CARI MAKAN

General observations on building forward better from COVID-19
About the cover

Use of disposables increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Disposables enabled medical and humanitarian work, made takeaways a viable alternative to dine-in, and facilitated in-person work. Think of workers with their plastik ikat tepi (drink takeaway in side-tied plastic bag) and tiffin carrier or polystyrene lunch box in hand.

The plastik ikat tepi represents the trade-off between human needs and environmental costs. There have been many others: cheap gloves come at the cost of substandard workers’ housing; movement restrictions reduce virus transmission but impose economic costs and mental and emotional strain. Meanwhile, the tiffin carrier represents solutions that are contextually appropriate, inclusive and community-based, environment-friendly, and informed by local culture and heritage.

Cari Makan explores the difficult choices before us, and how they intersect with social inequalities brought to light by the pandemic. It also sheds light on new or alternative solutions, many of which may already be with us, just awaiting (re)discovery.

Cari Makan: General observations on building forward better from COVID-19.

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Co-building the Accelerator Labs as a joint venture with:

Production crew

Project management
Lim Su-Jin
Siewlin Tan Pei Zin
Muhammad Imran Abdul Razak

Production design and creative direction
Benjamin Ong

Story development
Olivia Yu Xuan
Teoh Jia Chim
Alexander Solkin

Writing and analysis
Joy Lee May Yen
Ivy Kwek
Marcus Philip Paul

Artwork
Azel Lorena
Firda Irmawi Syam
Laurie Salsijab
Katrina Lene

System maps and technical advisory
David Tan

Data and analytics
Adibah Amir
Hasbul Hadi Shamsul Munir

Environmental interludes
Scholastica Esther Sibin Guntillie
Natalie Lee

Kisah partnership coordination and support
Sri Ranjani Mukundan
Maneesha Khalae
Muhammad Imran Abdul Razak
Ong Gui Xian

Editorial, design and layout, and additional artwork
Clover Creative & Communications

my.undp.org
By Nilay Banerjee
Resident Representative
UNDP Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam

The COVID-19 pandemic has set back progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Globally, between 119 to 124 million people dropped back into extreme poverty in 2020. Key drivers of human development — health, education, and economic opportunities — have been impacted. In Malaysia, over 26,000 lives were lost directly to COVID-19 by the end of September 2021, while the economy contracted by 5.6 percent in 2020. And while movement restrictions and reduced human activity provided a temporary respite for the environment, it has not altered our trajectory of climate change.

Is there, then, any silver lining from this crisis? Yes, but only if we take lessons from this.

Following the COVID-19 crisis, unprecedented levels of cash aid were distributed through welfare and social protection programmes, turning ideas about temporary and universal basic income into real possibilities. We experienced how our health and well-being depended on the health and well-being of the most vulnerable, and recognized the necessity of digital connectivity for all segments of society. The interdependence of health and socio-economic development was made crystal clear. We saw what skies and rivers could look like if we reined in pollution.

If we can learn from this experience and act accordingly, then the COVID-19 pandemic will have been a moment of inflexion, setting off our world onto a different trajectory. To this end, UNDP has been collecting data through the COVID-19 Data Futures Platform and others, and generating insights and recommendations to secure health, protect people, enable economic recovery, develop macro responses, and build social cohesion. UNDP Malaysia is generating actionable intelligence for recovery and building back better.

While we need data and intelligence for informed decision-making, we also need stories to touch our hearts and shape our collective values that form the basis for these decisions. The power of narratives was clearly seen throughout the pandemic, influencing vaccination rates, public willingness to wear masks and maintain physical distancing, and the approach taken towards vaccinating undocumented persons — both native-born and migrants. UNDP launched the Kisah initiative, exploring the impact of COVID-19 through the eyes of conversation-partners at the front lines of the response to the pandemic.

Cari Makan builds on Kisah, exploring issues of health, work, education, social inclusion, the environment — and more, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, told in human stories. A rich variety of personas embody the intersection of these issues, turning datapoints about the SDGs into relatable human beings and their lived experiences. The publication juxtaposes diary entries, social-media feeds, story-telling, and short analytical pieces — complemented with illustrations — to provide a gripping experience. The writers and production team have put together a narrative about our world, showing not only its present imperfections, but also the hopes and aspirations we share to improve it. I hope that you will discover a vision for sustainable development in the Malaysian context and be inspired to contribute to its realization.

*Kisah is a Malay word that means both ‘story’ and ‘to care/to take interest’.*
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Cari Makan: The view from the kitchen

Let us rewind to dinner last night. What do you see? The home-cooked dinner, the fast-food delivery, the tapau or bungkus* packet, or the instant cup noodle. It seems very familiar, doesn’t it? But, this is not the food you remember from your childhood, nor is it even the food you remember from two years ago. When did you learn to cook like that? When did we come to rely so much on food deliveries or takeaways? When did we become hoarders out of a post-apocalyptic film?

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the ways in which we cari makan (look for food). More significantly, it has also opened up new conversations about how to cari makan (earn a living). When COVID-19 hit, many had to make difficult decisions, choosing between life and livelihood: when showing up to work is a health risk; when staying at home presents new challenges; and when jobs are no longer secure — what does it mean to survive, to sustain, and to thrive?

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) continue to frame what a just, prosperous, and resilient future should look like. Getting back on track — and accelerating progress — towards the SDGs will entail no less than the exploration of alternative, emerging, and under-the-radar solutions that offer greater social-ecological resilience. Scary as it seems, we must acknowledge that COVID-19 won’t be the last — or the worst — global crisis. We cannot just go back to ‘normal’. We have to proactively defuse foreseeable crises and build more resilient and less vulnerable societies.

Cari Makan reflects on whether we, as a country, are well positioned (or not) for that. To this end, we created a document that is not only retrospective and reactive, but prospective and proactive — to better navigate the uncertainty before us.

Process

Cari Makan is not your typical policy document. We took an experimental step in ‘incarnating’ these issues in persons and personas. To understand the impact of COVID-19 and the policies and responses formulated to combat it, we must explore multiple perspectives. Thus, in these pages you will find stories — fictional (‘cooked up’ you could say) but based on real people and events, real struggles and lived experiences — that examine how different people seek refuge in crisis, probing the inherent conflict and contradiction between these different viewpoints.

* Tapau and bungkus are the Cantonese and Malay words, respectively, for takeaway.
Are these stories subjective? Of course. Knowledge is positional and depends very much on the angle and perspective of the observer. We hope these stories will help you explore the nuances behind the complexities, uncertainties, and fragilities brought to light by COVID-19. You will not find easy, straightforward answers in these pages. But by offering a glimpse into how events that occur to ‘them’ also impact ‘us,’ Cari Makan highlights the connections, contradictions, and trade-offs we need to navigate, to build a just and inclusive future.

Some of these stories were told to us; others, we overheard. We have drawn from a variety of data sources — interviews, podcasts, ethnography, social media listening, and even memes, to create these characters and stories.

Interspersed throughout these narratives are various checkpoints to help us take a step back and reflect on the issues highlighted in the stories:

- **Unpacking the system** through system maps that help us explore the interconnections between complex problems;
- **Environmental interludes** reflect on the planetary pressures that are a cost of human development;
- **KISAH Futures stories** take a speculative look at what the future might be if things stayed the same, or if they changed; and
- **Alternatives** — niche or slowly-trending ideas, practices and “weak signals” that may hold a key to improving resilience to future crises.

What is the logic behind this collector’s scrapbook of a year with COVID-19? The specifics of the issues described will change. However, if we understand how people and systems respond positively and negatively to disruptions, we can project the future, imagining the impact of different scenarios and disruptive events on various groups of people. Our hope is that this will open a door into more reflexive, foresighted, and inclusive policymaking.

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### Pathways

Stories are our windows to the world, but we only see, and know, in part. The response to COVID-19 is a story with many observers and points of view. The picture becomes more complete (and complex!) the more voices we listen to, for the general observer is every one of us. Our collective perspective — our collective intelligence — is strengthened when we are in this together.

Cari Makan is a collection of bite-sized snippets. Flip, scroll, and find a headline that grabs you. Read it, and chew on it. They may be (very) short stories but they bring our attention to deep, complex, and interconnected issues. Whether you identify with the stories in this volume, agree in principle but have more to add, or disagree because your experience says something else — we invite you to join the conversation. Get in touch with us via [www.collective-intelligence.my](http://www.collective-intelligence.my) and/or take action on issues close to your heart as a starting point. In each chapter we have identified several community-based and non-governmental organizations at the front lines of our most pressing challenges.

