

1

INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 Impacts and Responses across Southeast Asia

Lee Hwok Aun, Siwage Dharma Negara and
Jayant Menon

THREE DISTINCT YEARS: 2020, 2021, 2022

Covid-19 shook the globe at the dawn of a new decade. The scale and speed of viral transmission, and the concurrent health and economic crises resulting from border closures and mobility restrictions, posed unprecedented policy and political challenges. Southeast Asia shared the global experience of Covid-19, with distinct national and regional features.

At the onset of the pandemic in early 2020, the world gravitated towards “flattening the curve” by minimizing human contact, which shut down economies except for essential services. As the year progressed and countries experienced waves of Covid-19 infection, mobility restrictions and border closures were maintained in much of Southeast Asia. Governments extended economic relief and stimulus to protect jobs, mitigate income losses and keep businesses afloat. Governments also grappled with the challenges of coordinating security, health and economic policies,

creating and managing mobile applications for recording movement and tracing the contacts of infected persons, and communicating information between agencies and to the public. The region performed relatively well in containing Covid-19 infection, but almost all economies significantly contracted. The adverse consequences were mitigated for some segments, especially those able to shift to online work and formal entities supported by public assistance, but swathes of society experienced great socio-economic hardship.

The storyline of 2021 was markedly different. The more transmissible Delta variant surged across the region but, having gained experience, including in contact tracing applications and public communication channels, governments shifted towards more localized mobility restrictions and adopted mechanisms for gauging the severity of the pandemic and applying commensurate measures for physical distancing. Countries stumbled along the way, with some incapacitated by political instability and others undermined by vested interests. Cross-border travel remained tightly controlled, with quarantine protocols widely in place. As vaccines were approved, procurement and mass roll-out were pursued as the highest priorities. Most countries accelerated Covid-19 inoculation from the second half of 2021. Southeast Asia broadly shifted into recovery mode, while public expenditure and indirect income supplements continued to provide relief and stimulus, and increasing attention was placed on job creation and reviving business activity. Cross-border travel resumed in late 2021 after an almost two-year hiatus, bringing relief to the strains placed on business, leisure and personal ties, although onerous screening and testing requirements were also introduced.

The momentum of economic recovery was sustained into 2022, marking the third leg in the Covid-19 odyssey. As vaccination rates passed critical majority thresholds, the momentum of domestic and international reopening continued amid the outbreak of the Omicron variant. Tourism and services, among the most adversely impacted sectors in 2020–21, re-emerged from their protracted downturn. The general optimism at the dawn of the year, however, was soon diminished by Russia's war in Ukraine, which exacerbated supply chain disruptions and stoked global instability and inflationary pressures. Though new challenges have risen to the forefront of policy priorities, looking back remains important as societies move on.

The pandemic was also a period of accelerated data flow, with many countries conducting daily briefings on Covid-19 cases, hospitalizations, deaths and other public health indicators. The frequency and transparency of such disclosures were necessary to update the public and to provide assurance that decisions were based on the numbers. Of course, amid the immersion in data, we must not forget that the pandemic inflicted the ultimate cost in lives lost. Time plots of Covid-19 infections and mortality are perhaps the most used visualization. While helpful for outlining Covid-19 waves and the magnitude and timing of public health impact and policy progress, multiple country graphics are too cluttered for the printed page. The chapters of this book illustrate these chronologies by individual country and also underscore the distinctiveness of each country’s experience.

To set some regional context, it is perhaps useful to provide a brief overview of the cumulative health and economic impacts of the pandemic. We observe in Table 1.1 that Covid-19 cases and deaths varied across countries, though the figures may be biased by a health system’s capacity to track Covid-19 infections and deaths. Nonetheless, a general assessment of the region’s efficacy in containing infections, especially in 2020, is borne

TABLE 1.1
Southeast Asia: Cumulative Covid-19 Cases and Deaths (as of September 2023)

| | <i>Total Cases</i> | <i>Total Cases per Million Population</i> | <i>Total Deaths</i> | <i>Total Deaths per Million Population</i> |
|----------------|--------------------|---|---------------------|--|
| Brunei | 310,522 | 691,583 | 163 | 363 |
| Cambodia | 138,941 | 8,286 | 3,056 | 182 |
| Indonesia | 6,813,429 | 24,731 | 161,918 | 588 |
| Laos | 218,853 | 29,066 | 671 | 89 |
| Malaysia | 5,127,712 | 151,090 | 37,187 | 1,096 |
| Myanmar | 641,225 | 11,835 | 19,494 | 360 |
| Philippines | 4,111,331 | 35,578 | 66,681 | 577 |
| Singapore | 2,573,565 | 456,547 | 1,872 | 332 |
| Thailand | 4,757,049 | 66,349 | 34,471 | 481 |
| Vietnam | 11,623,372 | 118,380 | 43,206 | 440 |
| Southeast Asia | 36,315,999 | 53,449 | 368,719 | 543 |
| Rest of World | 725,452,996 | 99,436 | 6,415,449 | 879 |

Source: Our World in Data’s Covid-19 dataset at <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus> (accessed 12 May 2023).

out in the overall outcomes across three years. The regionwide averages of cases and deaths per million are lower than the figures for the rest of the world.

