EAP COVID-19 Workshop Series Summary
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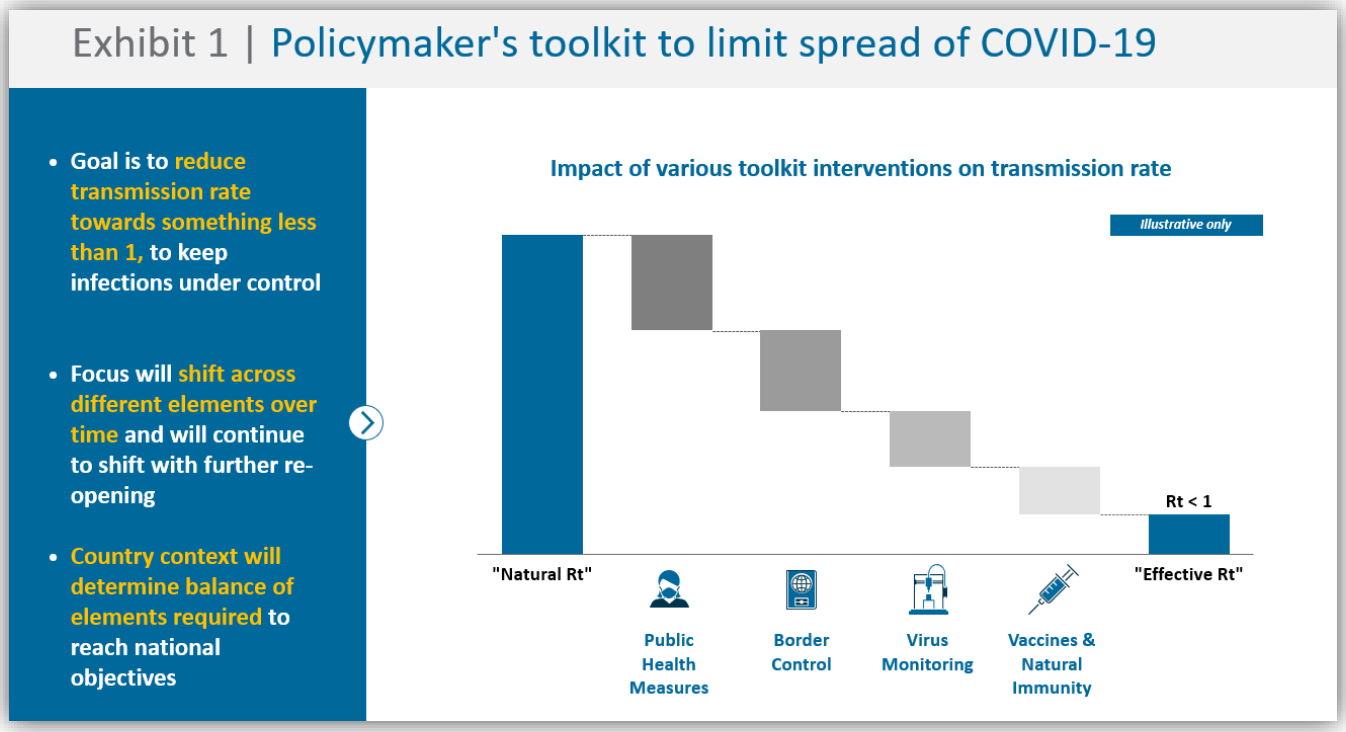
When COVID-19 hit East Asia and the Pacific (EAP) in early 2020, many countries in the region successfully limited its spread through aggressive deployment of tools such as public health measures, border controls, and monitoring systems. (Exhibit 1.) Indeed, the cumulative death toll has not gone beyond 200 deaths per million for any of the countries in the region, versus more than 470 per million globally. While the health impact of the pandemic has been reduced, EAP has not escaped the financial, economic, and societal costs of the pandemic. In Asia and the Pacific, economies are expected to contract on average by -4.3 percent in 2020, with the Pacific countries expected to be the hardest hit at -5.7 percent. Unemployment, poverty, and income inequality rates are also projected to rise across the region.



As the pandemic continues, however, the continued application of these tools is challenging, as can be seen from recent surges in Vietnam, Thailand, and Singapore. The development of vaccines as a new tool

has meant as of the end of June approximately 900 million people in the region (including China) have already received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine, representing more than 40 percent of the population. However, supply constraints mean that many countries may not fully vaccinate their populations until 2024 even as new variants emerge that existing vaccines may be less effective against. Beyond the targeted response, many countries are now looking to defray the accumulated costs of the pandemic through re-opening and rejuvenating their economies and societies.

With such a dynamic situation, countries need to continuously learn from each other and adapt their responses as new tools become available. The recently concluded COVID-19 Workshop Series was an opportunity to hear from global and regional experts about different approaches to "respond, re-open, and rejuvenate" in EAP. It was a platform to share experiences, learn from peers, and engage in candid debate.