Ultimately, Cari Makan is only the beginning, a tool we hope will spark conversations, reflection, and action on some of the “difficult issues” in society. We do not know enough. But, we hope to explore and uncover nuances so that our work for change reflects the needs of all, especially the most vulnerable. Let us seek out alternatives to the dominant development paradigms. Let us find and share solutions that are community-based, indigenous, under-the-radar, non-mainstream, or even counter-intuitive. (Sometimes these may be simple things right under our noses.) Let us strive for a far more inclusive society than what we have today, where lives and livelihoods can thrive.

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The COVID-19 pandemic is both an ecological and a social phenomenon. There are biological and physical factors that shape how contagious COVID-19 is. However, the social systems we have created — such as global travel, crowded worker dormitories and prisons, and beliefs about the balance between individual liberty and societal responsibility — shape how the pandemic has spread. Together, these form a socio-ecological system driven by a variety of feedback loops.
COVID-19 can spread very quickly. A few cases quickly become a few dozen, a few hundred, a few thousand... and more. As the level of COVID-19 infections rise, the risk of new cases also increases because the potential exposure to COVID-19 is higher — and this in turn increases the level of COVID-19 infections. The resulting R1 loop is a reinforcing feedback loop that tends to amplify change. This explains the tendency towards exponential, runaway growth in COVID cases.

How might this ecological feedback loop be stopped? Public health professionals have been focused on $R_0$, which describes the number of new infections each patient generates. If $R_0$ is greater than 1, the feedback loop feeds the spread of the disease; if it is less than 1, the feedback cycle is starved and cases come down. There are two ways to reduce $R_0$. The first is to change the ecological system by increasing the number of people immune to COVID-19 so it has less opportunity to spread. Left unchecked, COVID-19 will accomplish this by itself as mass exposure generates some level of immunity in the general population, but at great cost in lives, as well as social and economic disruption. This is why we need a safe and effective vaccine.

The second way to reduce $R_0$ is to reduce the opportunity for exposure between those infected by COVID-19 and those who do not have immunity. These strategies — such as wearing masks, movement restrictions, and physical distancing — target social systems. Unfortunately, many of these responses also create social and economic costs including livelihoods and connections with family and friends. Therefore, we see these social strategies rise and fall with societal anxiety over the number of COVID-19 cases, and we see the level of COVID-19 infections fall and rise again as we tighten and loosen restrictions and personal behaviours. The resulting B1 loop is a balancing feedback loop that tends to resist change and maintain an equilibrium. In January 2021, a newspaper commentator suggested that we might need to behave as if there were 20,000 new cases each day to keep the number of cases in check. In August 2021, we reached that number. This model is, of course, a simplification. COVID-19 variants, ‘lockdown-fatigue’, and other factors complicate reality. Nonetheless, it is a good starting point for thinking about the challenges of containing the pandemic. Indeed, the COVID-19 socio-ecological system does not exist in a vacuum. It shapes and is shaped by other social systems and pre-existing challenges. As we unpack the stories of people impacted by COVID-19 and the resulting socio-economic responses, we will also examine some of the linkages between these systems.
Work from home or live at work? How many of us remember the feeling of waking up to familiar yet strange skies, with our neighbourhoods transformed into clusters of offices and classrooms?

Home and work were the first spaces to be impacted by COVID-19. We begin here, exploring the evolving nature of home and work — with consequent impacts to life and livelihood — accelerated by the pandemic.

The narrative in Chapter 1 follows a woman working from home, exploring COVID-19’s impact on families, home, education and gender roles. Chapter 2 explores the nuances of today’s dynamic workforce, identifying gaps and opportunities in supporting workers on fluid and non-linear career paths.
Chapter 1

Battle on the home front
It was a Wednesday like no other. Instead of fighting her way through the usual morning traffic, Norah found herself flustered at home. She was up before dawn to prepare breakfast and some mid-day snacks for her husband and three kids. She had tidied up the living room and dining table so that she and her husband had space to work from home. She had also prepared some activities for her children to occupy themselves with while she settled into a new routine as a work-from-home social worker.

She had explained to her children the day before that school would be out for the next two weeks. They cheered. But Norah still felt edgy about how they would all get through the next two weeks of the Movement Control Order (MCO) without the help of her mother, who would usually take care of the kids during the school holidays. She wouldn’t be able to drop them off at her mother’s place with the movement restrictions, and she didn’t want to expose her parents to any health risks.

It takes a village to raise a child. But in modern society, parents are often left to raise their children on their own.

In the past, the extended family played an important role in child-rearing. Uncles, aunties, grandmas and grandpas were on hand to offer wisdom and chip in whenever parents found it difficult to cope. Children were free to wander from house to house in their neighbourhoods, often playing, eating and learning in someone else’s home.

But as families migrate to cities for better opportunities, that support system is vanishing. Extended families and trusted friends are increasingly far away and we may not always know our neighbours well.

The pressure for parents to keep their households together on their own can be intense, especially when both parents are working. This is even more of a challenge for single-parent households. COVID-19 and the consequent MCO has added further strain to families as parents cope with working from home, helping their children with online classes, and dealing with added household chores and care work.

An ongoing issue that has become more pronounced during the pandemic is how women continue to take on the lion’s share of the unpaid workload at home — a workload further increased by the pandemic. This added burden may also lead to more women suffering from poorer mental and physical health.

Worryingly, more women than men are leaving the workforce during this time, perhaps because of the increased domestic workload. UN Women has expressed concern that this care burden on women could wipe out 25 years of progress in gender representation in the labour force.

Clearly, there is a need for governments, corporations, and society at large to recognize, rethink, redistribute, and support unpaid care and domestic work to better assist women in households through updated policies and changed mindsets. Care workers — the majority of whom are women — should be adequately remunerated. This should go hand in hand with increasing access to childcare services and family-friendly workplace policies.

The Malaysian government has kicked off efforts in this regard. In 2018, the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) launched the i-Suri scheme which aims to provide some form of a safety net for housewives, particularly those in the B40 (bottom 40 percent of the Malaysian household income) group. This initiative acknowledges the contribution that housewives bring to the economic table and reminds us to value the work that they do within the family.

More can be done to help households distribute care work in a fairer manner. Drawing from the examples of other advanced economies during the COVID-19 lockdowns, both working mothers and fathers need flexible work arrangements to attend to family needs, especially when schools are closed.

It is worth noting that a 2014 study by UNDP found that most working women still relied on families or relatives to help with childcare (53.3 percent), followed by childcare centres (25.8 percent), neighbours (13.9 percent), and domestic workers (9 percent).

However, with changes in family structures and the rise in urban living, society needs to catch up with the realities of modern parenting and start conversations around how we can rebuild a village that reflects the current landscape, and provide families with the support they need to thrive.
Norah sighed. She can't win this argument. She moved out of the room and took the next call in the kitchen.

Around noon, she started preparing lunch. Nic and Anna wanted to help out in the kitchen, so she had to supervise them while cooking. Her phone started ringing again. "Mummy, I put inside." Anna’s hands reached out for the vegetables. It was tough trying to focus on the caller’s questions while stirring the pot with one hand and keeping her eyes on the kids to make sure no one gets hurt or makes a mess. When lunch was ready, her husband emerged from the room.

There was no time to do the dishes after lunch. "I’ll deal with them tonight," she thought. The phone calls had started coming in again and Norah’s husband had gone back into the room for work. In between calls, she tried to coerce her kids to take their afternoon nap. But Anna didn’t want to take a nap, perhaps because her parents were home today. That meant Norah wouldn’t be able to file her reports while the kids were asleep; she also knew that she would be dealing with a cranky toddler in a bit. She'd have to do the reports tonight. She hadn't even started on the laundry yet. And she'd have to think about dinner soon. Norah let out a sigh. She wished she could drop her kids off at her mother's, or maybe have her parents come over to help with the kids. She wondered how they were doing. She should probably give them a call later in the evening.

"Mummy, I wan watch TV." Anna pulled at Norah’s sleeve. The three-year-old, her youngest, was no longer interested in the toys that were brought out of the box. It was barely past 9 a.m. "I also wan watch TV!" Five-year-old Nic ran over, echoing his sister’s request.

"Not now. Mummy and Daddy are working. The TV will be noisy," Norah said. "But I wan watch TV!" they screamed in unison before crying loudly.

Her husband, who was sitting across from her at the dining table, looked up from his laptop with furrowed brows. Can you keep them down, his eyes asked. Norah tried to hush them and offered some snacks instead, but this did not work. The wailing continued.

Her phone rang. She had to take this call. She looked over at her husband but he was glued to his screen. He only looked away from his laptop when his phone beeped. "Ok, ok. You can watch TV for a while." Her words worked like magic. The crying stopped and her two little munchkins ran for the remote control.

Norah quickly reached for her phone and walked into her room to answer it. Now that the NGO’s nine phone lines have been compressed into one, she has to be quick with the calls to make sure the line is clear for more callers. In the middle of her third call, her husband walked into the room.

