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 from 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 immediate and unilateral measures that have been mostly at the country or city level, not because governments have been unable or unwilling to do so, but because of the responsibility of individual governments.

This has come to change: the world is waking up to the common pandemic stronger. A good time to take a pause is the International Monetary Fund and World Bank begins their annual conferences of leaders this month.

Some headway is being made with the G20’s 20/20/20 initiative, with finance ministers and central bankers expected to offer a freeze on bilateral loans and new repayments for six to nine months when they meet today. This is a more positive move and more such coordination is needed.

PERVASIVE LOCKDOWNS, LIMITED GLOBAL IMPACT

The current state of the world is abysmal as the global economy slows to a crawl. Last month, countries from six continents, unilaterally implemented either a partial or full lockdowns, closed borders, or a complete lockdown that restricted intra-city movement of people, goods and services, ranging from closing down of the manufacturing sector to the closure of schools.

Countries such as Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom in Europe, in China, India and the Philippines in Asia, effectively declared a state of emergency that halted all non-essential industries and businesses, as well as enforced strict movement restrictions that required people to essentially stay within their primary residences and limit movements between the cities.

Some of these national closures were enforced and executed with little prior warning and planning, resulting in the sudden implementation of curfews as well as the suspension of supply chains, which raised the specter of food shortages. These have resulted in job losses, widespread anxiety and destitution for quality of life for millions of people.

Countries such as South Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan pursued different strategies, relying on rigorous contact tracing, widespread testing and early quarantining of all high-risk contacts. The outbreak without lockdowning the country continued, although it has implemented varying degrees of border controls that suspended entry quotas who have been to regions experiencing widespread community transmission.

Borders closure to limit imports and exports that could lead to further transmissions, whereas a complete lockdown aims to disrupt uncontrollable local transmissions.

When timed and executed well, both measures together can contain the spread of the coronavirus in Sars-CoV-2, that causes the disease Covid-19, as exemplified by boxShadowing from mainland China and specifically Wuhan, the first epicentre of the pandemic.

Controlling local transmission has allowed China to gradually lift its curbs on manufacturing and small businesses sectors, schools and local and international travel, but as it reopens borders, the risk of importations contributing to a potential second wave of widespread community transmission is very real. For the past three weeks, China has notably more infections than indigenous ones.

There are many problems with country lockdowns. They work better in well-resourced countries that are able to provide compensationary resources to those affected through a prolonged period of scarcity and isolation.

Countries with insufficient planning and resources would inevitability have to ease the lockdown prematurely to allow impacts of essential food and medicine supplies, or to provide for the vulnerable communities to avert a different humanitarian crisis.

National responses have amplified current inequities as some nation-states and communities have turned to local lending for vaccines, by boarding unaided, resources and restricting the expeditious medical and personal protective equipment (PPE) necessary for the management of the epidemic. This exacerbates the shortage of vital PPE, such as surgical masks, face shields and goggles, in low- and middle-income countries that lack the financial capacity to engage in price negotiation to guarantee supply.

Apart from inequitable outcomes, country lockdowns that are individually executed have limited effect. They can only reduce transmission and death rates in individual countries for a short period, until movements of people and goods resume, increasing infection risks again. Thus, they are at best a temporary local containment, but well-fals to slow the Covid-19 pandemic if one adopts a global outlook.

Most crucially, the subsequent opening up of economies and “unlocking” of these measures, if not coordinated globally, will unleash second, third and subsequent waves of infections.

Unlocking this crisis refers to countries electing to cease internal curbs on various sectors and international and movement.

For those who would have worked better is a coordinated lockdown that would dramatically reduce most commercial activities across the world for a pre-determined period to break the chains of transmission of the virus. This would deliver the sharp but short shock to the world economy, after which activities can resume.

COORDINATED EXIT

But this did not happen. What is thus crucial now, since a coordinated lockdowns has not occurred, is how we open borders in an orderly manner.

This can be a blueprint to help governments decide when transmission is at a level that would permit the unlocking of various sectors and borders and international travel without raising the risk of imported re-infections from travellers.

Without a coordinated approach, staggered or prematurely ending the national lockdown could render all gains and efforts for weaker nations, including conflict prone and failed states, to exit from the lockdown. This would require international support as such as the World Bank and other aided countries, to individually allocate resources, as coordinated by the United Nations, if not to ensure any macroeconomist on accumulation.

The execution of an international aid sends to be underpinned, including establishing coordinated regional and country-specific measures needed and vulnerable, and in the long term, to secure that all countries have the capacity to respond to public health emergencies in the future as has been recommended by the G-20 in its recent declaration.

Fifth, make one of existing multilateral agreements, involving the global meetings of leaders this week, to conceptualise and coordinate plans for exist. There are many other international issues pertinent to coordinated exits, such as a common agreement on trade, travel, control of borders and businesses and the coordination of flights and aviation, and ability to housing public assistance packages promised.

The game new remains. Do leaders have the will to seize this momentum and achieve this goal?