The economic disruption of the pandemic looms large in the gross domestic product (GDP) figures, which capture total economic activity and output (Table 1.2). Although Southeast Asia generally curbed Covid-19 contagion quite well in 2020, the region concurrently suffered steep economic downturns. This was expected because economic shutdowns were extensive and protracted, and external and uncontrollable factors such as supply chain disruptions and the total collapse of tourism hit

TABLE 1.2
Selected Countries and Regional/World Averages:
GDP and Annual Growth, 2010–22

| | <i>GDP per Capita</i> (Constant Dollar) ^a | <i>GDP Real Annual Growth (%)</i> | | | | |
|------------------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|------|------|-------|------|
| | 2020 | 2010–18 ^b | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
| <i>Southeast Asia</i> | | | | | | |
| Cambodia | 4,276 | 7.2 | 7.1 | –3.1 | 3.0 | 5.2 |
| Myanmar | 4,947 | 7.0 | 6.8 | 3.2 | –17.9 | 3.0 |
| Laos | 7,764 | 7.4 | 5.5 | 0.5 | 2.5 | 2.7 |
| Philippines | 7,773 | 6.3 | 6.1 | –9.5 | 5.7 | 7.6 |
| Vietnam | 10,451 | 6.5 | 7.4 | 2.9 | 2.6 | 8.0 |
| Indonesia | 11,516 | 5.4 | 5.0 | –2.1 | 3.7 | 5.3 |
| Thailand | 16,866 | 3.3 | 2.1 | –6.1 | 1.5 | 2.6 |
| Malaysia | 25,831 | 5.2 | 4.4 | –5.5 | 3.1 | 8.7 |
| Brunei | 61,604 | –0.2 | 3.9 | 1.1 | –1.6 | –1.6 |
| Singapore | 94,910 | 4.3 | 1.3 | –3.9 | 8.9 | 3.6 |
| <i>East Asia</i> | | | | | | |
| China | 16,297 | 7.5 | 6.0 | 2.2 | 8.4 | 3.0 |
| South Korea | 42,397 | 3.0 | 2.2 | –0.7 | 4.1 | 2.6 |
| <i>Region/World</i> | | | | | | |
| East Asia and Pacific ^c | 10,780 | 5.3 | 5.0 | –3.2 | 2.6 | 5.8 |
| All Countries Worldwide | 16,204 | 3.5 | 2.8 | –2.9 | 6.2 | 3.3 |

Notes:

a. 2017 international dollar adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP);

b. compound annual growth rate;

c. excluding high-income countries and China.

Source: World Bank's World Development Indicators at <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators> (accessed 22 May 2023).

hard, although economic stimulus had some mitigating effect. Vietnam, which averted widespread lockdown, fended off a recession in 2020—as did Myanmar, but the latter suffered a cataclysmic collapse in 2021 in the aftermath of the coup.

