



GOOD PRACTICES in Responding to
Emerging Infectious Diseases: Experiences from the

ASEAN
Plus Three Countries



Chapter 14: ASEAN Secretariat

ASEAN's Pioneering Initiative on Multisector Pandemic Preparedness, Response

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It was one Saturday morning in April 2009 when peoples of ASEAN woke up to a world threatened by an influenza virus capable of causing massive human deaths. It was a stark reminder of the region's experience with SARS in 2003 and a wake up call to our human vulnerability to pandemic threats.

The day called for immediate action, and posed a challenge to raise our guards, and activate mechanisms put in place in protecting ASEAN from any disease threat.

It was an opportunity to demonstrate what ASEAN has achieved in institutionalizing a pioneering initiative on multisector pandemic preparedness and response.

1. Introduction

In recognition of the human, economic, social, and security threats posed by communicable diseases, ASEAN Member States have worked over the past several years to implement integrated approaches in strengthening surveillance and response to emerging infectious diseases with a focus on multisector collaboration, information sharing and multi-country approaches.

The ASEAN Technical Working Group Pandemic Preparedness and Response (ATWGPPR), was set up as a coordinating body which drives multisector cooperation in the region. An Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response was ratified in December 2009 and it seeks to provide effective mechanisms to reduce disaster losses in lives and in the social, economic and environmental assets of the Member States, and to jointly respond to disaster emergencies in the ASEAN region.

Likewise, issues in the animal-human-environment interface are targeted specifically by the ASEAN Secretariat Working Group for ONE Health (ASEC-ONE Health), which coordinates various health-related initiatives of the ASEAN Secretariat and tries to maximize the use of resources and promotes efficiency and integration.

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A project was developed to stockpile antiviral drugs and personal protective equipment, in the event of a pandemic. Such initiatives also enable the testing of the efficiency of coordination among all parties involved in delivery of the stock in times of a pandemic.

ASEAN Secretariat also implements the ASEAN Plus Three Emerging Infectious Diseases (EID) Programme, funded by the Australian Government (AusAID). The Programme aims to enhance regional preparedness and capacity through integrated approaches to prevention, surveillance and timely response to emerging infectious diseases.

2. Advancing a Multisector Approach to Pandemic Readiness

In recognition of the role of the non-health sectors in pandemic preparedness and response and the delivery of essential services, the ASEAN Secretariat has been actively taking the lead in strengthening multisector coordination, specifically between the health sector and the non-health sectors responsible for the delivery of essential services, both at the regional and national levels and to ensure continuity of the economic and social functions of the country.

Seven essential non-health sectors were identified for ASEAN: (1) water and sanitation; (2) food supply; (3) utilities and energy; (4) public transportation; (5) communication; (6) security and order; and (7) finance and banking. The ATWGPPR was organised to strengthen regional collaboration among the existing national and ASEAN regional initiatives in improving the planning for pandemic preparedness and response. These are aimed at maintaining essential services and reducing the socio-economic impact of a pandemic.



Representatives from Member States and partner organizations during the ASEAN Pilot Assessment on Multisector Pandemic Preparedness and Response on 1-5 June 2009, Indonesia



Participants of the ASEAN Regional Workshop on Multisector Pandemic Preparedness Assessment Methodology on 22-23 February 2010, Indonesia

Not Letting Its Guard Down - ASEAN to Identify Gaps in Pandemic Readiness

Recognizing that the ability to respond to and mitigate the impact of an influenza pandemic will depend on both health and non-health actors, the ATWGPPR has undertaken the development of indicators that can be used to assess national preparedness for multisector influenza pandemic response. Upon completion of a pilot assessment in Indonesia, national assessments will be conducted for the 10 Member States, and results will be made available in the latter part of 2010.

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Demonstrating Policy Support in the Midst of 2009 Influenza A(H1N1) Pandemic

ASEAN's efforts to maintain a common defense against the 2009 Influenza A(H1N1) made strong headway with the conduct of the ASEAN Plus Three Health Ministers Special Meeting on Influenza A(H1N1) on 8 May 2009. The Meeting was held to intensify the region's collective response measures to contain the spread of the disease.

