



Online Consultation
Towards Vaccine Equity amidst COVID-19 Surge in Asia

Concept Note

The global COVID-19 pandemic warrants us to assess the situation of prioritising equitable healthcare and access to affordable high-quality services with strong commitments from all stakeholders. The vulnerable and the marginalised communities are still being left behind in testing, treatment, and even vaccination during this global pandemic. Given that over fifty percent of the world's population has no access to social protection or adequate healthcare, the impacts are estimated to be manifold. A common trend in Asia is fragile health systems which are characterised, for the most part, by a lack of basic medical care facilities and under-resourced hospitals.

Contemporary issues regarding vaccine nationalism and vaccine distribution serve as a snapshot of global inequality and are representative of all the forces that prevent the realisation of equality, fairness, and justice. As the World Health Organisation (WHO) observes, "International collaboration among scientists was critical to vaccine development, but now weak cooperation between nations is a major barrier to achieving worldwide vaccination at the scale needed to end the pandemic." Several developed countries continue to stockpile vaccines, procuring scarce supplies of doses, and in some cases, even blocking vaccine exports to other countries.

The prevailing inequitable vaccine distribution is leaving millions of people vulnerable to COVID-19, especially in developing nations, and such a situation is also allowing deadly variants to emerge and rebound across the world. New variants continue to develop and spread, even in countries where advanced vaccination distribution has been introduced.

Asian countries are now at a crossroad; they are experiencing precarious circumstances concerning public vaccination. The availability of vaccines for import, scepticism towards vaccines themselves, and the general trust in vaccination across Asia have hindered the outreach of COVID-19 vaccines to a large extent. In many countries, access to vaccines, especially for marginalised communities, will remain a challenge simply given the sheer population that requires vaccination. A continuing lack of global solidarity and equity in access to COVID-19 vaccines will undermine efforts towards disease control and further derail the project of achieving a pandemic-free world. It is important for the region to ensure that everyone has the knowledge, information, and access to advanced research and development of these vaccines locally.

The churches in Asia are placed in better positions to play important roles in building trust towards a healthier world, particularly in crisis situations such as the surge of the pandemic. The myths and misconceptions surrounding the pandemic, especially concerning vaccinations, must be urgently and emphatically addressed with critical priority by Asian churches and other faith communities. The trust that communities have in faith leaders can be instrumental and leveraged to play an important role in restoring health, and ensuring healing and wholeness. Churches must also promote and share correct information

with the help of medical professionals about the pandemic. Churches should also engage in facilitating theological reflections on social and moral obligations to each other which will help in eliminating fear, hesitancy, and misinformation regarding vaccines.

Church-owned healthcare institutions and services also need to shine a light on, and reach out to, underprivileged populations—the poorest of the poor, the rural communities, the socially marginalised, and those in fragile or conflict-prone areas—striving for their inclusion in vaccination and immunisation campaigns.

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) has been responding to the COVID-19 situation in different ways ever since the pandemic broke out in early 2020. Such initiatives have included organising and facilitating different webinars on the impacts of COVID-19, especially on 'Right to Health amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic', and facilitating the observance of the Asia Sunday–2020 and 2021 based on themes related to the COVID-19 pandemic situation. The Asia Sunday–2020 was focused on the theme 'God, Heal Us, as We are Vulnerable' and the Asia Sunday–2021 on 'I am the God who Heals You and Restores your Health'.

In order to understand various challenges and also to understand the role of churches and its institutions in vaccine access, the CCA will organise an online consultation with the assistance of specially invited experts from various Asian countries. The consultation will look into the challenges and learnings which will also be helpful to bring awareness among people and communities, especially in demystifying the false perceptions on vaccination. It will also aim at generating ideas and strategies for effective advocacy aimed at guiding coordinated actions at national and regional levels to overcome the ongoing challenges in response to COVID-19 and inequities in vaccine distribution.

Date: 20 July 2021

Duration: 12:00 noon to 16:30 PM Bangkok (Thailand) time

Objectives

- To identify various ways in which churches in Asia can advocate to vaccine equity upholding the dignity and human rights of all God's people amidst the COVID-19 crisis.
- To sensitise churches and other faith-based organisations on strategies to encourage communities towards overcoming inequities in vaccine distribution.