

CLIENT ALERT

Coronavirus: APEC Health Cooperation Imperative as Economic Integration and Interdependence Grows in the Presence of Health Threats

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APEC Health Cooperation on the Coronavirus

Health officials of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) member economies are convening in Putrajaya, Malaysia this weekend to discuss strategies for the surveillance and management of the outbreak of 2019-nCov (coronavirus).

The semiannual meeting of APEC health ministries comes as new cases of coronavirus continue to be confirmed throughout the Asia-Pacific region and around the world. As of February 6th, coronavirus cases had been confirmed in 14 of the 21 APEC economies, including: China, Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Japan, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, Russia, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, the United States, and Viet Nam. Cases have also been confirmed in 14 other countries and territories in Europe and Asia.

Health ministry representatives are expected to share updated information on the coronavirus and discuss plans for continued work together to improve the management of the current outbreak as well as future emerging disease outbreaks in the Asia-Pacific region. APEC economies will also be examining supply-side strategies to strengthen vaccine-based public health responses to address new and resurgent disease epidemics and pandemics.

APEC and SARS

The APEC forum has been a pioneer in addressing the public health and trade impacts of infectious disease threats. APEC was established in 1989 as an inter-governmental forum to facilitate trade and economic cooperation among the countries of the Pacific-Rim.

In 2003, when the global architecture for identifying and responding to health emergencies was still being developed, APEC economies took early steps to call for enhanced cooperation on infectious disease prevention and preparedness, and proposed the *APEC Action Plan for SARS*. This constituted a set of guiding principles for health screening procedures for travelers which were endorsed by APEC Senior Officials, Health Ministers, and Heads of State.

As chair of APEC 2003, Thailand elevated SARS as a top issue on the multilateral trade agenda and it was then that APEC first recognized the linkage between infectious diseases, trade, and economic growth.

APEC Health Cooperation Post SARS

The events of 2003 led to the establishment of a temporary APEC Health Task Force to help address health-related threats to economies' trade and security, focusing mainly on emerging infectious diseases. With the spread of H5N1 in 2006, the Health Task Force was upgraded to a permanent body within the APEC organization and renamed the APEC Health Working Group.

Over the past seventeen years since the SARS outbreak, multilateral cooperation on health and infectious diseases has greatly improved information sharing between governments, especially with countries such as China. Increased transparency and improved trust, embodied by the spirit of the APEC platform, has enabled these governments to quickly work together to respond and mitigate harmful impacts on health and the global economy.

The Role of APEC in the Presence of Health Threats

It could take months or even years for economists to measure the full economic fallout of the coronavirus. But it is already clear that the impact will be significantly larger than it was during the SARS crisis in 2003. APEC economies are significantly more integrated and interdependent than they were back then and China plays a much larger role in the global economy, contributing 15% to global GDP compared to only 4% in 2003.

Health, trade, and the economy are always intertwined. Emerging infectious disease outbreaks are not going away. They will continue to disrupt an increasingly interconnected global economy for the foreseeable future. Dialogue and cooperation on health, trade, and economic issues is the only path forward. The meeting in Malaysia will be an opportunity for APEC officials to tackle this reality for the mutual benefit and prosperity of the APEC region and the world. It is an ongoing statement to the value of APEC in improving Pacific Rim economies and human lives.

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