The region's initiatives also received full support from its Dialogue Partners - China, Japan and the Republic of Korea.

The agreed measures, issued in a Joint Ministerial Statement, included the continuous implementation of national pandemic preparedness plans; strengthening surveillance and responses; and effective communication especially within the public realm to avoid panic and social disruption.

This Meeting enabled ASEAN to collectively call on the World Health Organization (WHO) for a review of the influenza pandemic stages and for the transparent, equitable, and fair access to vaccines and virus sharing mechanisms, which served as one of the key strategies in addressing the pandemic.



ASEAN Plus Three Health Ministers during the Special Meeting on Influenza A(H1N1) on 8 May 2009, Bangkok, Thailand

The ASEAN Meeting on Promoting Access to Antiviral Drugs and Pandemic Influenza Vaccines was held in January 2010 as a follow-up to the Joint Statement of the ASEAN Plus Three Health Ministers Meeting on Influenza A(H1N1). The region's Ministries of Health and the Food and Drug agencies committed to jointly formulate regional policies to ensure availability and facilitate domestic production, importation and registration of antiviral drugs and pandemic influenza vaccines.

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Secretary-General of ASEAN Dr. Surin Pitsuwan responding to media inquiries after the ASEAN Plus Three Health Ministers Special Meeting on Influenza A(H1N1) on 8 May 2009, Bangkok



Dr. Bounpheng Philavong, Head of the Health and Communicable Diseases Division of the ASEAN Secretariat giving a media interview during the ASEAN Plus Three Health Ministers Special Meeting on Influenza A(H1N1) on 8 May 2009, Bangkok

3. Strengthening Communication and Information Systems

As part of the ASEAN's work on pandemic preparedness and in combating infectious diseases, a Communication and Integration Strategy was developed in 2007. The Strategy paved the way for the organization of the Communication Focal Points who are tasked to share information regarding outbreaks, using a framework of an agreed regional protocol on communication and information sharing.

The Communication and Integration Strategy also enabled the development and implementation of a Risk Communication Training Programme for ASEAN. Through the facilitation of Indonesia, a website (www.aseanplus3-eid.info) was also restructured as a mechanism for news surveillance and platform for information exchange, not only with the health sector, but with other non-health sectors necessary for pandemic preparedness and response.

Intensifying Communication and Coordination Mechanisms for 2009 Influenza A(H1N1) Pandemic

In view of the urgency, the ASEAN Secretariat arranged for teleconference and other information exchange mechanisms with the region's health officials, comprising of experts on communicable diseases and on emerging infectious diseases. These mechanisms aimed to review preventive measures that were taken by the ASEAN Member States and the need to consider a common stand and secure agreement on issues related to the public health measures being carried out.

The ASEAN Secretariat also established a Coordinating Centre to monitor the developments on the 2009 Influenza A(H1N1) situation in the region. The Coordinating Centre, on a daily basis, monitors and collates information on situational updates and precautionary measures taken by the ASEAN Member States. The ASEAN Plus Three EID Programme serves as the Secretariat of the Coordinating Centre.

The website (www.aseanplus3-eid.info) served as the platform for news surveillance and for sharing prevention and control measures among countries.



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4. Building Regional Capacities

Building the capacity and capability of the Member States is one of the cornerstones in combating infectious diseases. In an effort to meet the greater challenges resulting from outbreaks and pandemics, ASEAN developed and organised capacity development programmes to equip Member States with increased capacity to respond to these public health threats. These initiatives were carried out under the ASEAN Plus Three EID Programme funded by AusAID.