"I need to use the room. The kids are too loud. I can’t work out there," he said.

"But I need the room. I need to take my calls," she protested.

"You can take your phone calls anywhere, right? Kitchen? I can’t focus with the TV and the kids in the background. I need the room."

"I need a quieter place to focus on my calls."

"Well, I’ve got a video call. So I’ve got to use the room."

Scene 1

Norah sighed. She can’t win this argument. She moved out of the room and took the next call in the kitchen.

Around noon, she started preparing lunch. Nic and Anna wanted to help out in the kitchen, so she had to supervise them while cooking. Her phone started ringing again. "Mummy, I put inside." Anna’s hands reached out for the vegetables. It was tough trying to focus on the caller’s questions while stirring the pot with one hand and keeping her eyes on the kids to make sure no one gets hurt or makes a mess. When lunch was ready, her husband emerged from the room.

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Alternatives: Supporting gender equality at the workplace

The pandemic has exacerbated gender roles in homes. And while there is a need for communities to have a mindset change to ultimately moderate the gender inequality, employers also play an important role in facilitating this shift.

Company policies can help shape attitudes, behaviours and mindsets towards increasing acceptance of gender-balanced care work at home. Employers have the tools and means to enable a fairer place at work as well as at home. This could be done, for example, by allowing men or fathers to have more flexible working arrangements so that they can easily take time out to care for their children or to help with housework. One trend that has been gaining traction among employers is paternal leave to ensure that fathers can help out with newborns. However, paternal leaves could ideally be lengthened from the usual practice of a few days to a longer period to enable parents to adjust to a new child.

There could also be better support for mothers coming back into the workforce. For example, employers could offer allowances for childcare services and equal opportunities for mothers who have taken extended time off to care for their children.

Multinational companies have taken the lead in this and are increasingly rolling out more measures that support both parents in their parenthood journey. This could lead to higher expectations for fathers to play a bigger role in both parents in their parenthood journey. This could lead to higher expectations for fathers to play a bigger role in both parents in their parenthood journey. This could lead to higher expectations for fathers to play a bigger role in both parents in their parenthood journey.

Microsoft offers a generous five months paid leave to all new birth mothers, and three months for fathers, adoptive parents and foster parents. This not only acknowledges the role that fathers play in welcoming a newborn into a family, but also recognizes the importance for new families of any nature to make time for initial bonding.

Another company, Deloitte, has created a supportive workplace for parents returning to work through programmes that support both their careers and families. Programmes such as its Deloitte Dads also help create equitable access for men to take leave. The company also offers financial support with childcare upon parents’ return to work.

Certainly, these initiatives come with a price tag and smaller companies may not be able to afford them. In this respect, the government can play a role in supporting smaller local employers through policies and incentives.

Given the new normal, the government is looking towards implementing flexible working arrangements between employers and employees post-COVID-19. This includes flexibility in working hours, working days, and workplace location, negotiated between employers and employees. The Women@Work initiative under Budget 2020, which offers monetary incentives and tax exemption for women returning to work, is another welcomed measure.

While it takes a paradigm shift on the part of companies to implement changes that support gender equality at the workplace, employers should embrace their role in a wider ecosystem to promote a fairer society. These changes need not be drastic. They can always start with baby steps such as enabling fathers to take parental leave to help with home disruptions. Such practices can then permeate to other companies in their field or value chain.

Norah gently set up her laptop for Zach’s online class. She had looked up how to use Google Classroom last night and hoped she had explained it well enough for her eight-year-old boy to understand. She also set up Zoom on the tablet for Nic to follow his kindergarten classes.

“Are you ready for class?”

“Yeah!” Zach replied enthusiastically. He hadn’t seen his school friends for a few days now and a virtual class would at least let them all say hi to each other. She left him with the laptop at the dining table. “I’m here if you need anything OK,” she assured him.

Nic, on the other hand, wasn’t so keen about seeing his teachers on the screen. “Can I play game now?” he asked. It didn’t help that Anna had her toys out beside him in the living area. “After you finish the class,” Norah sat beside him to make sure he was following the lesson.

Ten minutes later, her phone rang. Norah took a few steps back and answered the call. With his mother distracted, Nic left his chair and moved over to play with his sister’s toys. When Norah turned around and saw him on the floor, she stared daggers at her son. She listened to the caller as best as she could, all the while mouthing threats to her son and pointing at the tablet. He reluctantly went back to his chair and she took the next call beside him.

Around noon, their lunch arrived. Norah had come to realize that it was easier to just arrange for food delivery these days, it takes one thing off her hands. But it also takes up a sizeable chunk of their monthly budget and the pile of take-out plastic containers at home was stacking up.

“Go call Daddy to come out for lunch,” she instructed her eldest son. Their room had somehow become her husband’s permanent workspace while they worked from home. Sometimes, she found herself wishing that she, too, could have a room to hide in for the whole day while someone else dealt with the kids and the mess in the rest of the apartment.

Norah had planned to finish up some reports in the afternoon. But Zach has an afternoon class and he’ll need to use her laptop.

Norah and her husband have two laptops and a tablet between them. But it was decided the day before that Zach would be using Norah’s laptop for his online classes.

“Your work is mainly to handle calls, right? So you’ll be using the phone more than the laptop. Besides, his classes won’t last the whole day,” her husband had reasoned. And because he has video calls to attend to, it came down to Norah giving up her laptop.

She’ll just have to do the reports tonight.

She brought Zach some snacks after his class. “Did you enjoy your class today?”

He beamed. “Yes! I got to see Matthew and Aman and everybody. But we can’t talk. Everybody can hear us on the video. Thank you Mummy.”

“What for?”

“For doing the Google Classroom for me.”

Norah smiled.

**Scene 2**

Norah picked up the phone on Zach’s desk and dialed the Google Classroom for him. She held up the phone to Zach’s face and dialed in his code. “Are you ready for class?”

“Yeah!” Zach replied excitedly. He hadn’t seen his school friends for a few days now and a virtual class would at least let them all say hi to each other. She left him with the laptop at the dining table. “I’m here if you need anything OK,” she assured him.

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“What for?”

“For doing the Google Classroom for me.”

Norah smiled.


The great
digital oversight

And although the government announced free 1GB of daily data through selected telecommunication companies for the duration of the MCO, access to stable internet connection remained a challenge. And if shared among siblings for multiple classes, that data allowance may not be enough.

The e-learning experience during the MCO has not been sufficiently inclusive for all students. The problem of insufficient devices and limited internet access is even more acute in rural areas, which means that these students, some of whom already face difficulties with access to education under normal conditions, are at risk of falling even further behind in this time of crisis. Additionally, those with visual or audio disabilities face difficulties in adapting to e-learning. These students would have access to more suitable materials in schools but may not have the same access at home.

Teachers have found it increasingly difficult to reach out to students via online classes and those who require extra guidance have not been able to get the attention they need. Some teachers have resorted to delivering homework by hand but this may not always be feasible.

Similarly, parents have found it a challenge to assist their children with online classes especially when the children are unable to understand their lessons. Parents already have a lot on their plate and this inability to help their children adds to their frustration during this period.

Efforts in the e-learning space are understandably patchy at this time given the sudden change of events. But stakeholders in the education space should take this opportunity to ensure that moving forward, no one gets left behind. This includes finding ways to make digital learning viable for everyone, while also supplementing digital solutions with alternative education delivery methods to plug the gaps in the education ecosystem.
Alternatives: Digital education alternatives

The online migration for schools has turned out to be somewhat of a subpar experience and there has been no shortage of anecdotal accounts on how students have failed to join online classes because of inadequate infrastructure.

In light of this weakness in digital infrastructure, think tanks have advocated the use of more traditional media-based learning such as printed handouts and radio to ensure that more students are able to access education even during this time of disruption and to complement the transition to e-learning. In this respect, NGOs and dedicated teachers have stepped in to fill the gap, going out of their way to prepare printed learning materials for students in low-income and rural areas.

Government initiative in this area has lagged behind, until recently. With families struggling to buy devices for their children to follow online classes, officials have finally decided that a cheaper way to bring education into homes is by airing lessons on public TV.

The Prime Minister launched the special terrestrial education TV channel, DidikTV Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia on 17 February 2021 as most schools remained shut under another round of the MCO.

While this effort has taken a year in the making, it is better late than never as students continue to struggle with fallout due to school closures.

For more insights into the learning experiences of urban youth living in poverty, see this photo essay produced in collaboration with the School of Education, Taylor’s University.

collective-intelligence.my/reading/kisah

Produced in partnership with
Bukit Aman: Cases of domestic violence against women dropped during MCO but parental abuse by adult children increased — The Malay Mail, 25 August 2020.

MCO-linked domestic violence rises — New Straits Times, 4 April 2020.

Shelterless domestic violence survivors sleeping in cars during MCO: WAO — The Edge Malaysia, 14 April 2020.

