



AIC COMMENTARY

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ASEAN-India Partnership to Strengthen Global Health **K. Srinath Reddy***

The opportunities for expanding the scope and scale of partnerships between India and ASEAN in the health sector are many. Together, they can work to improve global health and reduce health inequities. Combined, they account for over a quarter of the global population. As the future of global health moves from a platform of shared vulnerability to a pedestal of shared values, ASEAN-India collaboration can provide the model for principled partnerships to safeguard the health and wellbeing of people across the world.

Introduction

Even as the world is waging the third year of its battle with the Covid-19, there is growing recognition that international cooperation and global solidarity are essential to overcome the dangers of present and future pandemics. Global threats call for a global thrust to counter them. This applies not only to infectious disease pandemics but also to other threats to global health which have trans-boundary connections in causation or impact, such as health disorders related to climate change or non-communicable diseases. In a highly interconnected and inter-dependant world neither microbes nor unhealthy consumer products respect geographical or political international boundaries, while climate change affects the planet as a whole.

The designation of 2022 as ASEAN-India friendship year is particularly propitious for global health, as India (population of nearly 1.4 billion) and ASEAN countries (population of 622 million) together represent 2022 million (2.022 billion) of the world's humans. Apart from being capable of providing a boost to global economic growth, through skilled and productive human resources, India and ASEAN can work together to protect and promote global health, within and beyond their regions.

ASEAN-India Partnership in Health

While there is vast scope for cooperation in health between India and ASEAN, the initial priorities may be set by those identified for the regional grouping at the 15th meeting of the health ministers of ASEAN countries at Bali, in May 2022. The joint statement issued by them identifies priorities and pathways of multi-sectoral action that resonate well with those set by India during the ongoing pandemic response. A purposeful and productive partnership between India and ASEAN will align interests, pool human and financial resources and accelerate action to advance health goals.

*Prof. K. Srinath Reddy, a cardiologist and epidemiologist, is President, Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI), New Delhi. Views expressed are personal.

ASEAN's health ministers called for strengthening "the prevention and preparedness towards public health emergencies." They aimed for strengthening the detection of public health emergencies, enhancement of mitigation strategies to address current and future public health emergencies, along with strengthening access to vaccines, therapeutics, diagnostics and other essential medical supplies. Focusing on the current global public health emergency, the statement was dedicated to pandemic preparedness and response, both in the context of Covid-19 and possible future threats.

Among the pathways they identified to achieve these goals, there are several goals, which are also part of India's prioritised agenda for pandemic preparedness and response. These include: One Health surveillance (to study zoonotic transmission of pathogens across species, with potential to spread rapidly within and across countries); genomic sequencing of microbes to surveil existing and emerging genetic variants that may become potential public health threats; global data sharing on identified pathogens, emerging variants and transmission patterns; big data analytics; regional public health laboratory networks; human and animal health collaboration; biosafety and biosecurity training.

India as a Major Source of Public Health

India has technical strength in each of these areas and is committed to further enhance capacity and competence in them through investment in institutional expansion and scaling up of skilled human resources. The recent launch of the Ayushman Bharat Health Infrastructure and Digital Health Missions, in October 2021, is a clear affirmation of India's commitment to augmentation of capacity for pandemic prevention, surveillance and control. Sharing of technical expertise, joint training programmes and data sharing mechanisms can feature as mutually beneficial areas of ASEAN-India collaboration.

The pandemic also revealed the need to produce adequate supplies of vaccines, drugs, test kits, personal protection equipment, intensive care essentials such as ventilators, home care monitoring assists such as oximeters and even accessories like disposable injection syringes and needles. While many ASEAN countries have adequate domestic capacity for producing these, some others will require international suppliers. During the pandemic, India has greatly increased its capacity for production of all of these forms of essential medical supplies. With low cost of production, India can become a dependable and affordable partner to ASEAN countries. In turn, ASEAN countries with advanced technological capabilities can invest for production in India, which can provide scale, low cost and assured quality.

Even prior to the pandemic, India had a well-earned reputation for large scale manufacture and export of several medicines and many varieties of vaccines. The Covid-19 pandemic gave a fillip to development of new vaccine platforms and expansion of vaccine manufacturing facilities. Even internationally developed vaccines have been licensed for large scale manufacturing in India to enable the global supply chain to expand quickly. Even after the pandemic recedes, global vaccine supply will depend substantially on India. ASEAN and India can partner in strengthening technical capacity for developing new vaccines and for their manufacturing on large scale.

Similar prospects exist for drug development and manufacturing too. India's capacity for producing generic drugs has already earned it the reputation of being the 'pharmacy of the world'. Even in Covid-19 pandemic, Indian pharmaceutical firms have been licensed to

manufacture new anti-viral drugs like molnupiravir and paxlovid. India is also expanding its capacity for manufacturing biologicals and biosimilars. ASEAN countries and India can partner in drug development, drug manufacturing and pharmacovigilance.