- (1) In partnership with Malaysia Ministry of Health, ASEAN facilitated the development of the Risk Communication Strategy, with activities identified at pre-pandemic, pandemic and post-pandemic (recovery) stages. It also assisted countries develop national risk communication plans consistent with the regional framework.
- (2) ASEAN also worked with Member States and partners in the development of a Training Module on Risk Communication, as well as the conduct of Training of Trainers on Risk Communication from all the ASEAN Member States. The participants represented the animal health and human health sectors and used a module that also facilitated the sharing of country risk communication strategies.
- (3) Communication Focal Points from the ASEAN Plus Three countries were also trained in website management, consistent with the approved Protocol for Communication and Information Sharing. These trainees were equipped with the basic steps in uploading information in the new website (www.aseanplus3-eid.info). A special section for Laboratory-based Surveillance was also included in the website for use by the ASEAN Plus Three National Laboratory Contact Points (NLCP).
- (4) ASEAN facilitated the development of the Minimum Standards on Joint Outbreak Investigation and Response, identifying the roles and responsibilities of all relevant sectors needed to conduct a multisector national, cross-border or multi-country outbreak investigation and response in terms of administrative and logistic arrangements.
- (5) Training was conducted in cooperation with the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN). The ASEAN-GOARN Outbreak Leadership Training was held with a view of organizing an ASEAN Network of Response Teams.



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- (6) An Exercise Management Training Programme was also implemented to provide personnel from Ministries of Health, and other relevant ministries in charge of animal health, and disaster management with the knowledge and skills necessary to plan, implement and evaluate simulation exercises which are deemed important not only for a proper response to outbreaks but also to pandemics.
- (7) The ASEAN Plus Three NLCPs were organised to coordinate activities related to laboratories in the region. The NLCPs have also agreed on the Terms of Reference to strengthen networking between the laboratories with the aim of strengthening capacity of health laboratories within the region to tackle emerging infectious diseases.

Enhancing Capacities as a Cornerstone for Pandemic Preparedness and Response

Since the beginning of the outbreak in the western hemisphere, the ASEAN Plus Three Partnership Laboratories (APLs) operationalized their activities within the network through electronic discussions, offering assistance for training, diagnostic testing, and sharing protocols on diagnosis.

Also, as a follow-up to the recommendation of the Joint Ministerial Statement of the ASEAN Plus Three Health Ministers Special Meeting on Influenza A(H1N1), the ASEAN Plus Three EID Programme facilitated the training of laboratory personnel in the diagnosis of influenza viruses including H1N1 pandemic virus, sponsored by the National Institute of Infectious Diseases of Japan (one of the APLs).



Participants in the Training of Laboratory Personnel on 1-2 September 2009, Japan



Dr. Andi Muhadir (Indonesia) and Dr. Luningning Villa, Programme Facilitator of the ASEAN Plus Three EID Programme of the ASEAN Secretariat, emphasizing the importance of information sharing during the Web Editors' Training on 12-14 January 2009, Bali



Ms. Joy Rivaca Caminade, Communication and Integration Specialist of the ASEAN Plus Three EID Programme of the ASEAN Secretariat facilitating a brainstorming session on communication strategies and key messages as part of the group exercise during the Risk Communication Training of Trainers on 21-23 April 2009, Kuala Lumpur



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5. One Health: Addressing Interconnected Health Challenges Through a Holistic Approach

ASEAN has shown commitments in addressing health issues (both animal and human), since the establishment of the Senior Officials Meeting on Health Development (SOMHD), the ASEAN Experts Group on Communicable Diseases (AEGCD), ASEAN Sectoral Working Group on Livestock (ASWGL) and Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) Task Force. These various decision-making and working bodies address issues related to communicable diseases which include emerging infectious diseases such as HPAI. To further strengthen collaboration on zoonoses, these two sectors have jointly developed a framework and workplan, in the spirit of ONE HEALTH.

ASEAN Member States (AMSs) have been working with many partners, particularly the WHO, World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to combat emerging infectious diseases including the deadly avian flu (H5N1) through joint actions and programmes. ASEAN

Secretariat itself has been engaging with several partners and countries in preparedness for avian influenza and other emerging infectious diseases, as well as on disaster management.

