

Q&A

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Discussion with ASEAN members on the region's COVID-19 response & vaccine procurement best practices

Interviews provided by:

Malaysia Ministry of Health Officials;
Dr. Worrawich Boonyathisathan, Ministry of Public Health Thailand

1

What is the ambition of your country under the ASEAN collaboration?

MALAYSIA

“ Malaysia welcomes participation and collaboration amongst ASEAN countries. During the COVID-19 pandemic, information and knowledge sharing practices were crucial among ASEAN countries to ensure countries were able to cope with the problem.

Further collaboration amongst all ASEAN Member States (AMS) will help to provide faster response and facilitate access to treatment or other crucial measures and ensure continuous and secured access to certain medicines by having strategic partnership in negotiation and procurement of medicines.

Apart from that, Malaysia, together with ASEAN members, continues to support fair, equitable and affordable access to safe and effective therapeutics and vaccines for COVID-19. ”

THAILAND

“ The National Vaccine Institute (NVI) plays a key role in establishing the ASEAN Vaccine Security and Self-Reliance (AVSSR) initiative. However, we recognize that this project has been designed to support ASEAN as a whole, where we are not the owners of such an initiative, but rather we are simply helping and co-founding it with the guidance and share vision of every member state together with a decent contribution from UNICEF, ASEAN Secretariat, and WHO.



1

What is the ambition of your country under the ASEAN collaboration?

Since ASEAN realized that vaccine security is vital to overcoming pandemic or epidemic challenges and assisting people in preventing disease, we are keen to see the plan's implementation steps put into practice. When questioned about our ambition, we would like to advocate its operation in accordance with the AVSSR framework as follows:

1. Bring AVSSR into the global scale;
2. Create a regional pool procurement and stockpiling mechanism;
3. Develop a regional vaccine information sharing platform;
4. Develop a human resource and training program; and
5. Establish the ASEAN Vaccine Network or solid regional committee.

Beginning in 2021-2025, each member nation are welcomed to carry out these activities, with Thailand serving as ASEAN's supporter and facilitator. The chairmanship will be managed upon voluntary basis or by consensus/resolution among ASEAN executive bodies, for instance ASEAN Health Cluster 3, Senior Official on Health Development (SOMHD), or ASEAN Health Minister Meeting (AHMM). While we have a strong supporter in the shape of the ASEAN Secretariat, which is responsible for the monitoring and evaluation as well as facilitating all relevant ASEAN projects that arise from AMSs and turn them into tangible action through the ASEAN mechanism. We are working to ensure our effort grows rapidly and look for it to become a wonderful, feasible, and reliable plan for ASEAN community. ”

2

How has the engagement of your country and other ASEAN Member States been initiated?



MALAYSIA

“ From our side, the ASEAN Platform, including the strong relationship between all ASEAN Member States, has helped in the initiation stage. ”

THAILAND

“ In terms of its history, AVSSR was established in 2014 as a small vaccine network, as known as an international Vaccine Consortium, in close collaboration with major partners, including the WHO and UNICEF Supply Division as well as the Developing Countries Vaccine Manufacturer Network.

The initiative began with a small group of ASEAN Member State experts in charge of national research and development and immunization personnel (National Immunization Program manager). However, according to the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) framework, Thailand finally called for partnership with ten Member States and established the regional vaccine project called AVSSR developed to be a fully plan from 2015 to 2016. In this regard, the regional engagement has been highlighted by a strong partnership between Thai vaccine experts and the ASEAN Vaccine Network.

This reflects the importance of the Vaccine Network among Member States; every good engagement is the result of a decent relationship in a long-term manner.

3

What does it take to set-up an efficient cross-country collaboration of this magnitude?