For more information and ways to help, do contact NGOs involved with women’s welfare, like:
• Women’s Aid Organisation https://wao.org.my
• All Women’s Action Society (AWAM) https://www.awam.org.my
• Women’s Centre for Change (Penang) https://www.wccpenang.org
• Sisters in Islam https://sistersinislam.org
• Purple Lily (Sarawak) https://purplelily.org

Scene 3

The phone calls have become more frequent in recent days. Everyone has stayed home for almost a month now and Norah was starting to feel anxious each time the phone rings. She was exhausted from having to meet everyone’s demands at home. But more than that, every call also weighed heavily on her.

A ring. Norah braced herself. She took a deep breath and picked up the call. “Hello, this is Norah speaking.”

The voice at the other end was raspy — from screaming, or crying, too much? — and she didn’t have enough credit to continue the call. Norah asked if it was safe for her to return the call. Yes, it was. Norah took another deep breath and dialed the number on her screen.

She heard the whimpering of a child. Norah gripped the phone tighter. She thought of Anna. “Are you ok? Can you tell me what happened?” The caller, Anis, thinks she may have broken her left arm. She can’t lift her hand, it hurts too much and she didn’t know who to ask for help. “How did that happen?”

Mumbles. “Are you alone? Where are you now?” Her four-year-old son was with her. They were huddled in the toilet at home. The door was locked. “How did you hurt your arm?” Anis hesitated. “mmmm...uh...mmm.” “It’s OK, take your time. You can just tell me,” Norah assured her.

Anis’s husband had hit her. It started as a slap. In the heat of the moment, it escalated into punches and kicks. “Has this happened before?” Anis was silent. But her son’s whimpering continued in the background. Finally, “Yes.” “Does it happen often?” “No. yes. uh. no. he’s just more stressed now.

No work.” Anis sobbed. “It’s OK. Where is your husband now?” “In the room. Sleeping. He’s not always like this. He just had a drink, that’s all. But painful,” she said. “When was the last time he hit you?” “Four days ago. Is your son OK? Is he hurt?” Her son was unharmed, just frightened.

Norah tried to assess Anis’s injury. She needed medical attention. Norah tried to convince Anis to head to a hospital. She could send over a Grab driver and stay with her on the phone throughout, if she wanted. But Anis didn’t want to go to a hospital. “There’s COVID.” Her voice shook. She didn’t want to get sick. She didn’t want to die. How about a clinic, then? It took a bit more convincing before Anis finally relented to visit the clinic. But she didn’t want to lodge a report. “He is not always like that,” she repeated a few times.

Norah hung up and ordered an e-hailing ride to Anis’s place. She would need to check in on Anis again in a bit. She thought of all the other details that she’d need to work out — claims for the Grab driver, payment at the clinic, getting another ride back. Would it be safe for Anis to stay at home? She would need to get some rest to recover. How would she take care of her son? So many questions. Norah stared at the dishes in the sink. She could feel the tears welling up, but she couldn’t cry. She needed to be the sturdy support. She had to call Anis again.

Norah’s husband walked into the kitchen for a drink. “Are you ok?” he asked. “Yeah, just, you know, a call,” she answered. He walked over and gave her a hug. “It’s ok. You did what you could,” he assured her. Did she? “Yes, you did,” he said, knowing what she was thinking.
Unpacking the system: COVID-19 and domestic violence

See pp.3-5 for an explanation of causal relationships and reinforcing and balancing feedback loops.

Domestic violence is an insidious problem that traps its victims — disproportionately women — and keeps them from leaving home and seeking help. The more time the victim spends with the abuser at home, the greater the level of domestic abuse and violence they experience. This emotional and physical abuse often generates fear in the victim about the consequences of leaving home, perpetuating the cycle (R2). Domestic violence victims need resources, alternative housing, emotional support, and protection from abusers to overcome fears of leaving home and exiting these situations. Help from authorities such as the police and from support groups and NGOs working on women’s welfare is critical in enabling victims to leave.

Unpaid care work
Domestic violence

Produced in partnership with

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified challenges faced by domestic abuse victims and the groups that help them. The risk of COVID-19 infection and movement restriction orders have kept victims at home. Meanwhile, movement restrictions hindered the ability of aid organisations to act while enforcement reduced police manpower and resources with competing priorities. In Malaysia and globally, cases of domestic violence spiked with the pandemic. The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development’s Talian Kasih hotline saw a 57 percent increase in calls from domestic violence victims in the first week of the MCO, mirroring trends in countries around the world.

For more insights into women’s unpaid care burden and domestic violence amid COVID-19 in Malaysia, read these articles:

collective-intelligence.my/reading/kisah

WOMEN’S AID ORGANISATION
PERTUBUHAN PERTOLONGAN WANITA

BATTLE ON THE HOME FRONT

23
The surge in domestic violence globally during the COVID-19 pandemic is a result of limitations in our social, economic, and political systems. The consequences challenge us to collectively invest in and improve these systems for a more just, safe, and equitable society.

Did work-from-home work for the home?

Work from home or WFH was probably one of the most used phrases in 2020. And if it is anything to go by, the positive shift in perception towards WFH by both employers and employees could well put remote working on the table for many workers in the foreseeable future.

Although the concept has been bandied about for years, it is the pandemic that has forced many of us to make WFH work and shown us that it is possible.

WFH has its advantages. In a survey carried out by UNDP, 42 percent of respondents saved at least one hour a day by cutting their commute to the workplace. This enabled them to manage work and domestic responsibilities better, thus, improving their quality of life.

But while WFH seemed to be a workable solution for work, it begs the question of whether WFH is also feasible for the home.

UNDP’s How We Worked From Home report found that while people worked from home, the costs of work were often absorbed by households. This includes utilities and work equipment expenditure, which puts additional stress on household finances, especially for those who faced income reductions.

Employees who are working remotely also experience burnout as they face difficulties in unplugging from work. The constant intrusion of work into the home space does pose a challenge for workers who are trying to draw the line between these two different spaces.

UNDP’s report noted that WFH can work for mothers, albeit with caveats. Being at home allows them the flexibility to take care of their families’ needs while working. However, there have also been many reports on the challenges faced by working mothers during WFH. Indeed, there was a gender imbalance in domestic responsibilities reflected in the survey results, with women between the ages of 35 and 44 twice as likely as men to find domestic responsibilities more difficult during WFH (40 percent vs. 20 percent). However, these gender imbalances exist with or without WFH.
Notably, women with childcare responsibilities were the most likely to report significant improvements in their quality of life during WFH (31 percent vs. 27 percent), and 59 percent reported that their productivity stayed the same or improved.

It is not a secret that families have struggled to strike a balance between work and home during this time. But with 83 percent of employers looking to adopt WFH practices in the new normal, households will also need to adjust their practices and realign their expectations while employers will need to change their viewpoint on workers’ KPIs, work practices and workplace culture to better support their employees.

Nonetheless, as different people grapple with WFH, parents have universally expressed gratitude in having the extra time at home to spend with their children despite the challenges thrown their way.

Women and WFH

Women aged 35 to 44 were twice as likely as men to say WFH made it more difficult to manage domestic responsibilities (40% vs. 20%), reflecting the higher domestic burden on women.

Nonetheless, women who were caregivers improved QOL while remaining productive.

54% of women were fully able to communicate with colleagues during WFH. In comparison, 44% of men reported the same.
Social behaviour in confinement

The call to stay at home has come across as a varied experience for people from different socio-economic backgrounds. Some could better afford necessities to make staying home more bearable and comfortable while others struggled to make it work.

Led by UNDP, the UN in Malaysia carried out a Rapid Household Impact Survey (RAHIS) to assess the impact of the pandemic on households during the first MCO in 2020 and to better understand the needs of families in a crisis like this. Respondents of the survey were largely from low-income households with 69 percent of them reporting an average monthly household income of below RM3,000.

The MCO had caged many lower-income families in cramped living spaces and with little resources to afford necessities. This is coupled with added tensions due to additional care and housework, and the consequences have been harsh on them.

What’s alarming about the survey is that it highlights the negative impact of enforced staying home on social behaviour and how these impacts affect women more than men. Women tend to feel more depressed and have observed more tensions among family members and noticed increased levels of psychological distress among their children, which could add further burden on their mental wellbeing.

Certainly, living in isolation has been hard on most people, and especially so for vulnerable groups, especially women.

While the government has focused its efforts to support the B40 group mainly through cash handouts, there is also clearly a need to provide non-monetary support to these households, particularly for women, who bear the brunt of taking care of the family and managing the household on limited resources. This could be in the form of access to counseling or coaching on stress management, as well as tools to enable them to better adapt to the disruption.