Over the course of the series, seven key themes emerged:

(1) We are in a race between vaccines and variants

While vaccines hold the greatest potential to exit the acute phase of the pandemic by preventing severe disease and significantly reduce transmission at high levels of population coverage, variants may undermine this progress. This is further complicated by the vast differences in speed of vaccine rollout. More transmissible new variants may overwhelm health systems and/or render vaccines less effective, creating the imperative for a globally coordinated response.

"We need to move as fast as possible to aggressively vaccinate now as we're in a race against time and against new variants emerging."

- *Emily Serazin of the Boston Consulting Group*

(2) The policymakers' toolkit has expanded, and choosing between these tools has become more complex

Vaccination, while critical, is an addition to the original COVID-19 response toolkit comprising of public health measures, border controls, and virus monitoring systems. The emergence of new tools may lead to the evolution of others, such as the addition of vaccine passports to border measures. Countries that have successfully contained the virus using these tools are now also piloting variations, such as the Trans-Tasman travel bubble between Australia and New Zealand.

As highlighted by Dr. Konstantin Hypponen of the European Commission, countries have the desire to open borders and be dynamic despite concerns on the variants. However, the virus' ability to fight back means that more sophisticated versions of the original tools are also needed, such as genomic surveillance to track variants. The goal remains the same, however – maintaining a low rate of transmission to keep infections under control. The relative focus on different tools will shift with further re-opening, keeping public health, economic, financial, and societal goals in mind.

"There is a lot of momentum to have a common travel-related system - the objective is to set up a framework which would verify vaccinations/recovery and one that is interoperable. There's also been a lot of discussion about different types of national use, including access to bigger events, festivals, restaurants, cinemas, bars and so on."

- *Dr. Konstantin Hypponen of the European Commission*

(3) The endgame remains clear, with endemic or zero COVID-19 both possible scenarios for the region

Some countries in the region, such as Singapore, are shifting from containment to control strategies. Other countries, such as Australia, China and New Zealand, are maintaining a goal of zero transmission. Some experts argue that the convergence of (1) vaccines not providing sterilizing immunity; (2) new variants' increasing transmissibility; and (3) vaccine hesitancy limiting high vaccine coverage may result in an endemic COVID-19 scenario. Others point to the success of EAP countries in achieving elimination through crush and contain strategies and argue that elimination may be possible to expand and sustain in the longer term through high levels of vaccination.

"In China, firstly, we have a clear strategy to try to prevent any imported cases and try to stop any local transmission if we have any positive cases. Secondly, nucleic acid testing is the key to identify sources of the infection and the thirdly, we are working very hard on vaccination, so this is what we are doing for the reopening of the economy and social activities in China at the moment."

- *Professor George F. Cao of China Center for Disease Control and Prevention*

"The Australian government's priority continues to be the health and safety of Australians and it acts on expert health and scientific advice to maintain a goal of no community transmission."

- *Dr. Stephanie Williams of Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia*

(4) Proponents of both scenarios agree on the critical importance of rapid vaccination

High vaccination coverage will be the backbone of both control and elimination strategies. In EAP, with constrained vaccine supply and the success of containment strategies potentially dampening demand, there is now a growing sense of urgency. At the global level, further

redistribution of resources via COVAX (including funding for procurement and vaccine donations) is critical to ensure supply availability. In parallel, countries can prepare for high administration throughput before supplies arrive, especially given the sharp increase in COVAX supply volumes that is anticipated in the second half of 2021. On the demand side, policy makers must demonstrate trustworthiness (Australia example: Chief Health Officers leading COVID-19 responses in Australia), clearly communicate the risks and benefits for individuals (UK example: Clearly communicating age cut-offs for the AstraZeneca vaccine to the population), and emphasize community as well as individual benefits. As highlighted by Secretary Elizabeth Koff of New South Wales Health, communication with the public is critical to increase public confidence in the vaccines, which is necessary to ease restrictions and lockdowns.

"Even if vaccines have limited long term efficacy, it still provides protection and may reduce the evolutionary pressure driving emergence of new variants. And, I do think the evidence is very compelling that it provides a good interim strategy while we identify what the optimal long-term approach will be."

- *Dr. Michael Baker of University of Otago*

"You have to demonstrate trustworthiness (to the community), and you need to do that early; ideally, you should have been doing that for years, so that you have trusted health professionals who can give public messages"

- *Dr. David Spiegelhalter of the University of Cambridge*

(5) Vaccination rollout and other tools to combat COVID-19 can provide entry points for addressing neglected health system challenges.