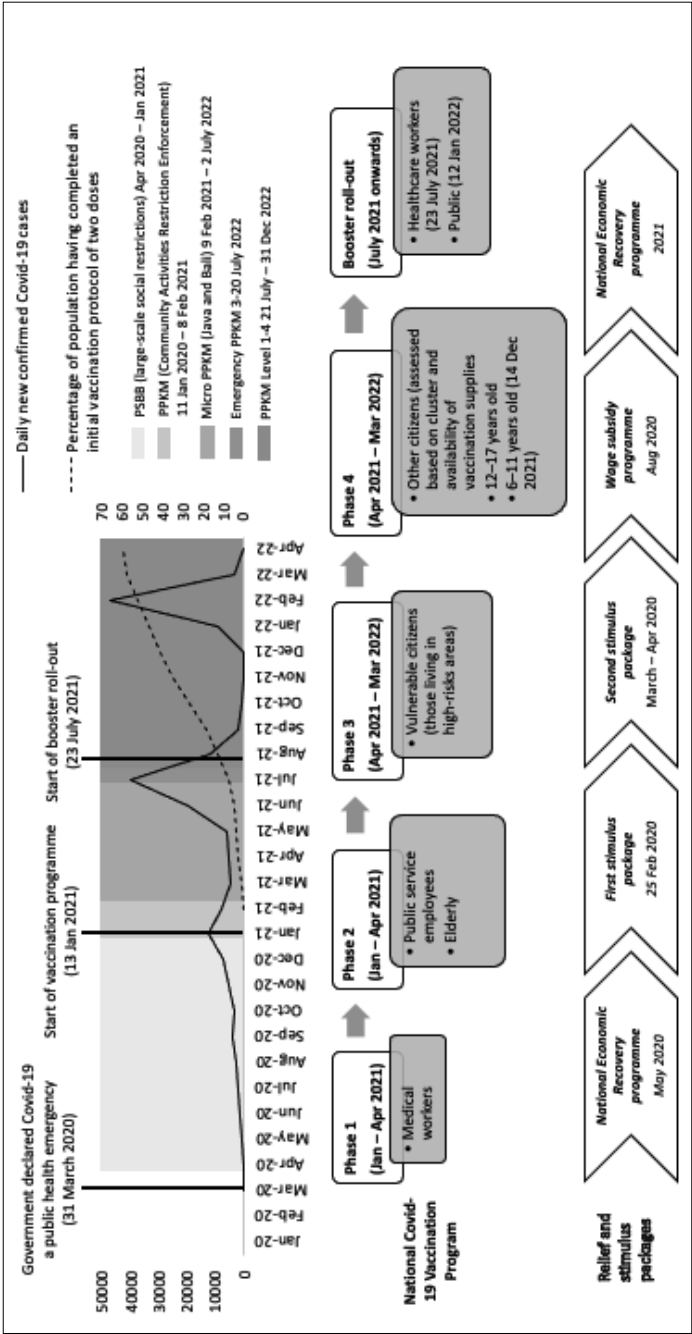
Covid-19 has been a defining experience that demands research attention to investigate what happened and what lessons we can learn, particularly in the socio-economic and public policy spheres. This book provides retrospective and critical examinations of the Covid-19 period in the region, spanning the key policy responses of restrictions to contain the virus, provision of economic relief and stimulus, and measures to facilitate recovery. The complexity of policy challenges is shown in Figures 1.1 and 1.2, which respectively attempt to encapsulate the Indonesian and Malaysian cases.¹ Alongside the headline data series of Covid-19 cases and vaccinations, as exhibited in the composite graphics summarizing the two countries' pandemic experience, the imperative to protect human life led countries to closely monitor hospitalization rates and deaths related to Covid-19. These other aspects are covered in the country chapters of this book.

The complexities of pandemic responses, of course, extend beyond the contents of summaries, such as those in Figures 1.1 and 1.2. The formulation of action plans encompassing mobility restrictions, economic shutdown and medical treatment, and the decision to shift between different phases of tightening control or reopening required unprecedented levels of coordination. The concurrent health and economic crises, and the magnitude of self-imposed shutdowns, also demanded clear communication across administrations and stakeholders and expansive assistance to households and businesses. Such challenges were distinct to 2020–22, in a region that had experienced the massive Asian financial crisis in 1997–98 and other economic downturns, and various epidemics that were more localized, albeit also more virulent. These factors reinforce the relevance of studying the journeys of Southeast Asian countries through the pandemic.

