Pandemic & the Economy: “Investment for the Future"
Wednesday 21 April 2021: 16:00 – 17:30 SGT (90 minutes)

Scope & Purpose
Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) Public Health Network
The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF)¹, founded in 1997, is an intergovernmental not-for-profit organisation representing the 53 ASEM² Partners: 30 European and 21 Asian countries, plus the European Union and the ASEAN Secretariat. Following the 6th ASEM Summit (ASEM6; 2006; Helsinki, Finland), where the leaders expressed their determination to combat avian influenza and a possible human influenza pandemic, the ASEM Initiative for the Rapid Containment of Pandemic Influenza, financially supported by the Government of Japan, was approved in principle at the ASEM Senior Officials Meeting (2008, Ljubljana, Slovenia). It was officially launched at the 9th ASEM Foreign Ministers’ Meeting (ASEM FMM9; 2009; Hanoi, Viet Nam). Since then, the 2 components of the Initiative (ASEM Stockpiling of Anti-viral Drugs and Personal Protective Equipment, as well as ASEF Public Health Network) have contributed to strengthening ASEM Partners’ capacity to manage public health emergencies.

The ASEF Public Health Network (ASEF PHN) has been promoting a bi-regional exchange of public health priorities with a strong focus on emerging infectious diseases (EIDs), including pandemic influenza. It provides a platform to encourage public health dialogue among ASEM Partners to facilitate multi-sector knowledge sharing between the health and non-health sectors, including governments, international and non-profit organisations, businesses, academia, and the media. The ongoing coronavirus disease (COVID-19) Pandemic posed challenges across different sectors, and ASEF PHN is uniquely positioned to address issues surrounding the pandemic, not limited to the health sector.

COVID-19 Pandemic: Health
On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC)³ under the International Health Regulation (2005) (IHR)⁴. The outbreak caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) continued to spread across the continents, including Asia and Europe. On 11 March 2020, WHO announced COVID-19 as a pandemic⁵. This previously unknown virus with no effective treatment options has posed significant challenges on the health sector with its uncertain nature and rapidly evolving information, also related to the capacity in testing and isolating, as well as its asymptomatic cases, etc. According to WHO, there have been 117,332,262 cases confirmed with COVID-19, including 2,605,356 deaths as of 10 March 2021⁶.

COVID-19 Pandemic: Economy
The strategies to control the spread of SARS-CoV-2 tend to bring difficulties in social and economic activities. Restricting people’s movement in order to contain the spread of the virus, such as lockdown, curfew and border control, has been reducing economic productivity. The economic damage is evident as the health and human toll grows, and the COVID-19 pandemic also represents the largest financial crisis in decades. According to the

¹ http://www.ASEF.org
² https://www.ASEMinfoboard.org/about/partners
⁴ https://www.who.int/health-topics/international-health-regulations#tab=tab_1
⁶ https://covid19.who.int/
World Bank, -5.2 per cent of the negative growth in global GDP is expected in 2020. Various studies also highlighted the financial implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and its strategies, such as social distancing measures, public awareness programmes, testing and quarantine policies and economic support packages.

Taking care of population health while tackling economic difficulties: the fine balance between Health & Economy

The world is facing an unprecedented scale of pandemic in recent human history. The decisions governments are taking will impact people’s action, life and society, which will eventually shape how the world will look in the future with a “new normal”. Promoting economic activities without sufficiently addressing public health concern would result in worsening the pandemic, which could lead to the re-introduction of the restrictive measures disrupting economic activities for a longer period. In the field of public health, it is widely acknowledged that it is best to contain disease outbreaks at the early stage to prevent further spreading. The larger the outbreak becomes, the more difficult to contain – this, in turn, means more social and economic damage to society. On the other hand, strategies without addressing economic concerns risk creating poverty as pandemic often deteriorates many households’ economic situation, especially those relying on work in the informal sector and contract-based jobs without compensation. It is estimated that approximately 88 to 115 million people will be pushed into extreme poverty in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the EU region, there is an economic recovery plan. To help repair the economic and social damage caused by the coronavirus pandemic, the European Commission, the European Parliament, and EU leaders have agreed on a recovery plan that will lead the way out of the crisis and lay the foundations for a modern and more sustainable Europe. The EU’s long-term budget, coupled with NextGenerationEU, the temporary instrument designed to boost the recovery, will be the largest stimulus package ever financed through the EU budget. A total of €1.8 trillion will help rebuild a post-COVID-19 Europe. It will be a greener, more digital and more resilient Europe. The plan will focus on R&D, climate change, digitalization, health emergency preparedness & resilience, modern agricultural policy, biodiversity and gender equality.