The pandemic has stretched the capacities and capabilities of health systems across the globe. It has laid bare the historic and severe under-investment in public health in most geographies, as was highlighted by Dr. Mitchell Wolfe of the US Center for Disease Control and by Secretary Vince Dizon of the Philippine National Task Force against COVID-19. The lessons learned from the pandemic point to the critical importance of strengthening of public health systems and fast-tracking universal health coverage. (Exhibit 2.) This agenda can leverage the data and delivery systems demanded by vaccination rollouts.

"There is an ongoing need to strengthen our public health workforce, modernize our data systems, and strengthen laboratories, especially genomics and our immunization systems."

- *Dr. Mitchell Wolfe of US Center for Disease Control*

"Like many other developing countries, we (Philippines) really suffered from chronic under investment in public health infrastructure. When COVID hit us in February, March last year we had only one laboratory capable of doing COVID-19 testing, one for a country of over 100 million people and an archipelago."

- *Secretary Vince Dizon of the Philippine National Task Force against COVID-19*

Exhibit 2 | Country context to determine priorities for broad health systems strengthening across key thrusts

Non-exhaustive

	Potential applications		
	High income countries	**Middle-income countries**	**Small island nations**
Infrastructure Strengthening *e.g., testing*	**Institutionalize COVID-19 systems** (e.g., testing, public health response) into permanent health system frameworks & governance	Align **testing capacity strengthening with novel scalable technologies** (e.g., antigen RDTs[1]) to enable more agile response	**Build scalable testing capacity** (e.g., via novel lower cost technologies) and enable regional cooperation to strengthen surveillance
Green supply chain *e.g., cold chain*	**Incentivize private sector development** of environment-friendly and accessible technologies across medical supply chains	**Engage private sector** in cold chain infrastructure build and **enable scaling** of novel green technologies within supply chain	**Focus on baseline cold chain build** and **explore regional purchasing platforms** to drive cost-effective volume aggregation (e.g., AMSP[2])
Robust Data Systems and Digitization *e.g., national health registries*	**Connect national health registries to global platforms** for real-time infectious disease monitoring and surveillance	**Strengthen national health registries** to incorporate monitoring of disease outbreaks along with general population health	**Institute collaborative regional health registries** to monitor disease prevalence and general population health across a larger base
Innovative Delivery Models *e.g., channel*	**Explore development of alternative channels such as e-ICUs** to enable remote care for high-risk diseases such as COVID-19	**Build capacity** for self-care approaches such as **e-consultation**	Build capacity with **community health workers using online training platforms** to address healthcare facility and manpower constraints

Note: 1. Antigen rapid diagnostic tests; 2. Africa Medical Supplies Platform

(6) Countries will need to make difficult choices and trade-offs against a backdrop of constrained fiscal space

Governments face a massive agenda, which includes the current response, control of endemic COVID-19, future pandemic preparedness, and restoration of other essential health services. However, we know that the economic impact of COVID-19 has not only hurt government revenues and budgets, but also household employment and income levels. Countries can efficiently utilize scarce resources by leveraging global and regional infrastructure (e.g. regional surveillance networks in Africa and the Caribbean), partnering with local universities and the private sector (as seen in the Chile and US experiences), transitioning from campaign mode to routine services, and leveraging COVID-19 financing for broader investments in health systems strengthening.

"I think the challenging part that many of you are living and feeling is that we're talking about investment in an already incredibly constraint context."
- *Trish Stroman of the Boston Consulting Group*

"Collaboration and partnerships are key to expand capacity, specifically for genomic sequencing (in Chile)"
- *Cristian Herrera of the World Bank*

(7) Adaptive policymaking will be a critical success factor

Developments surrounding variants, vaccine effectiveness, and vaccination strategies are being reported daily. For example, several countries have now approved COVID-19 vaccination for adolescents and children. Others are considering booster shots and matching and mixing vaccine formulations. This rapid evolution means that adaptive policymaking – an approach which is flexible, data-driven, and responsive to emerging best practice will be critical to exiting the acute phase of the pandemic.

"It's very important to have a good policy making framework based on both evidences, but also capacity to change, adapt and adjust the existing policy following new evidence."
- *Dr. Soonman Kwon of Asian Development Bank*

Overall, there are reasons for optimism, with vaccination accelerating as supply constraints ease and a unique opportunity to build stronger and more resilient health systems. However, significant work remains to be done amid growing complexity and uncertainty. Countries will need to continuously adapt their toolkit in a context of constrained fiscal space. As the pandemic has repeatedly shown us, this will require collaboration and solidarity at regional and global levels. No one is safe until everyone is safe.

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World Bank's EAP COVID-19 workshop series comprised of three workshops that deep dive into critical topics on how governments can 'respond, re-open, and rejuvenate'. Further details on each workshop, including presentation materials and recordings can be obtained through the World Bank's EAP COVID-19 workshop microsite.