APPROACH AND CONTRIBUTION

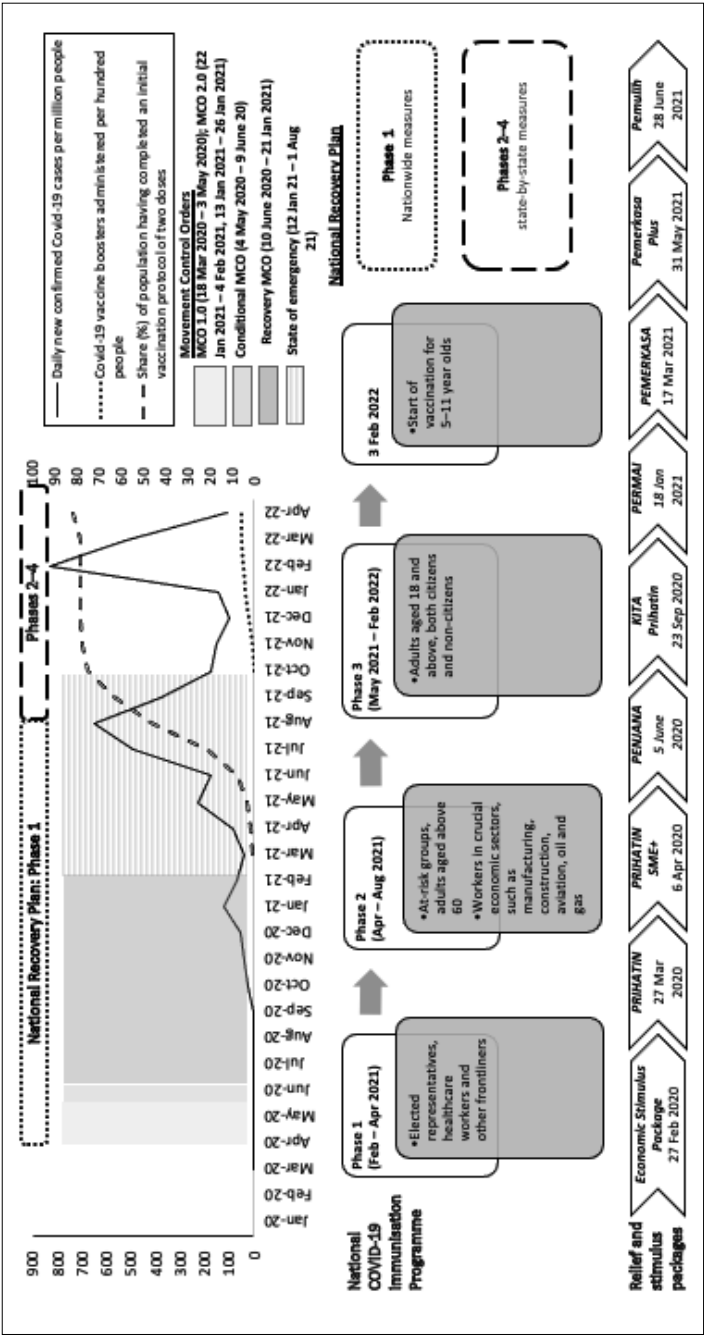
The pandemic generated great interest and prolific social science publications from as early as 2021. The cumulative literature on the

FIGURE 1.1
Indonesia's Covid-19 Experience: Cases, Mobility Restrictions, Stimulus Packages, Recovery and Vaccination Programmes



Sources: Authors' compilation from news articles.

FIGURE 1.2
Malaysia's Covid-19 Experience: Cases, Mobility Restrictions, Recovery and Vaccination Programmes



Sources: Authors' compilation from news articles.

subject matter is voluminous, even when narrowing down the search to Southeast Asia. Some of these works are based on research conducted in the early stages of the pandemic as rapid, in-the-moment responses to provide insights for managing the crises and transitioning towards recovery. A substantial literature focused on a single Southeast Asian country; prominent among these are edited volumes published in 2021 on Indonesia (Lewis and Witoelar 2021) and Malaysia (Louis, Kaur and Cheong 2021; Pandian, Kaur and Cheong 2021; Lim, Kaur and Cheong 2021). The books provided wide-ranging insights into these two countries' experiences in the economic, educational and psychological realms. More recently, the chapters in Indrawati et al. (2023) explain how Indonesia handled the Covid-19 pandemic and its effects on the economy and social life during 2020–21, from the perspective of policymakers who were involved in the design of the National Economic Recovery Programme and scholars who closely monitored and evaluated the policy responses. Singapore's stories of coping with the pandemic, from the onset of restrictions to the reopening in 2022, were collated by Yee and Tambyah (2022).

The gravity and universality of the pandemic inspired various multi-country publications spanning Southeast Asia. These edited volumes, primarily consisting of individual country studies on a specific subject, build on both the uniqueness of country experiences and the need for specialized focus among the numerous topics pertinent to Covid-19. Shin, McKenzie and Oh (2022) assembled country studies on an array of topics—from digitalization to migration to community-level responses—to survey pandemic responses and derive post-pandemic lessons. Aslam and Gunaratna (2022), who cover South, West and Southeast Asia, examine policies in various spheres as well, notably the security dimensions, recognizing that the restrictions imposed to contain the pandemic have involved security forces and may have acute effects on marginalized and politically volatile communities. The papers compiled in Sciortino (2023) focus on the social protection offered by Southeast Asian countries to citizens and residents, and emphasize biases and limitations that omitted swathes of the population, especially the informally employed and migrant workers. Tan and Chan (2023), another notable compendium, probed migration, demographic and educational impacts of Covid-19.

This book is the product of a research project that started in mid-2021. From the outset, we place high priority on comparative analysis, and set out to formulate a multi-country study project that addressed key challenges of the pandemic thus far and facilitated cross-country learning. The pandemic had been unfolding for a year and a half. Countries had gained experience in mitigating Covid-19 infection and extending social assistance while grappling with the more contagious Delta variant, procuring vaccines and planning inoculation roll-outs. The prospect for recovery was brightening. Similarities and differences had emerged among Southeast Asian countries' pandemic management, and the diversity of economic development levels, geography and political systems provided frameworks for organizing comparative study.

