



Australia supports equal access to safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines

Op-Ed by Australian Ambassador Pablo Kang

4 September 2020

Here in Cambodia, the Ministry of Health, working with local and international partners, has been successful to date on preparing for and responding to COVID-19.

Thanks to this massive collective effort, we all continue to benefit from the relatively low cases of COVID-19 here.

Touch wood.

To truly beat this virus, countries need to work together.

We need good public health policies that help prevent COVID-19's spread.

We need good public health systems that help us respond to cases when they emerge.

And we need vaccines that are safe, effective and available for all.

This is an area on which the Australian Government is particularly focused.

Ensuring equal access to vaccines will play a critical role in shaping the future of Cambodia, Australia and our shared region, as our governments grapple with the social and economic recovery from this pandemic.

In this context, last week Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Women Marise Payne announced AUD80 million in funding for equitable vaccine access in southeast Asia and the Pacific.

This investment builds on Australia's strong record of advocacy to ensure the health security interests of countries in our region are prioritised, through our role as the Vice-Chair of the Gavi Board.

The AUD80 million announcement will ensure that the Gavi COVAX Facility Advance Market Commitment (COVAX AMC) has the funding it needs to improve access for southeast Asian and Pacific countries to effective and affordable COVID-19 vaccines.

The goal is to mobilise one billion doses for developing countries by the end of 2021, to address the acute phase of the pandemic.

This AUD80 million announcement is for our region. It supplements Australia's significant AUD50 million, five-year investment in the Cambodian health system, as a key international partner in the Health Equity and Quality Improvement Project (H-EQIP).

More than 2.4 million poor Cambodians continue to have access to subsidised healthcare as a result of H-EQIP. And H-EQIP, under the Ministry of Health's leadership, is driving impressive reforms to improve the quality of services at health centres and hospitals nationwide.

H-EQIP also made it possible for AUD 14 million in Australian funds to be mobilised immediately for the Ministry of Health to purchase essential supplies to assist the COVID-19 response, and the procurement of 20 new ambulances, which have now arrived in Cambodia.

It is true that, when it comes to this pandemic, we are all in this together — and as neighbours close cooperation between Australia and Cambodia has never been more important.

It is also true that we are only as strong as the most vulnerable in our community, which highlights the importance of the partnerships that ensure that vaccines and health services are accessible to all, regardless of their ability to pay, during COVID-19.

To achieve this equity, international investment in laboratory development, vaccine manufacturing and procurement is critical.

Here, Australia continues to use its role as Vice-Chair of the Gavi Board to advocate for the interests of countries in southeast Asia.

A significant number of countries in our region are now eligible to access vaccines through the COVAX AMC, including Indonesia, Timor-Leste, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines and Vietnam.

Once available, we are committed to ensuring that the COVAX AMC allocates vaccines to countries equitably, in line with guidance from the World Health Organisation. The process will involve two steps.

Firstly, participating AMC countries will be able to access vaccines for those at greatest risk (up to 20 per cent of the population).

This is a critical step that will allow access to enough vaccines to cover key populations, including health care workers and vulnerable groups, such as the elderly.

Secondly, and after this initial phase, the AMC will scale up COVID-19 vaccines to provide access for more of the population.

The AMC will run for up to a decade—with a review scheduled by the end of 2025.

As Vice-Chair of the Gavi Board, Australia will continue to advocate strongly for the best outcomes under the COVAX AMC for our region.

Eligible countries, including Cambodia, can express their interest to participate in the AMC directly to Gavi.

It is Australia's firm belief that a future COVID-19 vaccine should be made available at affordable prices and distributed equitably around the world.

Not hoarded by countries or sold to the highest bidder.

Because it is only by eliminating COVID-19 worldwide can we really, truly be over the pandemic.

And then maybe, just maybe, life can return to whatever the "new normal" holds in store.