

Prospects

Aperiodic – no. 21/209 – 10 June 2021

The point of view

Asia: vaccination delays a worry

Once admired for its handling of the pandemic, Asia is now a source of concern because of vaccination delays. While advanced economies have gradually been easing their public health measures, some Asian countries have even had to resort to imposing tighter restrictions.

This is not an isolated phenomenon: Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Thailand and even Vietnam have all had to implement new measures ranging from curfews to strict lockdowns (in most capital cities and, in the case of Malaysia, nationwide). Case numbers and deaths are, of course, still far short of those seen elsewhere, especially in Latin America, the United States and Europe. Nevertheless, authorities in each country are taking rising case numbers very seriously lest the situation get out of hand.

Vaccination delays: multiple causes, one effect

Behind the deteriorating public health situation, the whole of the Asia-Pacific region has one thing in common: vaccination delays. Even after adjusting to exclude the effects of varying levels of development, the difference between Asian countries and the rest of the world is striking. A mere 6% of the Japanese population has received its first vaccine dose, whereas over 40% of the US population is now fully vaccinated. Australia, South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan: even the region's most advanced economies are significantly behind the curve. And that's to say nothing of the poorest ASEAN countries (Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam), where the vaccination effort has barely begun.

There are a number of reasons for these delays: supply problems for the poorest countries, dependent on the COVAX scheme; reluctance on the part of the population in countries such as South Korea and Taiwan where there have been few Covid deaths; administrative hurdles slowing the vaccine approval process (e.g. in Japan and South Korea); and poor vaccine choices (Australia and Thailand bet on the AstraZeneca vaccine, use of which is restricted among younger people).

A worrying economic situation

Yet this part of the world too needs to get back on the path towards normalisation so growth can restart. Indeed, the crisis has already taken a heavy economic toll on South and Southeast Asia, with some countries sinking deep into recession – by as much as 6% in Malaysia and Thailand and 9% in the Philippines – especially when measured against their pre-crisis growth trajectories. It is taking a particularly long time for these three countries – which, moreover, have no remaining fiscal or monetary room for manoeuvre – to come out of recession. This is in stark contrast to the situation in Northern Asia (China, South Korea, Taiwan), which is in rude economic health, largely thanks to booming demand for electronic products. This kind of V-shaped recovery will remain out of reach for the rest of the continent as long as the public health challenge remains unresolved. ■

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