The fact that many do not have access to such facilities also underscores the divide among the rich and the poor. Such prolonged inaccessibility will only exacerbate these social behaviours among the lower-income group.

And if left unattended, we could potentially see the effects of these behaviours taking root and lasting beyond the timeframe of the pandemic.
Alternatives: Taking care of employees’ mental health

The importance of mental health has certainly hit home in this pandemic and it is time that companies recognize this as a necessary aspect of employee wellbeing. Allowing employees to take days off to deal with mental stress, rest, and reset, just as they are given paid medical leave to deal with other illnesses, can generate benefits for both employers and employees.

Some companies have started incorporating mental health into their policies or offer workers support measures to deal with mental health issues. In Malaysia, radio broadcast company BFM allows its employees to take time off for mental rest under their medical leave allowance without needing to produce a medical certification (MC). Elsewhere, Google is supporting an employee-led programme called Blue Dot, which offers colleagues something akin to peer-to-peer counseling. The data-driven giant has pledged not to collect any data on the programme to enable employee privacy.

There is an increasing need to include access to mental health assistance in employees’ benefit packages and to enable open conversations on mental health at the workplace. This will also pave the way for more people to seek out help where needed and encourage workers to nurture their own well-being and mental resilience so that they can operate from a place of strength.


An ear-piercing alarm blared throughout the neighbourhood, followed by the soft humming of modern engines trekking up poorly maintained roads.

A familiar irritation burned at the tips of Ayeesha’s skin at the noise, signaling all residents to be on stand-by. The racket jarred her meditative session with warm coffee and a highly-sought after novel — paperback version. A rare gem in the midst of the prevalent pandemic haunting the world since late 2019; which led to a decreased production of paper.

With a heavy sigh, she set her book onto the marble kitchen counter and made her way to the front door; but not before putting on a flimsy white hazmat suit, courtesy of the government. Once outside, she was greeted by the rare sight of her neighbours, all adorned in the same protective gear, coming out from identical one-storey houses, wearing the same tired expressions.

Slowly driving past the neighbourhood was a large rectangular lorry, with its shiny black surface reflecting the afternoon sun. It was a stark contrast to the old lorries built mainly for practicality and low cost. This vehicle was crafted out of expensive lightweight carbon fibre composite which caused the manufacturing process to be more efficient and flexible.

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Annoying alarm ceased once every resident was stationed at their respective doorstep. In a flashy display, the vehicle extended two claws out, setting down big black boxes of plastic onto each home before driving away.

Ayeesha walked towards the box a few paces away from her doorstep and typed in her security mail code. With a satisfying click, the lid flew open to reveal a single piece of paper with a familiar newspaper format.

The headline read: Could 2030 be the end of COVID-19?

Ayeesha rolled her eyes, not bothering to scan the QR code on the paper to read its contents. This was what the media had promoted every year, the ‘end’ of the pandemic, yet the situation had only worsened each year with 28 percent of the whole Malaysian population currently infected. She doubted this year would produce a more effective vaccine than the last. Even the best medication had only been able to subdue the symptoms.

After shoving the paper to the corner of the box, she found herself staring at a thick piece of soft foam which sheltered a glass case. Considering the price of glass these days, whatever lay within it could be valuable.

Her heart dropped. Understanding seeped into her mind as she gingerly picked up the case. Her hands shook as she walked unsteadily back into her house, leaving the black box for the vehicle to pick up later.

Once the door was closed, the excitement bubbling in her came out in the form of tears, anxious but hopeful.

She set the case onto the coffee table before clumsily opening her hazmat suit while staggering into her bedroom. There was no time to waste.

With only a brief thought, she took out the pink baju kurung which she had reserved for her best days. Today was one of them. Wiping her tears, she attempted to put on makeup while shivering in anticipation. Her mascara had smudged slightly but she was too impatient to care.

She opened the glass case from the living room, revealing a cylindrical chip the size of her thumb. There was no need for instructions as she had spent countless hours studying this device when its prototype was launched.

She squeezed the chip twice and a vertical beam of light escaped, momentarily blinding her.

But when she opened her eyes, there standing in front of her in her living room were her parents, their arms wide open and eyes brimming with tears.

Instead of distant worried gazes on a polished screen for years, she finally felt their comforting embrace as though they were with her.

The hug broke apart as her lungs caved in and she fell into a coughing fit. A reassuring hand warmed her shoulder.

No immediate cure, but a reason to live on.
Environmental interlude:
Selangor water cuts in the COVID-19 pandemic

Selangor, together with the federal territories of Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya, is the most populated area in Malaysia, home to about seven million people. This population density strains available water resources — making it paramount to protect rivers, which are the primary drinking water source. Yet, water disruptions have become a common burden, even before the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2020, Selangor experienced as many as seven unscheduled water cuts due to contamination of raw water resources, odour pollution, as well as waste-dumping of liquid and semi-solid organic compounds into rivers. These incidents left large portions of the state without water for several days at a time. The cuts compounded the challenges created by the pandemic — making it difficult to practice personal hygiene and sanitation to prevent transmission of COVID-19, thus adding to the burden of households coping with the challenges of working and studying from home.

The most severe cut took place in September 2020, with full restoration of water supply only achieved after six days. The cut coincided with a period of low COVID-19 cases, which was fortunate in several ways. Many Selangor residents undertook impromptu solutions, including checking into hotels or travelling out of state to escape the predicament. If COVID-19 cases were higher, either of these solutions might not have been available due to movement restrictions, alternatively, such behaviours could have created a new wave of infections. For those who could not get away and had to queue for water delivery, the COVID-19 pandemic created social distancing challenges and increased risk of exposure.

For many businesses attempting to leverage the respite in the pandemic, the timing of the water cut was yet another economic setback in an already difficult year. Water rationing is impractical for many businesses that rely on water to operate, e.g., laundry, dialysis, and food services. Some businesses sent their staff to distant locations with an active water supply to bring back water to keep the business running. Eateries used plastic sheets on plates so that the plates could be reused without washing or used disposable plates. Drinks were served in plastic bags and tied with raffia strings. Thus, the water cut generated solid waste. These practices were also financially unsustainable, increasing costs and turning off customers — who were already hesitant about the cleanliness of eateries during the water disruption.

Both the water cuts and the COVID-19 pandemic stem from poor choices in how we, as human beings, interact with the environment. These chains of cause-and-effect, illustrated on the opposite page, show the intersections of the downstream impacts of our choices. Indeed, the problems created by the water cut were amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the water cut created conditions that could have easily accelerated the pandemic.

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Chapter 2

To gig or not to gig?
Invisible, but essential

No one really notices the gardener who appears now and then to prune and water the small patch of garden outside the office or the worker at the hardware store who knows where every nut and bolt is. Neither do we notice the construction workers and part-time maids who build and clean our homes — as long as they do their job well.

These are but a few of many in the informal work sector — unnoticed, unregulated, and unprotected. While they are not always out of sight, they are usually out of mind. They are, however, essential for the smooth running of our everyday life and of the wider economy. Restaurants can’t run without servers and cooks, households would be lost without plumbers and electricians, and offices would be inept without document runners.

The informal sector makes up a sizeable portion of the local labour force. In 2017, there were 1.36 million people in the Malaysian informal sector, making up about 10.6 percent of the total labour force. By the first quarter of 2020, 2.66 million people were self-employed — that is, 17.4 percent of the total workforce in Malaysia.

The MCO has shined a harsh light on the fragility of informal work. Although not all informal workers are poor, the informal sector is often linked to vulnerable employment and unstable income. Many are low-wage earners and paid daily. They do not enjoy the benefits of basic incomes or severance packages. Those who held on to their jobs during the pandemic were likely required to be on site, exposing them to health risks.

Many informal workers also fall through the cracks in government aid because they are not registered employees. The wage subsidy programme, for example, targets workers in formal employment but overlooks many individuals in vulnerable employment, including the self-employed, informal workers, and unpaid family workers.

One thing that has become obvious during the lockdown is how crucial these informal workers are to the economy, so much so that they have earned the labels ‘essential workers’ and ‘frontliners’.

Indeed, we need to provide better social protection for this group of workers. This means ensuring policies and responses that are inclusive of the informal sector. It is the least we can do for those we’ve come to call essential.


Naz puts on his shoes and gets ready to head out. He grabs his square backpack and turns on the food delivery app to start taking delivery orders. It’s 7:30 a.m. There should be a couple of orders coming in for breakfast soon.

He rides his bike to a nearby delivery hotspot and finds other riders already gathered there. He sees a few familiar faces and waves to acknowledge them. They sit, talk and laugh as they wait for orders to come in. Naz listens as Dennis tells them about his brother who just got retrenched. A few of the other guys nod in sympathy. Farish shares that his brother could soon be joining him on this food delivery path.

