Global leaders need to coordinate exit from lockdowns

The Covid-19 pandemic is a global health and economic crisis, and a global response is needed – especially to exit the many nationwide lockdowns now in place. Otherwise, chains of transmission will recur.

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For The Straits Times

Covid-19 is a global crisis. Yet the international responses that have been made at the country or city level are piecemeal: preparations and planning have largely been the responsibility of local governments.

This has to change if the world is to emerge from the coronavirus pandemic stronger. Agreed as a new norm is how the International Monetary Fund and World Bank began virtual conferences of leaders this week.

Some headway is being made with the Group of 20 (G20) finance ministers and central bankers expected to finalise a freeze on bilateral government loans repayable six to nine months when they meet today. This is a positive move and more such co-ordination is needed.

PERVADING LOCKDOWN

LIMITED GLOBAL IMPACT

The current state of the world is abnormal as the global economy slows to a crawl. Last month, countries from six continents unilaterally implemented either partial lockdowns or border closures, or a complete lockdown that restricted most city movement of people, goods and services, ranging from closing down parts of the manufacturing sector to the closing of small businesses and schools.

Countries such as Italy, China and the United Kingdom in Europe, to India, and the Philippines in Asia, effectively declared state of emergency to halt non-essential industries and businesses, as well as enforce strict movement restrictions that required people to essentially stay within their primary residences and limit commutes within the country.

Some of these national closures were announced and executed with little prior warning and planning, resulting in the sudden implementation of curfews as well as the suspension of supply chains, with all the associated socioeconomic and health shortages. These have resulted in job losses, job insecurity and decline in the quality of life for millions of people.

Countries and territories such as South Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan prioritised different strategies, relying on rigorous contact tracing, widespread testing and early quarantining of high-risk cases to contain the outbreak without shutting down the entire country or territory, although all have had their own degrees of border controls that suspended entry to visitors who have been regions experiencing widespread community transmission.

Border closures aim to minimise importations and exports that could lead to further transmission, whereas a complete lockdown aims to stop the spread of the local transmission.

When timed and executed well, both measures together can contain or even local outbreaks of the coronavirus Sars-CoV-2 that causes the disease Covid-19 as exemplified by reports from mainland China and specifically Wuhan, the epicentre of the pandemic.

Controlling local transmission has allowed China gradually lift its curbs on manufacturing and small businesses, sectors and local and international travel, but with strict borders, the risk of importing cases or potential second wave of widespread community transmission is very real. For the past three weeks, China has rarely seen imported infections from indigenous ones.

There are many problems with country lockdowns, they work better in well-resourced countries that are able to provide compensatory resources to tide their citizens through a prolonged period of scarcity and isolation.

Countries with insufficient planning and resourcing would potentially have its lockdown prematurely to allow imports of essential food and medical supplies, or to provide for the vulnerable communities to avoid a different humanitarian crisis.

National responses have amplified current inequalities as some nations and communities have been left behind to fend for themselves, with boarding debarking resources and restricted the export of medical and personal protective equipment (PPE) necessary for the management of the pandemic.

This exacerbates the shortage of vital PPE, such as surgical masks, face shields and gowns, in low- and middle-income countries that lack the financial capacity to engage in price negotiations to guarantee supply.

Apart from inequitable outcomes, country lockdowns that are individually executed have limited effects. They can reduce transmission and death rates in individual cities or countries for a short period, until movement of people and goods resume, increasing infection risks again. Thus they cannot at best achieve a temporary local containment, but will fail to slow the Covid-19 pandemic if one adopts a global lockdown.

Most crucially, the subsequent opening of economies and "unlocking" of these measures, if not coordinated globally, will unleash a second, third and subsequent waves of infections. "Unlocking" in this case refers to countries electing to ease internal lockdowns on various sectors and international movement.

Of course what would work better going forward is a coordinated lockdown that would dramatically reduce commercial activities around the world for a pre-determined period to break the chain of transmission of the virus. This would deliver a sharp but short shock to the world economy, after which activities can resume.

COORDINATED EXIT

But this did not happen. What is crucial now, since a coordinated lockdown has not occurred, is how the world coordinates toward the national lockdowns.

First, there has to be benchmarks to help governments decide when transmission is at a level that would permit the unlocking of various internal sectors and local and international travel without raising the risk of imported re-infections from travellers.

Without a coordinated approach, staggering prematurely ending the national lockdowns could compromise any gains made and the potential weak link in the chain (in an app or the inability of every country to contact Covid-19 invariably would increase the risk of importing cases, hence, clarity is needed on how the measures can be eased, and the World Health Organization must provide technical guidance on the appropriate measures to assess risks and manage the global pandemic as lockdowns occur.

Second, a risk assessment approach, sector by sector, is needed to safely unlock lockdowns, rather than a blanket rule to ease or keep lockdowns measures.

For example, activities involving specific population strata that are deemed to have low infection risks such as allowing school children to resume classes if transmission had been shown to be low in school settings. Next, perhaps a graduated approach to permit partial re-opening of various sectors and resumption of manufacturing and trade, but continuing with restrictions on international travel.

Risk assessment at present, however, is hampered by the lack of validated epidemiological models that are needed to understand transmission patterns and trajectories during the past few months. And a lack of evidence on the immunity provided by previous infections to people in permitting those with a positive serology to safety re-enter the workforce.

Third, engagement. Despite the above uncertainties, the business sector can be tapped to contribute more to the planning for unlocking the sector from aviation, manufacturing or small businesses, for example, perhaps coordinated through an international Forum or World Trade Organization, can work with governments to develop a gradual plan to resume operations, and ensure compensatory mechanisms that were put in place during lockdowns are fully honoured and new ones established if deemed necessary.

Fourth, improvement in development assistance. One specific change needed is in the definitions of overseas development assistance to be expanded, so that help given under many such programmes globally can compare all goods and services necessary for weaker nations, including conflict zones and failed states as countries from the lockdown. This would require international organisations such as the World Bank and other aided countries, to redirect resources, as coordinated by the United Nations, and necessary to invoke any mechanism or sanctions.

The execution of international aid still needs to be better aligned, including stabilising coordinated systems that deliver aid as needed and only, and in line with the time frame that help ensure that all countries have the capacity to respond to public health emergencies in the future as has been seen under the G-20 in its recent declaration.

Fifth, making multilateral actions, including the global meetings of leaders this week, to conceptualise and coordinate plans for these. There are many other international issues pertinent to coordination, such as re-orienting measures and support to developing countries, andƟers, cautioned re-orienting measures and support to developing countries, and countries to necessitate more assistance packages promised.

The question now remains; Do we have the will to come together and achieve this?