Repeat circuit breakers may be needed: Experts

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While Singapore is making strenuous efforts to contain Covid-19, a realistic strategy could entail imposing a circuit breaker every few months until a vaccine is developed, said experts.

The country is fighting Covid-19 on two distinct fronts — in the community and in foreign worker dormitories, said Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the National University of Singapore’s Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, yesterday.

In a webinar organised by the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSSP), as part of a series examining public health lessons from the pandemic, Prof Teo said the month-long circuit breaker could lead to lower community transmission within the next one to two weeks.

What is worrying is that clusters have formed in foreign worker dormitories, he said, which is why the Government has sent dedicated clinical teams to treat the infected workers, while moving healthy ones to separate locations with lower human density.

He added that there will likely have to be a circuit breaker “every three to four months to allow the healthcare system to recuperate”.

LKYSSP visiting professor Tikki Pangestu said there remain many unknowns surrounding the virus’ transmissibility and true mortality rate. Different standards of governance and a lack of global coordination also make it difficult to predict when the pandemic will end, he said. “Other countries in East Asia may not have Singapore’s level of resources, social capital and governance structures like the multi-ministry task force.”

Prof Teo said that because countries have made unilateral decisions on when to close and reopen their borders, some such as China are now seeing a second wave of infections. This means border restrictions have to remain in place for some time, he said.

Panellists said a stop-and-start strategy of repeated circuit breakers could pose economic challenges.

Compounding this is the psychological fatigue that sets in when people are forced to endure a lengthy lockdown, said Associate Professor Joanne Yoong, senior economist and director of the Centre for Economic and Social Research at the University of Southern California.

Prof Teo cautioned against short-term solutions such as “immunity passports”, or documents that allow those declared virus-free to go back to work. “The economic driver becomes extremely powerful for people to start coming up with fake certificates,” he said.

Prof Yoong said that to lead in such a climate of uncertainty, it is important that governments plan for the long term, establish trust and communicate clearly and simply.

“Expressions of empathy are going to be part of the new normal of policy communications. Social compacts which are based on heavy-handed government intervention are no longer sustainable,” she said.

“It’s not just going to be a marathon, but a series of repeated sprints — we need to have that mentality going forward.”

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