the World Trade Organization.

Members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), together with other countries in the East Asia and Pacific region, could play a more important role in promoting cooperation, partly because they have been better at containing COVID-19 and have suffered less economic damage. The region has a long history of economic cooperation, including the recent conclusion of one of the world's biggest trade agreements, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND HEALTH REGULATIONS

Once the dust from COVID-19 settles, international health regulation frameworks need to be reexamined to account for the lessons learned from the collective experiences in fighting the pandemic.

COVID-19's effects have become so far reaching that almost no country can deal with it alone. Four issues are especially important to consider.

Existing international frameworks for global health cooperation should address interconnectivity. The current pandemic shows that countries with both strong and weak health systems are almost equally vulnerable. The sources of this vulnerability are domestic and international, and are intertwined, given the globalized nature of the world today. Existing frameworks should reflect that.

The International Health Regulations (IHR), adopted during the fifty-eighth World Health Assembly in 2005, is one such framework—a benchmark against which to examine countries' capacity and readiness to prevent, detect, and respond to public health threats.

The IHR requires all member states to embed the framework into their national surveillance systems, which are examined annually by the WHO joint external evaluation (JEE), an independent team of experts. The JEE also requires member countries to define their national action plans for health security.

The IHR, however, has no enforcement mechanism. A stronger global surveillance system for certain aspects of the IHR needs to be devised, particularly for matters on which inadequate capacities would endanger member countries. One such aspect is the ability to detect, respond to, and inform domestic health events—an infectious disease breakout, for example. Failure to share related information in a timely manner could have catastrophic consequences.

The Global Health Security Agenda's (GHSA) role should be expanded. Under the GHSA, member countries make new, concrete commitments to improve their capacity to prevent, detect, and respond to infectious disease threats. It also provides support through collaboration and information sharing to help countries fulfill the requirements defined by the IHR. This coalition of committed countries should be expanded, and assistance from advanced-capacity nations increased. A more robust and independent assessment mechanism such as the World Bank's Health Security Financing Assessment Tool and the WHO's joint external evaluation should be put in place to help member countries increase their readiness.

Regional organizations need to increase their investment in infrastructure, capacity-building, and human resources development in public health and health security. Relative to global organizations, which are often too complex, regional organizations are better situated to understand the national contexts of their member states, and therefore to lead the way to better and more efficient cooperation. Regional organizations could also help support the implementation of existing global frameworks such as the IHR or GHSA.

ASEAN's dialogue partnerships is one example. The partnership helps connect ASEAN with ten parties through initiatives such as the ASEAN Plus Three, which connects ASEAN with China, South Korea, and Japan. During this crisis, dialogue partners have been responsive and quick to act. For example, the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting on Coronavirus Disease convened twelve foreign ministers as early as February 20 to seek a coordinated effort to combating COVID-19.

ASEAN's health ministers also convened a video conference to intensify regional cooperation. The conference was also attended by officials from the WHO regional offices for Southeast Asia and Western Pacific. Linking regional organizations with the WHO through its regional offices will be the way forward.

National governments and regional and international organizations should focus on the eight core areas identified in the IHR. IHR's eight core areas are policy and legislation, coordination, surveillance, preparedness and readiness, response, risk communication, human resources, and fully functioning labs. Enhancing cooperation, increasing investment, and syncing collaboration in these areas will help contain this pandemic and make the world better prepared for the next one.