MALAYSIA

“ In order to set up an efficient cross-country collaboration, we have found it is critical to have working diplomatic channels between Member State governments, as well as strong engagement through the ASEAN Secretariat. ”



THAILAND

“ Common goal, trust, friendship and mutual benefit are needed. Every country relies on the trusted collaboration between Member States, with a decent relationship, working like a friend, close neighbor, and together with a mutually beneficial outcome for all parties involved, these are no boundaries. When it comes to healthcare, every player should be willing to support, because they understand how important it is in people's lives.

Shared vision should be taken into the account as well. When we have reached our objective of a healthier community through the security of a promising vaccine, everyone shares the same vision, and by moving together, we can set up an efficient cross-country collaboration in the long run. ”

4

Are there any specific countries you have seen a stronger collaboration with via the AVSSR initiative?

MALAYSIA

“ Malaysia appreciates Singapore’s support of 100,620 doses COVID-19 vaccine to Malaysia, in its efforts in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic in the region. Malaysia has also received technical guidance and information on the implementation of lot releases, as well as biological testing, from Thailand under the AVSSR initiative. ”

THAILAND

“ There are no particular countries. We value all forms of collaboration that lead to greater efficiency in the region, equally. Each country has a unique potential in their profession. For example, Thailand has a strong R&D section, but limited manufacturing capacity, whereas Indonesia has extensive manufacturing capabilities. As a result, Thailand could support Indonesia in the R&D fields of work, while Indonesia could support strengthening the manufacturing areas. Furthermore, when concentrate on a pharmaceutical development plan beneath AHC3 governance framework, we truly appreciate Malaysia in leading a regional project on Drug security, called "ASEAN Drug Security and Self-Reliance" or "ADSSR". Thailand witnessed that Malaysia has a strong NRA and a solid drug and pharmaceutical R&D capability. We have seen a connection between AVSSR and ADSSR in some actions, and we wish to work with the Malaysian Ministry of Health to promote this pharmaceutical subject (drug and vaccine).

We genuinely think that if we work next to each other, we can move a greater distance in a more solid future, as well as enhance bilateral and multilateral partnerships in better detail. Thailand would like to promote Indonesia to lead a manufacturing partnership with Thai vaccine producers as well as Vietnam, that has a decent vaccine development and production capability. We've seen that BioPharma of Indonesia has a strong capacity for supplying such vaccines for immunization programs, as well as a distinct product pipeline. We intend to work with Indonesia to develop a more efficient regional supplier for ASEAN utilization and reduce importation. As previously noted, each country has its own expertise, experience, and even the ability to lead a major effort for this region. NVI, Thailand, may be able to assist this "regional teamwork" in achieving vaccine security by connecting and linking all AMSs via the AVSSR action plan. ”

5

Can you provide some examples of regional policies developed under ASEAN and what are the immediate next steps?

MALAYSIA

“ In ASEAN, there are 4 ASEAN Health Cluster Work Programme with various projects/ activities that have been implemented to achieve the vision, mission and goals of the ASEAN Health Sector. Some examples include:

- *ASEAN Health Cluster 3:* This area aims to strengthen health systems and access to care via programmes such as the AVSSR, which was endorsed by the ASEAN leaders in November 2019. It was led by Thailand, while the ADSSR is to be led by Malaysia and is in the planning stage and for further deliberation by AMS.
- *ASEAN Health Cluster 2:* This area responds to all hazards and emerging threats, from which the ASEAN Center for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases was established. ”

THAILAND

“ I am only in charge of one regional policy, AVSSR. I assisted a senior officer in drafting and finalizing it just before it was submitted to the ASEAN high-level platform for endorsement. During the 35th ASEAN Summit in 2019, ten ASEAN leaders finally adopted the AVSSR and made a Leaders' Declaration on AVSSR. Following that, the ASEAN Health Ministers reviewed and approved the Strategic and Action Plan. As a result, in 2022 I have advocated for all activities relating to the NVI and AVSSR focal points being put into action. By this, I mean that I have started the actions and showcased best practices, and from there have let other countries do the rest. Thailand only supports the first step of AVSSR implementation throughout its timeline.