We deemed that the most valuable contribution this book could make, as the research progressed over a few months along with vaccination roll-outs and an increasing momentum of economic recovery, would be to investigate the full experience of pandemic impacts and responses. In conceptualizing the potential chapters to be written, we were cognizant of the breadth of subjects and the distinctiveness of country experiences, as evidenced by the richness of the edited volumes cited earlier in this chapter.

Meeting our objectives entailed grouping countries by subject matter and assembling contributors from the region. Instead of collating generic overviews of each country's Covid-19 experience that could lack depth, or openly inviting contributions that would yield disparate topics, we formulated study themes that encapsulated specific phenomena and policy challenges regarding Covid-19, and assigned countries especially suited for drawing out comparative lessons within each theme. We also strove to include as many countries from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as possible.

The chapters in this final product, covering nine of ASEAN's ten members, address the specificities of each country's experience and discuss policy implications. To further enhance the lessons learnt, the book includes comparative synthesis essays that critically engage with the country studies, drawing out key similarities and differences in five thematic groups and policy lessons for the future.

SOUTHEAST ASIAN DIVERSITY AND DISPARITY: DESIGNATING COVID-19 RESEARCH THEMES

We formulated four themes to optimize Southeast Asia's diversity of geography, demography, economic development and political systems, and a fifth that takes a regional perspective. These themes are derived from economic, demographic and geographic criteria that warrant a brief discussion, with reference to economic, demographic and governance indicators. Comparisons across the region, especially on this subject, which encompasses public health, economic and security apparatus of the state, must place in context the disparities in income levels, economic structure and geography (Coxhead 2018), as well as the range of political regimes—with mixes of monarchy, parliamentary systems, presidential republics and centralized and federal systems, and varying levels of democratic freedom (Croissant and Lorenz 2018).

The first theme, Covid-19 in the transition economies, is defined by developmental conditions. Similarities across the transition economies of Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar are apparent. The countries flanking Thailand to the east and west have the lowest GDP per capita of the region (Table 1.3) and lesser financial resources on the whole, although they qualify to a greater extent for international development assistance. Lower urbanization and a higher share of agriculture in employment exert varying impacts on pandemic response; viral contagion is higher in densely populated areas and in services and industry jobs. However, the mitigating factors must also be juxtaposed with the exceedingly large informal economy and low social protection, while deficiencies in internet and broadband access in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar hindered their ability to perform contact tracing, online work and learning, and other adaptations (Table 1.4). The Myanmar coup of February 2021 also impacted adversely on governance in a singular manner, distinguishing the country from all others.

Governance of these countries is also regarded as less effective, although these are perception-based evaluations and we must be circumspect when drawing causal links between political systems and pandemic response measures (Table 1.5). Relatively autocratic regimes may be able to implement lockdowns—and create compliance with mandates in general,

TABLE 1.3
Southeast Asian Countries (Lowest to Highest GDP per Capita): Economic and Demographic Profile, 2020

| | GDP per Capita (Constant US\$) ^a | Share of Total Employment (%) ^b | | | Population (Millions) | Urban Population (Percentage of Total) | Health Spending (Percentage of GDP) |
|-------------|--|--|----------|----------|--------------------------|--|---|
| | | Agriculture | Industry | Services | | | |
| Cambodia | 4,276 | 38.9 | 25.4 | 35.7 | 16.40 | 24.2 | 7.5 |
| Myanmar | 4,947 | 46.5 | 18.6 | 35.0 | 53.42 | 31.1 | 4.6 |
| Laos | 7,764 | 58.1 | 10.8 | 31.1 | 7.32 | 36.3 | 2.7 |
| Philippines | 7,773 | 24.3 | 18.7 | 57.0 | 112.19 | 47.4 | 5.1 |
| Vietnam | 10,451 | 29.0 | 33.1 | 37.8 | 96.65 | 37.3 | 4.7 |
| Indonesia | 11,516 | 29.0 | 21.8 | 49.3 | 271.86 | 56.6 | 3.4 |
| Thailand | 16,866 | 31.6 | 22.5 | 45.9 | 71.48 | 51.4 | 4.4 |
| Malaysia | 25,831 | 9.6 | 28.3 | 62.1 | 33.20 | 77.2 | 4.1 |
| Brunei | 61,604 | 1.3 | 24.3 | 74.4 | 0.44 | 78.3 | 2.4 |
| Singapore | 94,910 | 0.3 | 14.4 | 85.3 | 5.69 | 100.0 | 6.1 |

Notes:

a. 2017 international dollar adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP);

b. sectoral shares of GDP do not necessarily total one hundred, due to differences in categorization.