In 2021, ASEF PHN is hosting a multi-country and multi-sectoral roundtable focusing on pandemic and the economy, and how the governments can perform to protect both Public Health and the Economy.
Objectives of the roundtable
The overall aim of this roundtable is to facilitate a much-needed dialogue between the public health sector and non-health sector when deciding on COVID-19 related policies and strategies in different countries’ setting. As each country possess different health, economic and social infrastructures, no “one size fit all” response will be expected. Nonetheless, the roundtable will seek to find some guides that can be considered by ASEM Partners. How an agreement is made between governments, public health authorities and non-health sectors on practical ways to overcome economic difficulties will be shared by some ASEM Partners.

The specific objectives are:
- To bring together officials representing different responsibilities such as Public Health, Economy as well as other stakeholders to identify the priorities to best address the COVID-19 pandemic
- To identify potential actions for the points identified above, and address the role of the health sector in connecting health and governance in addressing COVID-19 pandemic
- To share the lessons learnt and best practice across Asia and Europe dealing with public health and the economy under the COVID-19 pandemic

Target Audience
The roundtable will address three target audiences: 1) senior-level health officials who are working in the area of COVID-19; 2) senior-level officials from other ministries who are working in the area of economy and/or policy related to COVID-19; and 3) Other representatives with expert knowledge on pandemic and the economy. The target audience more specifically includes:
- Senior-level officials, advisors, and/or other decision-makers from Ministries of Health of ASEM Partners or equivalent who work in the area directly related to the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic
- Chief/directors from national health agencies of ASEM Partners or equivalent who work in the area of pandemic preparedness and response, including COVID-19
- Senior-level officials from Ministries of Finance and Foreign Affairs of ASEM Partners, other government representatives who work on the matters related to COVID-19 related economic policy
- Representatives of international organisations and non-profit organisations (NGOs) as well as academic with relevant specialities

Date & Location
This roundtable will take place on 21 April 2021 from 16:00 to 17:30 (SGT) online.

External cooperation for this meeting
The planning of this meeting has been developed in cooperation with the following experts.
- Dr Angel KUNCHEV, Chief Health Inspector, Ministry of Health, Bulgaria
- Mr Jukka RAILAVO, Senior Financial Advisor, Ministry of Finance Finland
- Mr Markus SOVALA, Director General, Statistics Finland
- Mr Jouni VARANKA, Ministerial Adviser, Prime Minister's Office, Finland
- Dr Iris HUNGER, Head of Global Health Protection Programme, Centre for International Health Protection, Robert Koch Institute (RKI), Germany
- Dr Tomoya SAITO, Director, Center for Emergency Preparedness and Response, National Institute of Infectious Diseases, Japan
- Associate Prof Vernon LEE, Director, Communicable Disease Division, Ministry of Health, Singapore
- Ms Karen TAN, Deputy Chief of Government Communications (Development) and Senior Director (Transformation), Ministry of Communications and Information
- Ms Nobuko ICHIKAWA, Senior Environmental Advisor, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)
- Dr Noriko KITAMURA, Medical Consultant, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)
Expected Outcome
The summary/policy recommendation paper will be developed as the outcome of this roundtable. Such an outcome will be disseminated among ASEM Partners. The outcome can be used to form the 2nd roundtable or becomes a base for the following activities to address further the issues identified.

Other announcements
It is a strictly closed-door event by invitations only. Any enquiries, please get in touch with ASEF PHN via riko.kimoto@asef.org

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