5

Can you provide some examples of regional policies developed under ASEAN and what are the immediate next steps?

Accordingly, the NVI planned to hold a regional workshop on AVSSR manufacturing capacity in September 2022, in close collaboration with the World Bank and ASEAN Member States. Participants are expected from ASEAN AVSSR focal points, Intergovernmental Organizations, funding agencies, as well as global vaccine manufacturers. This workshop aims to establish a regional Vaccine Network in accordance with the AVSSR Strategy 5 and to identify opportunities from outside of ASEAN that can help ASEAN strengthen its production capability. [the workshop did conduct during 14 – 15 September 2022, but this questionnaire had conducted prior to that forum] ”



6

Can you describe any significant achievements, as well as any key barriers that you have experienced?

How did you manage to overcome them? (e.g., example of good practices)

MALAYSIA

“ In view of the urgent need for COVID-19 vaccines to be available for the public during the start of the pandemic, the Malaysian Drug Control Authority has agreed to implement conditional fast track registration for pharmaceutical products during disasters, as provided under Regulation 8, Control of Drugs and Cosmetics Regulations 1984.

In ensuring vaccine access in Malaysia, the Government of Malaysia has taken an integrated and concerted approach in its vaccine acquisition effort by leveraging on its diplomatic relations and strategic international cooperation with vaccine manufacturers, world health bodies, and affiliates. A joint Special Committee comprising of the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, the Special Committee for Ensuring Access to COVID-19 Vaccine Supply (JKJAV) was established to ensure access to COVID-19 vaccine supply in a safe, effective, and timely manner.

The National COVID-19 Immunisation Programme outlines the policies, vaccine supply procurement strategies, implementation efforts and monitoring to curb the COVID-19 pandemic nationally.

Malaysia has also planned for the track & trace system to be implemented for all pharmaceutical products. Given the pandemic and the urgent need for a safe & secure system for the supply chain of COVID-19 vaccines, Malaysia started the Vaccine Management System (VMS). The VMS system monitors the movement of each vaccine vial starting from the manufacturer until it reaches the vaccinee through a unique serial number on each vaccine vial. ”

6

Can you describe any significant achievements, as well as any key barriers that you have experienced?

How did you manage to overcome them? (e.g., example of good practices)

THAILAND

“ Significant accomplishments include a healthy perception, robust networking, strategic communication, and solid teamwork through trustworthy and friendly approaches. These elements are critical for achieving greater success, especially when dealing with international relations. With all the above, we can move quickly to AVSSR affirmation and acceptance among stakeholders.

One of the tough barriers to overcome is shared understanding/common goal, with everyone on the same page to have alignment on the benefits of such collaboration among all stakeholders. Realizing that each entity has a main objective and is expected to play a key role in this task in order to ensure that it remain a success. There will always be a redline that precludes everyone else from entering or attempting to overcome that too. NVI may help lighten that redline, making it more loose, thinner, and even disappear, in order to gain mutual benefit.

This is a challenge to overcome; it is difficult to get everyone on the same page. However, NVI has always highlighted the significance of a Vaccine Alliance in helping people to live healthier, reduce mortality, and improve overall public health. That everyone accepts this attitude and does everything in their power to ensure that their people benefit more. I believe that if we care about the community regardless of our own benefit, everyone senses and appreciates our attempts to improve people's health and, as a result, they are actively supports us. This is humanitarian work; we do not work for ourselves, instead for the benefit of the general population. This is my good practice: doing it with a pure heart, transparency, serviceability, and trustworthiness. ”



7

Please describe lessons learned from being part of ASEAN, amid the pandemic response.