To enhance and promote multisector coordination in addressing the inter-related issues of health (human, animals and the environment), the Executive Committee of the ASEAN Secretariat (EXCOMM) approved the establishment of ASEC-ONE Health in March 2008.



ASEAN Secretariat finalized the Terms of Reference of ASEC-ONE Health and developed a workplan for implementation.

The ASEC-ONE Health aims to coordinate the various health-related initiatives of the ASEAN Secretariat to ensure coordination and integration thus maximising use of resources and promoting efficiency and integration. The Working Group also serves as the coordinating arm (Secretariat) to support the newly-established ATWGPPR.

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To ensure continuity of its key functions and safety of its staff during the 2009 Influenza A(H1N1) pandemic, the ASEAN Secretariat ran an emergency exercise on influenza pandemic preparedness. Consistent with the global call for preparedness, the exercise involved the senior officials and key personnel of the Secretariat. Policies and procedures that need to be operationalised were identified for further action.

The exercise led to the establishment of the ASEAN Secretariat Crisis Management Committee and the Task Force on Influenza Pandemic (ATFIP). The committee and the task force were set up to ensure timely, coordinated and appropriate measures to minimize, if not prevent, the spread of pandemic influenza; to carry out measure to alleviate the burden of affected staff of the ASEAN Secretariat and to maintain its core operations in a pandemic situation.

Through the leadership of ATFIP, a Crisis Management Guidelines for Pandemic Influenza was developed based on the results of the emergency exercise and suggestions from the ASEAN Secretariat personnel.

ASEAN Secretariat Steps up Pandemic Preparedness and Response

Officers of the ASEAN Secretariat were given seasonal influenza vaccination. In addition, allocation of Tamiflu for ASEAN Secretariat staff and family has already been approved by ATWGPPR and Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs to be taken from the ASEAN stockpile.

Information materials on 2009 Influenza A(H1N1) pandemic prevention were also produced, such as hygiene etiquette and ten steps to protecting oneself from influenza. Hotline numbers of ASEAN Member States were also collected for distribution to ASEAN Secretariat officers who are frequently on missions.



Information campaign on 2009 Influenza A(H1N1) pandemic prevention was launched in ASEAN Secretariat

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6. Insights on the 2009 Influenza A(H1N1) Pandemic Response

ASEAN's and ASEAN Secretariat's immediate and proactive action to facilitate regional cooperation during the 2009 Influenza A(H1N1) pandemic was a clear demonstration of the functionality of its established mechanisms for information sharing, collaboration and cooperation among the ASEAN Plus Three countries.

Through its established networks and mechanisms, ASEAN facilitated information sharing and the identification of gaps in the response measures of the ASEAN Member States for 2009 Influenza A(H1N1) pandemic. Even before the outbreaks in the ASEAN Region, ASEAN has coordinated the conduct of teleconferences and electronic discussions on the preparedness mechanisms, with the aim of being able to assist countries in their needs and share policies and surveillance protocols.

The quick reaction and prevention mechanisms put in place by individual countries to intensify disease surveillance have demonstrated to the world that our region is better prepared for the crisis. Our ASEAN Leaders took no time in calling this Ministerial Meeting as a demonstration of support in protecting our people.

7. Conclusion

Through regional cooperation as well as individual national efforts, ASEAN Member States continue to address pandemic preparedness and response at different levels and platforms. These include strengthening institutional linkages within countries and across borders, setting up partnerships with all stakeholders in public and private sectors and civil society, sharing information, knowledge, good practices and lessons learned, and exerting leadership and instituting coordination to be on top of the situation.

Amidst all the regional efforts, relevant sectors need to collaborate in intensifying risk communication and public awareness campaigns so the ASEAN peoples, especially at the local communities, are empowered to take the necessary precautionary hygiene and personal protection measures.

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The best way to inspire public resilience at the face of this pandemics and public health threats, is through the involvement of local communities and the meaningful cooperation with the relevant sectors in the delivery of basic economic and social services.

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