Source: World Bank's World Development Indicators at <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators> (accessed 22 May 2023).

TABLE 1.4
Southeast Asian Countries (Lowest to Highest GDP per Capita): Structural Features Relevant to Pandemic Management

| | <i>Informal per Total Employment (%)^a</i> | <i>Population Covered by Social Protection (%)^b</i> | <i>Internet Use (Percentage of Population), 2021^c</i> | <i>Fixed Broadband Subscriptions (per Hundred People), 2021^d</i> |
|-------------|--|--|--|---|
| Cambodia | 89.4 (2019) | 3.1 (2013) | 60.15 | 2.03 |
| Myanmar | 81.0 (2020) | 13.8 (2017) | 44.02 | 1.66 |
| Laos | 88.8 (2017) | 2.2 (2018) | 62.00 | 2.03 |
| Philippines | 62.8 (2018) | 40.6 (2015) | 52.68 | 8.45 |
| Vietnam | 68.6 (2022) | 34.9 (2014) | 74.21 | 19.83 |
| Indonesia | 80.2 (2022) | 44.6 (2019) | 62.10 | 4.54 |
| Thailand | 65.0 (2018) | 71.9 (2018) | 85.27 | 17.35 |
| Malaysia | 8.3 (2019) | 76.7 (2016) | 96.75 | 11.12 |
| Brunei | 31.0 (2021) | — | 98.08 | 17.83 |
| Singapore | — | — | 91.10 | 25.69 |

Notes:

a. Informal employment as defined by country;

b. percentage of population participating in social insurance, social safety net, unemployment benefits and active labour market programmes. Estimates include both direct and indirect beneficiaries.

Sources:

a. Department of Statistics Malaysia. 2020; all other countries: ILOSTAT's compilations from national labour force surveys;

b, c, d. World Bank's World Development Indicators at <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators> (accessed 22 May 2023).

TABLE 1.5
Southeast Asian Countries (Lowest to Highest GDP per Capita):
Indicators of Democracy and Governance

| | <i>V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index Ranking (2022)^a</i> | <i>Worldwide Governance Indicators (2021) Percentile^b</i> | | |
|-------------|---|--|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| | | <i>Political Stability^c</i> | <i>Government Effectiveness</i> | <i>Control of Corruption</i> |
| Cambodia | 146 | 43.9 | 36.1 | 11.5 |
| Myanmar | 173 | 4.7 | 8.7 | 15.9 |
| Laos | 167 | 69.8 | 30.3 | 15.4 |
| Philippines | 100 | 17.0 | 57.7 | 34.1 |
| Vietnam | 161 | 44.8 | 62.0 | 47.1 |
| Indonesia | 74 | 27.8 | 65.4 | 38.5 |
| Thailand | 147 | 27.4 | 60.6 | 35.1 |
| Malaysia | 97 | 50.9 | 81.3 | 61.1 |
| Brunei | — | 92.9 | 91.4 | 86.1 |
| Singapore | 101 | 97.6 | 100.0 | 98.6 |

Notes:

- a. 179 countries ranked;
- b. figures indicate the country performs better than x per cent of the total countries surveyed;
- c. political stability and absence of violence.

Sources: V-Dem Institute (2023); World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators at <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/Home/Reports> (accessed 24 May 2023).

such as vaccination—with less resistance from citizens, but they may also be less responsive to popular issues and grievances compared to democratic systems. In view of the lesser data access and fewer research resources to investigate specific questions, the country studies of Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar in this project provide an overview of the pandemic impacts and responses. This project was, however, also able to incorporate findings of a survey conducted in Cambodia and Laos.

Southeast Asia's most populous countries—Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam—faced pandemic management challenges arising from their demographic conditions, with the added features of archipelagic geography in Indonesia and the Philippines (Table 1.3). This project thus grouped the three under the theme of managing and mismanaging the pandemic, with a focus on mobility restrictions and efforts to curb contagion. This assignment of subject and country case studies also aimed to juxtapose the differing strategies that had already emerged in the first year of the pandemic. The

Philippines' stricter and longer lockdown contrasted starkly with Vietnam's policy of refraining from extensive lockdowns in 2020, while Indonesia's approach was somewhere in between. Vietnam's high levels of internet access and exceptionally high broadband subscription rate also suggested that the country's digital infrastructure potentially enabled effective contact tracing and compiling and disseminating information—possibilities that were worth investigating (Table 1.4).

The extensive coordination required in national pandemic management warranted a specific investigation. Covid-19 coordination encompassed two dimensions. Horizontally, government departments in different domains—especially those overseeing finance, health, industry, education and labour—had to align their information, communication and actions. Vertically, national and subnational governments had to interact and cooperate in new ways to align interventions at the central and local levels. The geographic and political diversity of Southeast Asia translates into potentially insightful cross-country variations in coordination.

Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand were chosen as case studies for exploring the theme of horizontal and vertical coordination. The more decentralized structures of Indonesia and Malaysia, and the centralized polity of Thailand, have shaped policy coordination horizontally between agencies and vertically between national and subnational governments. While perception of government effectiveness was not a criterion for selecting the three countries, it is notable that all register similar World Governance Indicator scores (Table 1.5). As the three country chapters took shape, mobility restrictions, economic stimulus and vaccination emerged as the more salient areas of coordination to be researched. The chapters also consider communication, among government agencies and layers of administration as well as between authorities and the public, and evaluate the clarity and consistency of government conduct in these respects.

Mobility restrictions and economic shutdowns were imposed by fiat and far exceeded the magnitude of those put in place during past epidemics. It should be noted that nothing has remotely come close to Covid-19, but Southeast Asia can claim some experience in containing deadly flu outbreaks, most obviously in the mid-2000s with SARS, avian flu and the Nipah virus. The Asian financial crisis of 1997–98, which triggered massive economic contraction across the region, also exposed deficiencies in the

provision of economic relief and social assistance that have since been significantly addressed through the expansion of social protection. The global financial crisis of 2008–9, which did not cause economic recession in all Southeast Asian countries, nonetheless prompted actions such as job protection schemes in Singapore.

A fourth theme is the design and implementation of economic relief and stimulus measures. The selection process settled on the countries with abundant financial resources and comparatively developed institutions: Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. The development levels of Singapore, a high-income economy, and upper-middle-income Malaysia and Thailand (Table 1.3), clearly correspond with lower informality and greater social protection outreach (Table 1.5), and the countries are also well regarded for government effectiveness. At the same time, the greater proportion of services employment possibly augmented the proportion impacted by lockdowns, given the sector suffered relatively greater impacts from restrictions on both domestic mobility and cross-border travel. The economic relief and stimulus measures in Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand were conspicuously extensive and responsive. Research findings enable us to synthesize the three countries' policy priorities and approaches and their achievements and shortcomings, which show striking similarities and differences. The focus of public measures has predominantly operated through the formal economy, although interventions such as household cash transfers can also be extended to the informally employed.

The project was rounded out with regionwide perspectives and an effort to conduct research spanning all countries. As the regional platform of multilateral cooperation, ASEAN's initiatives warranted some attention. The opportunities and challenges surrounding vaccination, which was key to reopening and recovery, also merited in-depth coverage. These issues merged in this volume's fifth thematic group, country-level and ASEAN experiences of vaccination and reopening.

Vaccine procurement and ASEAN's Covid-19 interventions took place behind the scenes, but yield important lessons. All countries sourced vaccines from multiple countries, and encountered constraints to varying extents, as well as domestic challenges in roll-out and public participation. By mid-2022, when vaccination figures were publicized by all countries, six out of the ten ASEAN member states had vaccinated more than 70 per

cent of the population, the minimum threshold recommended by the World Health Organization. Combatting the coronavirus, a borderless menace, clearly could have benefited from regional coordination. ASEAN's efforts in this regard are notable, albeit constrained by levels of funding and participation. While the vaccine procurement of the regional bloc amounted to a fraction of total vaccine requirements, and its travel corridor initiative was not implemented, the experience suggests there is potential for more effective responses.

LIMITATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

We should reiterate that this project has focused on economic impacts and public policy implications of Covid-19. Issues related to the medical profession and epidemiology, while fundamental, lie beyond our scope. Within our social science ambit, we also provide limited coverage of the psychological and educational ramifications of the pandemic.

We have placed more emphasis on retrospective and rigorous analyses to address particular thematic questions. Accordingly, the chapters provide focused and contextualized answers, rather than prescriptions on the question of whether to impose lockdowns or not, or formulas on the right mix of protecting health and protecting the economy. This book shows the uniqueness of Covid-19 and of each country's experience in handling the crisis, which underscore that the next one will surely have unique features that demand a measured and circumspect approach when drawing lessons from 2020–22.

While we assigned a thematic focus to the country chapters, each can be read on its own and particular insights will stand out for each reader. At the same time, we have endeavoured to collate and extract comparative lessons, in the form of synthesis essays appended to the back of each thematic group. Those essays offer specific insights and are concise enough that we can direct readers there rather than provide summaries here.