MALAYSIA

“ During the pandemic, communication, negotiations and various collaboration activities were crucial for quick decision-making and response. There was a crucial need to review existing processes to facilitate and ensure ease of implementation within the government agencies. Exploring new and sometimes “out of the box” options, while abiding to the existing laws and regulations, was also necessary. Other than that, all staff were encouraged to be innovative and creative in finding new information-sharing methods and to explore e-learning tools, not only to disseminate healthcare-related information but also enhancing the pharmacy services in ensuring patients health based on the new norms.

Strong leadership and political will was also needed to ensure the implementation of various action plans. Collaboration between government Agencies/ Ministries with the private sector, non-governmental organizations and other relevant stakeholders, also contributed to ensuring successful implementation of programmes such as the Immunization Programme during the pandemic, as well as sustaining the supply chain particularly for medicines use in the management of COVID-19.

Besides that, collaboration between ASEAN Member States was needed to secure access of certain medicines, including the ability to better negotiate for medicine prices. ”

THAILAND

“ Concerning the Vaccine Security Effort, this pandemic pointed out the importance of vaccines and their effectiveness in controlling and mitigating the negative impact of COVID-19. Even if the country has a rapid protocol or measures that disallow transportation, the vaccine is still required to protect people's health and reduce fatality rates among the valuable population.

7

Please describe lessons learned from being part of ASEAN, amid the pandemic response.

However, every nation needs such vaccines, but there are only a few suppliers. As a result, demand and supply were mismatched during the COVID-19 pandemic, and many groups were unable to receive such vaccines. Looking into the details, almost all developing countries must secure vaccines using their own budgets and allocation schemes; however, capital is obviously limited and cannot be met in a timely manner, leading to a high rate of infected cases and fatalities.

Thailand then underlines the value of developing homegrown vaccines in several platforms, including DNA, mRNA, viral vector, inactivated, protein subunit, and live attenuated vaccines. This is being transformed into the Blueprint Access to COVID-19 Vaccine for Thais, by providing financial support to each research institute in the amount of US\$ 150 million. We expect to have a promising vaccine prototype that could be produced and sold by a local supplier, leading to the country's long-term self-reliance.

That is our lesson: we need to get more favorable local vaccine manufacturers, less importation, more security, and greater self-reliance. Furthermore, human resources are critical in strengthening regional infrastructure for capacity readiness. Building human workforces is critical for achieving long-term vaccine self-reliance.

Furthermore, one of the long-term successes that is streamlining the vaccine development process is sustainable financing. Sustainable investment is critical for the development of a good vaccine production environment. Without financial support, it is possible that the development cycle will be interrupted, resulting in bottlenecks or gaps in vaccine development.

Furthermore, information sharing between member states is critical, particularly for border controls and country harmonization. Sharing a list of confirmed cases from frontier nations are appreciated, as is saving lives regardless of nationality or country of origin, because we are ASEAN and we are all human. Major success is vaccine donation and allocation among ASEAN members; no one was left behind, and everyone received a high-quality COVID-19 vaccine. ”

8

What are the policies/priorities under 2022 Thailand chairmanship for the health sector?

THAILAND

“ Thailand takes the lead on **three** initiatives:

- 1) AVSSR, which focuses on vaccines;
- 2) ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases (ACPHEED), which focuses on the "response" component. The AVSSR prioritizes a healthier population, with an eye towards vaccine security, whereas ACPHEED prioritizes a healthier community through access to quality medicines and vaccines. As a result, when it comes to those policies, we are the pioneers of vaccines, medicines, and health interventions designed to prevent emerging diseases
- 3) The ASEAN Centre for Active Ageing and Innovation an ASEAN center to enhance better life quality of ageing and well prepare ASEAN to be ready for ageing society in the future. The Centre is another deliverable of Thailand’s ASEAN Chairmanship under the theme of “Advancing Partnership for Sustainability”. ”



Q&A

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Contact:

Dyuti Schuwey Daepfen

Community of Practice (CoP) Manager

Vaccine Procurement Practitioners Network (VPPN)

dschuwey@unicef.org