**Dennis:** Jobs are quite tough now. This MCO, everybody has to close shop. No business. How to tahan? Companies are firing people, left, right, centre. My brother just started work last year. So last in, first out lah. Bad timing lah.

**Mani:** Susah lah.

**Farish:** Yeah. My brother left work a long time ago. Thought want to follow his passion jadi artist. Hard work. Every day kais pagi, makan pagi. My parents also tak suka. But he stubborn. Nak buat juga. Last year, finally got progress. Sold quite a lot of his paintings. Quite a lot of money. Ada lah, orang suruh dia buat exhibition besar this year. Already prepared, made a lot of artwork, rent place, beli tiket terbang. Lepas tu, MCO pula.

**Naz:** Sekaran, macam mana?

**Farish:** Don’t know lah. Got some savings from last year lah. But this MCO, don’t know how long also. How many people can tahan lebih satu bulan no income?

**Naz:** Tu lah.

The guys laugh. Some of the guys here used to have full-time jobs. But with aeroplanes not flying and gyms and salons closed, they’ve taken up delivery work. Before the pandemic, Naz used to think that those who went into the gig economy were solely in it for the flexibility to work whenever they wanted to. Now, he realizes there are also many like him who are in it because there is not much else they can do, especially now.

One by one, the riders disperse to deliver breakfast to customers many kilometres away. Naz manages to fulfil four orders nearby before the mid-morning lull sets in. He’ll need to make another eleven trips to meet his daily income target. He figures he should grab a quick bite and wait somewhere until the online lunch crowd comes in. Maybe he can even catch a quick nap.

Just before noon, he is on the go again. But the lunch deliveries are further away and that means going through roadblocks. He has the required documents to move around but he invariably gets questioned at these roadblocks. He quickly gets in line with the other cars, trucks, and bikes. As traffic crawls, he looks around to see his fellow road users, all fuming that they have to wait in line to go on their way.

In this hot sun, anyone would be fuming. His T-shirt has become a layer of skin, glued in by his sweat. Under his helmet, his head is a soaked mop. He can’t wait to wash his hair but the next shower is a long wait away. If he wants to make enough money for the month, he has to maximize his time on the road. Naz breathes in the fumes and looks at his watch. He hopes his lunch recipient won’t be angry with this delay. He had gotten a good shelling yesterday.

As he draws nearer to the police officer, he gets ready to get off his bike in case they want to inspect his delivery bag. But thankfully, they let him through after a few questions.

He speeds to his destination, avoiding a few cars along the way. When he arrives, Naz calls the customer. No answer. He tries again a few more times. Still no answer. He waits beside the guardhouse as he is not allowed in, and after a few minutes, he tries again. He calls a few more times before he is finally able to hand over the pack of food to the customer. This delay might mean a trip or two fewer for him — and this during peak hours when the incentives are better.

The handover done, he hurries to his next stop. The restaurant is busy and his order is not ready yet. He looks around and sees flustered waiters trying to make do. The rider who got there before him tells him that he’s been waiting for close to an hour.
The robots will serve you now

It is almost impossible to talk about automation without discussing its impact on jobs. There is the grim outlook where thousands of low-skilled workers in factories and offices are expected to be displaced by machines and robots. And on the flipside, thousands of new jobs are also expected to spring over the next few years as new technology opens new opportunities.

But while we often think of those in formal employment losing their jobs, we don’t pay enough attention to how automation could impact the informal sector. During the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of those who lost their full-time jobs turned to the informal sector to stay afloat. Case in point, pilots who no longer deployed to carry small purchases and necessities to people. Locally, these technologies are also slowly picking up pace with robots and drones potentially taking the place of waiters and warehouse workers.

While we cannot and should not hinder the development of such technologies, we should take a deeper look at how they will affect the lives and livelihoods of the many who have now turned to the informal sector out of necessity. As the conversation around the upskilling and reskilling of our workers at the workplace takes shape, we need to also ask the question: can we apply these reskilling and upskilling strategies to the informal sector? If so, then policymakers will need to include them in their framework to prepare the labour force — both formal and informal workers — for the future. And if not, then it is high time that we look into alternative ways to distribute the gains from automation, to ensure that we are not caught off guard when the robots come rolling in.


Naz takes on another three orders for the afternoon and starts worrying that the evening rain will shorten his workday. The sky quickly darkens and rumbles. And then the rain comes. It has been raining cats and dogs every evening this week and riding in this rain is risky. It is difficult to see anything when heavy droplets are beating into your visor. More importantly, it will be hard for others to see him in this downpour.

He contemplates whether to head out or not. Incentives during these hours are tempting. He needs to make at least seven more orders before the day ends. But he is worried. His parents would be worried too. He decides to take shelter at a bus stop and waits for the rain to ease a little. He’ll try to do more deliveries another day, maybe start earlier tomorrow. As he waits, he sees other delivery guys braving through the rain.

We really are braving through the heat, rain, roadblocks, and virus for the sake of customers, Naz thinks. Maybe it is true that they are frontliners after all. Before the MCO, delivery riders were taken for granted. No one took a second glance at them before this. But suddenly, the nation is thanking them for soldiering on and have labelled them frontliners — risking their lives to bring necessities where they are needed.

Naz never really thought of himself as a frontliner. He had wanted to be an engineer. But here he is, armed with a helmet and square backpack, bringing food to people who can’t go out to get their own. A part of him is grateful to be of help in such a small way during this time.

He manages another three orders after the rain slows, before eateries have to close. He didn’t make as many trips as he’d liked to today. Would he be able to squeeze in four more jobs tomorrow? Not if it rains like this again tomorrow, he thinks. He was already short of his target over the last few days because of the rain. He’ll probably have to work an additional day this month to make up for the income shortfall for this week. He usually allows himself two days off each month to help out with chores around the house. Guess it’ll be just one day this month then, he thinks; otherwise, his family will have trouble paying the rent.

It is past his dinner time. He makes his way back home in the dark, tired and hungry. He can’t wait to wash his hair, grab a quick supper and get some rest. He hopes his younger siblings are still awake so that he can at least say hi for the day. His engineering dreams will have to wait because tomorrow, he’ll be out early again serving on this new front line.

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Alternatives: Instilling financial literacy

With lifelong secure jobs becoming less and less of a thing, it is becoming more important that people are equipped with the knowledge and tools to be financially independent. This will help them better manage risks such as saving for a ‘rainy day’, taking on manageable debt, and preparing for their old age.

In today’s complex economy, financial products and services have become more complicated. Credit is also easily accessible, making it easy for consumers to borrow money that they may not have the ability to repay later. Coupled with the disruption posed by the pandemic, which has affected incomes and forced people to dip into their savings and retirement funds, it is time to heed the growing call for a structured financial literacy programme to be taught in schools.

While teaching children to save with simple tools like a piggy bank is good practice, experts believe financial literacy is no longer suited for home education. Given the complexity of the modern financial landscape and the occurrences of bigger disruptive events such as COVID-19, a structured syllabus is needed. The call for financial literacy to be introduced to students at an early age is nothing new. But with current developments, the urgency for exploring and acting on it has increased.


Alternatives: Giving more weightage to skills

For a long time, students of every age were taught to aspire to become professionals. Many spend their schooling years building up impressive resumes to enter good programmes in prestigious educational institutions and graduate magna cum laude, with first-class honours or distinction, and the like. There is also a progressive trend towards higher qualifications like a master’s degree or a PhD.

But as automation changes the landscape of work, some have questioned whether a degree is still able to prepare graduates for an ever-evolving workplace.

Organizations are beginning to recognize that they will require relevant skilled people who can effectively support the business or navigate times of change rather than just candidates with a paper qualification. Globally, companies like Penguin Random House, Ernst & Young, and PricewaterhouseCoopers have openly stated that they no longer require university degrees in their search for candidates. They will, instead, let non-degree holders earn their professional qualifications on the job.

This will not only open the door for many who may not have had the opportunity to get an education to still have access to good jobs; it will also allow employees to pick up relevant skills on the go. Increasingly, there has been a greater focus on developing industry-ready skills and on technical and vocational education and training (TVET) to ensure that graduates can function in a proper and productive manner at the workplace. With more attention given to training, certifications in non-traditional courses such as social care work, digital marketing and agriculture can help bridge the skills gap between academia and the industry.

This also sees a possible return to apprenticeships as a path towards professional qualifications.

However, the need to reskill graduates shines a light on certain weaknesses in the current education structure and content. This calls for education institutions to reappraise syllabuses to remain relevant in the wake of such developments.

Education institutions should have closer engagements with the industry to ensure that they are producing graduates that meet industry requirements. Schools should also look into offering more cross-skilling opportunities for their students to enable them to be multifunctional and adaptable to new technological developments.