Nonetheless, we conclude this opening chapter with a few general remarks. The Covid-19 experience offers vast lessons on preparedness for future pandemics that may again require coordinated public health, security and economic responses. In grappling with Covid-19, the world gravitated

towards lockdowns and social distancing in a climate of uncertainty and in view of the unprecedented magnitude of the threat. The next pandemic will assuredly have its own confounding elements, but the experience of 2020–22 offers immense insight for balancing efforts to contain deadly contagion while keeping the economy running. To cushion the socio-economic fallout of future financial crises or severe recessions, countries can also draw lessons from the relief and stimulus measures rolled out in 2020–22. The pandemic experience should spur further discussion on the Covid-19 responses that should be recorded as ad hoc, one-off interventions and those that should be institutionalized. Some protocols or special programmes could also be placed on standby, to be activated when crises strike.

Notably, growth in the digital economy accelerated during the pandemic, as applications were deployed to trace contacts, disseminate information, deliver retail goods and services, and disburse social assistance. Further expansion and advancements will surely continue, with the promise of new growth engines and increased access to finance and ease of transactions. However, governments must be vigilant in regulating the sector and checking against monopolistic behaviour to safeguard personal privacy and the public interest.

The pandemic has also highlighted systemic issues that are interwoven throughout the chapters of this book. A robust, nimble and well-resourced public healthcare system is crucial to meeting the challenges of a public health crisis. The importance of maintaining the education system must be underscored. Learning disruptions due to missed school days or migration to online platforms that educators are ill-equipped for and households unable to use, due to lack of computing devices or inadequate internet connection, can have long-term consequences on children's development. The injection of fiscal spending and stimulus measures also depends on stable macroeconomic management and government capacity to run deficits or draw on reserves, along with responsive governance that is attuned to the needs of vulnerable communities. The pandemic's prolonged scarring effects, notably in exacerbating inequality and compounding socio-economic disadvantage, may not yet be fully apparent and warrant further research. However, there is ample evidence that the disadvantaged and vulnerable have borne greater and more lasting harm. The Covid-19

pandemic has highlighted the need for societal and policy resets, and reaffirmed the imperative of economic justice and equitable distribution.

Note

1. The authors thank ISEAS interns Hafiz Nasruddin and Koh Jun Ming for compiling news articles and data, and Ang Tze Xin for designing Figures 1.1 and 1.2.

References

- Aslam, Mohd Mizan, and Rohan Gunaratna, eds. 2022. *COVID-19 in South, West, and Southeast Asia: Risk and Response in the Early Phase*. London: Routledge.
- Coxhead, Ian, ed. 2018. *Routledge Handbook of Southeast Asian Economics*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Croissant, Aurel, and Philip Lorenz. 2018. *Comparative Politics of Southeast Asia: An Introduction to Governments and Political Regimes*. Cham: Springer.
- Department of Statistics Malaysia. 2020. *Informal Sector Work Force Survey Report 2019*. Putrajaya: Department of Statistics Malaysia.
- Indrawati, Sri Mulyani, Suahasil Nazara, Titik Anas, Candra Fajri Ananda, and Kiki Verico, eds. 2023. *Keeping Indonesia Safe from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons Learnt from the National Economic Recovery Programme*. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.
- Lewis, Blane D., and Firman Witoelar, eds. 2021. *Economic Dimensions of Covid-19 in Indonesia: Responding to the Crisis*. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.
- Lim, Weng Mar, Surinderpal Kaur, and Huey Fen Cheong, eds. 2021. *COVID-19, Business, and Economy in Malaysia: Retrospective and Prospective Perspectives*. London: Routledge.
- Louis, D. Gerard Joseph, Surinderpal Kaur, and Huey Fen Cheong, eds. 2021. *COVID-19 and Psychology in Malaysia: Psychosocial Effects, Coping, and Resilience*. London: Routledge.
- Pandian, Ambigapathy, Surinderpal Kaur, and Huey Fen Cheong, eds. 2021. *COVID-19, Education, and Literacy in Malaysia: Social Contexts of Teaching and Learning*. London: Routledge.
- Sciortino, Rosalia, ed. 2023. *Who Cares?: COVID-19 Social Protection Response in Southeast Asia*. Chiangmai: Silkworm Books.

- Shin, Hyun Bang, Murray McKenzie, and Do Young Oh, eds. 2022. *COVID-19 in Southeast Asia: Insights for a Post-Pandemic World*. London: LSE Press.
- Tan, Kevin S.Y. and Steve K.L. Chan, eds. 2023. *Populations and Precarity during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Southeast Asian Perspectives*. Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute.
- V-Dem Institute (Varieties of Democracy Institute). 2023. *Democracy Report 2023: Defiance in the Face of Autocratization*. V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg.
- Yee Sin Leo and Paul Tambyah, eds. 2022. *Covid-19 Pandemic in Singapore*. Singapore: World Scientific.