Lessons from Pandemic

There is a large agenda for health, even beyond pandemic preparedness and response. Even in the cluster of infectious diseases, vector borne diseases are common threats to India and several South East Asian countries. While plasmodium vivax is the dominant parasite causing malaria in South and South East Asia, falciparum malaria in the countries which are neighbours to North Eastern India is a matter of great concern. Dengue is another mosquito transmitted illness in India and several ASEAN countries. As climate change increases global warming, mosquito vectors of malaria and dengue will spread farther and faster. Control of such vector borne diseases can be an area of collaborative research and joint public health action between India and ASEAN. Tuberculosis and HIV-AIDS too should feature on the platform of collaboration for scientific research and public health action.

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are the leading causes of death in India and ASEAN countries. Many ASEAN countries are more advanced in epidemiological transition, with older populations and higher levels of urbanisation. As a result, they have experienced high burdens of NCDs for a longer time than India. Countries like Singapore and Thailand have been leaders in control of NCDs. While tobacco control has been implemented with strong commitment and high levels of success in these countries, other public health strategies and clinical advances can offer a rich field for knowledge sharing. That experience will be of great value to India.

India's strength in digital health is rapidly growing, with many incubation centres, start-ups and innovations for personal health monitoring, point of care diagnostics, tele-health and delivery of healthcare in institutional settings. Big data systems are being established. Information technology is being used to enhance efficiency and accountability of health systems. Electronic health records are being integrated. Covid-19 vaccination programme was delivered extensively, to a large population across the vast country, with commendable success due to support from digital technologies. India can partner with ASEAN for supply of low cost technologies for primary and secondary care, while benefiting from the technical expertise of ASEAN countries for the development and manufacture of technologically more advanced devices and instruments for advanced medical care.

Areas of Cooperation between ASEAN and India

India and ASEAN countries have a rich legacy of traditional systems of medicine which are widely practiced and relevant even today. India's AYUSH programme of traditional medicine is receiving strong support from central and state governments. Several ASEAN countries too harmoniously blend traditional systems with allopathic medicine. There is a great scope for knowledge sharing in this area.

As primary care led universal health coverage (UHC) is a major target of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), there is strong political commitment to this goal in India and ASEAN. Several ASEAN countries have developed innovative and successful models for steering their health systems towards UHC. India too is strongly committed to UHC, as

enunciated in the National Health Policy of 2017. The Ayushman Bharat programme provides a strong platform for strengthening India's health system, to enable it to deliver on the promise of the UHC. Knowledge sharing on best practices and innovations would assist India and ASEAN to move surely and swiftly towards this target.

Apart from infrastructure, equipment and medical supplies, an efficient and equitable health system requires a multi-layered, multi-skilled health workforce for dependable delivery of a wide range of health services. Public health services too need to be strengthened with infusion of public health expertise. India's commitment to public health and efficient health service delivery has been amplified with the recent decision to create public health and health management cadres at central and state levels. Several ASEAN countries have well established public health institutions and systems. A partnership between India and ASEAN countries will provide a fast track for building public health capacity across both partner regions. Even global health workforce shortages can be addressed through such partnerships.

Concluding Remarks

The opportunities for expanding the scope and scale of partnerships between India and ASEAN in the health sector are many. Together, they can work to improve global health and reduce health inequities. Combined, they account for over a quarter of the global population. As the future of global health moves from a platform of shared vulnerability to a pedestal of shared values, ASEAN-India collaboration can provide the model for principled partnerships to safeguard the health and wellbeing of people across the world.

About AIC



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Considering the work of the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG), and its Report with recommendations for forging a closer partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity, the Heads of the State/Government of ASEAN and India at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2012, held at New Delhi on 19-20 December 2012, recommended the establishment of ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), which was formally inaugurated by the Hon'ble External Affairs Minister of the Government of India on 21 June 2013 at RIS. AIC serves as a resource centre for ASEAN Member States and India to fill the knowledge gaps that currently limit the opportunities for cooperation. AIC works with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India and undertakes evidence-based policy research and provide policy recommendations.

AIC Commentary Series Editor: Dr Prabir De, AIC at RIS, New Delhi

Contact us at:

ASEAN-India Centre (AIC)
Research and Information System of Developing Countries (RIS)
Zone-IV-B, Fourth Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road
New Delhi – 110003, India
Tel. +91-11-24682177-80
Fax: +91-11-24682173-74
E-mail: aic@ris.org.in
Visit our website at: <http://aic.ris.org.in>

@AIC_aseanindia