Solace in art

Listening to an orchestra play remotely from the comfort of our couches; reading a book; neighbours gathering at their windows to sing; hours of entertainment on TV; browsing through online museum and art collections; laughing heartily at virtual stand-up comedy; passing time with doodles; grooving along to dance beats; exploring life through remote theatre.

With much of the world shut-in for most of 2020 and 2021, many of us have found enjoyment, amusement, assurance, comfort, and solidarity in the many forms of art. Art told us stories of what was happening in other communities and how others were coping with the pandemic, allowing us to connect and empathize with others. The arts also enabled us to examine and express our thoughts and emotions, helping us to deal with our many months of isolation. They inspired and reminded us that there is always light at the end of the tunnel.

Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of UNESCO, couldn’t have put it better when she noted that art and culture makes us resilient and gives us hope. It reminds us that we are not alone. Certainly, the pandemic has called to attention the value of the arts.

But just as much as the arts have consolled us, it is also perhaps time for us to extend a helping hand to artists so that they, too, can find solace in what they do. Get to know our local artists and support them.
Passion and resilience

COVID-19 has thrown a spanner in many artists’ plans and cut off most of their income stream. Still, they persist to remain resilient in their passion.

Note: Interviews were conducted in August 2020.

Chacko Vadaketh
Actor, host and voiceover artist

How has COVID-19 affected you?
The negative impact is that work and income have been cancelled. There is a lot of uncertainty about how things will start up again. What will happen with regular events, conferences, annual dinners, weddings? These are places where I work. And of course, theatre shows and TV shows are also severely impacted.

But the positive aspect, I think, is a sense of the community coming together to help each other.

Also, there is great appeal in going online. My sisters who live in Australia could watch me perform in KL. And the show is recorded so it has an ongoing life, unlike in theatre where the show is dead after it is done, until it is staged again. But what’s lost is that connection with the audience. We also need to see how this can provide income for artists because we can’t live on thumbs-up signs on the screen alone.

How did you get involved in the arts?
I’m a lawyer by training. It was a sensible thing to do. I was in Cambridge and there are a lot of theatres there. That’s where I fell in love with theatre. I was playing Othello and as I got a standing ovation for my final night curtain call, I thought, “THIS is what I want to do.” But it took a long time. I practised law for ten years while doing theatre on the side. I enjoy it. You get to connect with audiences. You give them that escapism, you make them laugh, you make them cry. And there’s something magical when that happens.

What would you like to see in the arts industry?
We need a one-stop centre for people to know what’s happening in the arts scene in Malaysia, where, who’s in it and reviews of the shows. We need a National Arts Policy that supports both the traditional arts and stimulates creativity that is free and open and with no or very limited controls. We need a National Arts Council that is a mix of government, practitioners, lay people, corporations. People who really know the arts, have a love for it and have experienced it locally and/or internationally. With a broad perspective and supportive of all the multiple cultures and communities that make up Malaysia, and secular, free of religious overtones. It must be transparent and receive and distribute funding — a mix of government and private sector. Oversee arts festivals. Be an advocate for the arts, nurture traditional art forms, provide support for arts companies. A council for ALL Malaysians.

Let’s hope we can get the vaccines soon so that audiences can come back in full force in theatres. But now that we’ve discovered technology, I think that will also be a major force in the performing arts, hybrid might be the way to go!

Juliana Heng
Stand-up comedian

Why did you become a comedian?
I love performing and making people laugh.

How was your journey as a comedian?
I’ve been a hungry and struggling open-micer since September 2017. I have not had any paid gigs. The KL comedy scene is rather small, so opportunities are limited. I’ve been told to wait patiently and to keep honing my craft. But gigs in KL are limited, so it becomes tricky to find opportunities to do so. If I want to work my way up, how do I improve myself? How do I get to where I want to be?

How has COVID-19 changed things for you?
With the lockdown, I actually felt rather displaced for a moment. This was the year for me to hustle but there were no more live gigs. I was curating an autistic comedy showcase for Camden Fringe 2020 in London. Unfortunately, that did not happen.

But thanks to virtual gigs, I can do two to three virtual open mics a day. As long as you are good, you are funny, you will be booked for shows internationally. There’s an abundance of opportunities out there. So this is great.

What are the challenges with virtual shows?
The internet connection can be very bad. There are times when I have to go to my friends’ house to borrow their internet so that I can perform a decent show where I don’t get cut off halfway, especially at my punchline — that’s the worst thing!

And instead of charging for tickets, we could encourage donations instead. Times are hard now and people appreciate that they are able to pay what they can rather than be forced to pay a certain amount.

But virtual shows are not the same as live shows because comedy is a very communal activity. It is very hard for people to laugh in isolation. So I would say virtual comedy is best as an option. It will never replace live comedy.
Huda Nejim al-Asedi
Arts educator and visual artist

How did COVID-19 change the way you present your work?
I try to stay relevant by using social media. But being drained mentally on social media with ever-changing algorithms and an unsaid rule to compete with others on the platform isn’t a positive thing. I didn’t feel like I could thrive or keep up on the platform and it was counterproductive. And if this goes on, I don’t know if I’ll be able to financially sustain myself. I might just have to look for other odd jobs and other ways to function, even if it means outside of the art scene.

Why did you become an artist?
It’s my passion. I believe in its power to heal people. Learning how to communicate as a little girl was tough and learning how to draw my internal thoughts was very life-changing for me. I was empowered by the ability to draw and explore more with the arts. I was able to say what I wanted and listen to others, through the arts. I keep thinking to myself, if art helped me grow into the adult I am today, it can definitely offer something more to the challenged young people out there.

What is needed to support the arts?
Platforms to enable artists to engage with the public (and vice versa) is something we should have at multiple levels in society, be it at a national level, community level or even just between friends. Those platforms would then need more funding to stay active and to foster more connection and communication to let them (both artists and public spheres) experience for themselves how the arts can continuously affect their lives positively.

We need more working avenues for artists to come together in this uncertain isolation, post-pandemic. We would need to test and try what can work as opposed to letting unhealthy coping mechanisms brew among our artists, such as continuing to work in silos. I think artists should be trained, have development programmes, interact with other people and have good communication skills. The visual arts extend from design to illustration, graphic design, comic production, animation and so much more. But all these sectors exist separately. We haven’t been successful in breaking the barriers to speak to each other and work together more collaboratively, building each other up through a meaningful experience.

What will the future of the arts look like?
I don’t know for certain, but if we overlook how the arts sector is heavily affected by the pandemic, we will risk killing our chance to survive the harmful effects of isolation during this pandemic. Social anxiety is on the rise and people are forgetting ways to connect with each other. We are already unable to go to public parks, recreation spaces, community cafes, or even museums and galleries as before. How will we be able to listen and understand each other at a deeper level, without a healthy art scene to assist in facilitating all the inner heart work that will have to happen, in order to heal our nation?

For more insights into the impact of COVID-19 and the Movement Control Order (MCO) 2020 on the performing arts community in Malaysia, watch our video featuring highlights from the Kisah Arts Survey.

collective-intelligence.my/reading/kisah

Produced in partnership with
ReformARTsi
Are we moving away from job security?

After decades of glorifying stable nine-to-five jobs, it would seem unimaginable to many that anyone would give up a steady position with employment benefits and a decent monthly salary in exchange for uncertainty.

And yet, it seems that more are looking to quit full-time employment, even in this pandemic, for a variety of reasons. These can range from safety and mental health concerns to needing to take time out to care for family members, to making time for the things that really matter to them or to work on new ventures that they are more passionate about.

For sure, technological developments have helped this move away from traditional work. The rise of digital platforms has enabled more people to look at part-time and project-based work as a sustainable way of making a living. Such platforms also allow them to tap into projects in other countries, which could potentially pay a living. Such platforms also allow them to tap into projects in other countries, which could potentially pay a living. Some operators are already rolling out efforts to better protect workers. Operators could also explore further measures such as enabling automatic deductions for contributions like Socso.

Incidentally, there has also been a growing interest in entrepreneurship, in line with the Government’s drive to encourage more people to become job creators. This inevitably encourages new thinking about job security and inspires some risk-taking.

These trends raise the question of whether we are moving away from job security. Is formal and traditional employment losing its shine?

Indicators show that the informal economy is large and growing. Informal employment accounts for almost 62 percent of total global employment and the informal sector has contributed between 20 percent to 64 percent of total gross domestic product (GDP) in countries around the world.

But the informal economy is highly heterogeneous. The decision to enter the informal sector could be due to personal choice for flexibility and new opportunities or out of necessity when formal, full-time employment is unobtainable.

Whichever the case, the changing dynamics of the workforce require policymakers and companies to rethink the nature of work. The informal sector offers employers greater labour flexibility and an opportunity to reduce cost, but companies will have to adjust their workforce strategies and change their approach and policies on hiring.

