



Sri Lanka

Social distancing, business disruption to persist into 2021 amid COVID-19 vaccine unavailability

 OPERATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE POLITICAL FOREIGN RELATIONS

COVID-19

The government on 19 December said it was in talks with the World Health Organization (WHO) to procure COVID-19 vaccine for 20% of its population through the COVID-19 Global Vaccine Access Facility (COVAX).

The likelihood of local vaccination distribution beginning early next year remains low, given the government's lack of a concrete procurement and implementation strategy.

Its provisional plan of sourcing all required COVID-19 vaccines in the form of donations is unlikely to be possible given huge international demand.

In addition to procurement, Sri Lankan authorities are likely to face significant operational challenges in the cold storage and delivery of vaccines, due to severe infrastructural constraints and acute shortage of frontline health workers.

Hence, we assess authorities will continue to focus on social distancing and other precautionary measures well into next year, making vaccines mandatory only for travellers moving in or out of the country.

Immunisation plans

Sri Lanka, like its South Asian peers [Nepal](#) and [Bangladesh](#), is reliant on a foreign-developed vaccine. Authorities noted that Sri Lanka will import a vaccine that is best suited for the country, though they did not commit to a particular timeline for implementation. With 171 reported deaths and 9,115 active cases as of 19 December, Sri Lanka has yet to announce a concrete plan to acquire a COVID-19 vaccine. The government is reliant on COVAX, a global initiative led by the WHO, the donor-funded Global Alliance for Vaccine Implementation (GAVI) and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI). COVAX aims to provide free vaccine to cover 20% of each signatory nation's immunisation needs, irrespective of the nation's income level.

However, securing a large number of doses through COVAX might be challenging for Sri Lanka, given the high vaccine demand among 190 other countries that have also signed up for the programme, including wealthy nations such as the UK and Canada. According to media reports, more than 9.8bn doses of vaccines have already been reserved by developed countries through pre-purchase agreements (separate to the COVAX arrangements). Meanwhile, COVAX – which in recent months has faced a significant decline in donations from its signatories – will have limited financial capacity to deliver vaccines for free to countries like Sri Lanka.

Regardless of the number of doses Sri Lanka ultimately can procure through COVAX, it is unlikely to be able to access enough free vaccine to ensure herd immunity amongst its population. As such, authorities are instead likely to focus on sustained social distancing and other preventive measures to contain the spread of infection, while implementing rules that ensure travellers coming in and going out of the country provide evidence of their own vaccination.

Implementation challenges

Although a large-scale vaccination programme will pose a significant challenge to every South Asian country – testing governments' local production, storage, logistics and distribution capacities – Sri Lanka's fragile primary healthcare infrastructure and critical shortage of frontline health workers will pose particular problems. According to domestic health experts, the government would have to additionally invest close to 1% of its GDP in ramping up existing capacity to meet the needs of such a vaccination programme. However, in light of the growing economic crisis and poor revenue collections in 2020, the government will face severe funding constraints in the coming year. These issues will likely slow down vaccine implementation and complicate recovery in 2021.

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