On the other hand, policymakers need to consider how to tackle labour vulnerability and its effects on the broader economic and social landscape of the country. Moving away from job security also means moving away from financial security. And with growing trends such as telemedicine and legal tech, there is also a possibility for professionals to offer their services through new channels rather than be employed in established firms.

In recent times, the value of flexibility has also been brought to the forefront thanks, in part, to the growing gig economy. According to Workerforce Institute, 55 percent of Gen Z-ers are attracted to gig employment as the flexibility allows them to work at their own pace and on their terms. The appeal is not just to among the younger generation; those more established in their careers are increasingly looking at freelancing as a way of exploring other options.

Recently, both the Employees’ Provident Fund (EPF) and Social Security Organisation (Sosco) allow gig workers to contribute voluntarily under their Voluntary Contribution with Retirement Incentive and Self-Employment Social Security Scheme respectively. The Government has also made it a point to cover informal workers — including gig workers, e-hailing drivers, bus drivers and tourist guides — under the various stimulus packages over the past year.

Nonetheless, in the long run, a more comprehensive framework is needed to ensure that gig workers are protected. Under the recently launched Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint 2021, the Government plans to introduce long-term social protection for gig workers. A feasibility study will be undertaken to develop appropriate social protection schemes and to map out the implementation plan for gig workers.

The plan will also look at indirect incentives for employers that contribute to their gig workers’ Sosco and EPF. This will be key to getting gig economy operators and other stakeholders to contribute to the welfare of gig workers.

Some operators are already rolling out efforts to better assist gig workers on their platforms. For example, Grab Malaysia has expanded its benefits programme to include financial literacy classes, financial assistance and additional insurance products for its drivers and delivery partners. Similarly, GoGet is encouraging its users to save their earnings and protect themselves through tie-ups with other partners and an on-demand insurance technology platform. Operators could also explore further measures such as enabling automatic deductions for contributions like Socso.

However, it needs to be said that the informal sector goes beyond just the gig economy and policymakers will have to develop measures that are inclusive. This could include redefining labour laws and reducing barriers to formalization for informal workers and enterprises. There is also the need to make health insurance accessible, to enable easier methods for flexible contributions to EPF and Socso, to create more skill development programmes for informal workers, and perhaps look into some form of basic wage for the informal sector.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to extending social protection coverage to workers in informal employment but any effort in this direction certainly warrants a closer look.


How we value jobs

Then

• What are the other benefits that come with the job?
• How often am I expected to work overtime?
• Do you require me to have knowledge in anything specific?

Do you have any questions for me?

Now

• Can you tell me a bit about the company’s values and culture?
• Are there opportunities for professional development?
• What are you looking for in a candidate?

Do you have any questions for me?
Do you have any questions for me?

- How should I link this project evaluation to my public work profile?
- Will there be similar work available at the end of this six months period?
- What opportunities will I have to expand my network in the agricultural sector?
Hands down, one of the most popular slogans of 2020 was #kitajagakita. But who is this kita (‘us’), really? In this section we take a step back, interrogating the spaces and systems that have been our default engines of growth.

Exploring themes of inclusion vs. exclusion, Chapter 3 brings us on a tour of the city from the perspective of a person experiencing homelessness. Who is part of the narrative of a ‘futuristic, developed’ city? Who is not? How can we truly achieve the lofty aspirations of ‘leaving no one behind’?

Told through the (fictional) social media feed of a factory worker, Chapter 4 analyses how the economic system that drives growth also drives vulnerability — the industries that have enabled us to fight the pandemic have also contributed to and perpetuated it.
Homme-less: Searching for belonging in times of COVID-19

Homme, the French word for man, or person. Is homelessness a lack of shelter, or is it a lack of belonging?
Home? I don’t have a home, this is my home lah.

Peter welcomed me into his ‘living room’ — a two-feet by two-feet area next to his ‘bed’, with a stool.

But I think my home is everywhere.

Peter took a sip of hot tea from his thermos.

I still remember the first night of being homeless. I was walking around, and suddenly I saw a group of homeless Chinese men at the Bank, sitting around chatting. They asked me to join them, one of them even shared his karipap with me. Since then I keep going back. The Bank area is where I sleep. I like to go there because most of my friends are there. At night it’s usually very happening. There are also homeless Indians and Malays there, Mat Sallehs and foreigners also got. But I don’t really talk to them very much, my Bahasa and English no-good lah. But we always help each other when we are in trouble.

That’s nice.

You mean in KL?

Ya, I love KL, it’s a nice city. I started working at a bar here when I was fifteen. I’m quite a good DJ, you know. My boss really liked me. Every night after the bar closed, we got together and he would buy us free drinks. As you know, you meet all kinds of people there. One of the guys introduced me to drugs. I got addicted. One day, the police caught me while I was using it. I was sent to Kajang prison for six months.

I tried to go home, but my family won’t accept me. Whenever I go back, they think I’m there to ask for money. So I decided to just stay on the street. I like freedom better, anyway. I can live on my own, with dignity.

What about your family?

I am not close with my family. My parents are divorced, and my brother thinks I’m an embarrassment because of my criminal record. So I decided to come out on my own.

I guess that’s fair.

Ya, now I work at Uncle Chong’s hawker stall, I can take care of myself. I started working there last year. His daughter Sharon is a social worker in a church nearby, and she helped me to get a job as a helper at Uncle Chong’s place. I work there from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Uncle Chong always gives me a free bowl of wan tan mee for lunch.

Ms. Teh, the tour guide lady who always eats at the stall said that the government is doing a good job in rejuvenating the city. Now we have the River of Life project that makes the river very clean and beautiful, with lights and fountains. But it’s not so good for us, because we can’t go there anymore. Nowadays we can’t stay in many tourist spots because police will chase us away.

I took a deep breath, lost in my own thoughts. Ironic that a ‘River of Life’ would also disrupt life.
Well, where do you go then?

Well, now with COVID-19, not many people are on the street. So we actually have more space to roam. But many of my homeless friends have lost their livelihoods, especially those who don’t have a job and rely on charity. Some of them have gone to the shelters provided by Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (DBKL). The DBKL and police have been coming to ask us to go there. It’s good there actually, they provide us with food and mattress. But I’m not sure if we can stay there forever.

That’s tough.

Haiya, not so bad lah. We are tough people, and there are others who help us from time to time. Sunday is the best. There is a charity run by a group of young people at Jalan Panggung. I always go there because the food is very delicious. Got nasi ayam, laksa, one time they even got cendol! Sometimes they also give free medical check-ups and free clothes. I got this denim jacket there lah, nice right?

Peter chuckled while showing off his attire.

What about the future? What do you plan to do?

Huh? Of course I want to be rich lah!

His cheeky facial expression betrayed him. Of course he is not serious.

Well, I would like to have a nice place to stay, if I have money I want to open a cafe. Maybe I can help my other homeless friends. It will be good to do both!

You have a big heart, Peter.

Aiyah… I’m late for work!

Peter stood up hastily, methodically folded his bed and tucked it into the far-right corner, out of sight.

Come, come… you walk with me… Let me show you around the area.

Sure!

I left with Peter, still bewildered by this unlikely friendship that I had just struck up.

Glossary

laah – a colloquial expression in Malaysian English, that has Malay, Cantonese, and Tamil roots. It is typically used at the end of a sentence to modify its tone, depending on the context, ‘laah’ can soften the sentence, make it harsher, or emphasize a point.

ya – slang for “Yes,” a laid-back way to answer in the affirmative

aiya – an expression with Chinese roots, used to express annoyance, pain, or surprise

karipap – a pastry filled with curried potatoes, and sometimes meat

Mat Salleh – a Malay term used as a colloquial expression to refer to white people

Bahasa – Bahasa Malaysia, the national language of Malaysia

wan tan mee – a type of dumpling noodle

Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur – Kuala Lumpur City Hall

nasi ayam – chicken rice

laksa – a spicy noodle soup with many local variants across Malaysia

cendol – a shaved-ice dessert with rice flour jelly, coconut milk, palm sugar, and other toppings
Inclusive placemaking — who does this city belong to?

Placemaking is a concept that has recently gained ground in Malaysia. Essentially, it denotes a collaborative approach to revitalizing existing public spaces to benefit communities, as opposed to a vendor-driven, profit-maximizing model to urban planning. The placemaking process is about everyone coming together, letting ideas flourish to create an enduring environment for a collective purpose.

Even so, urban rejuvenation efforts still inevitably create exclusion for certain segments of society. Because ‘homeless people’ are seen by city dwellers as undesirable and because homelessness is a ‘problem’ to be rid of, the absence of homeless people has sometimes been seen as the yardstick for success of urban renewal — without regard for how it is achieved.

This ignores the multifaceted nature of homelessness, and the human factors that shape it. Public spaces play a critical role for the homeless, especially during COVID-19. The city is where they come for food, shelter, and financial means to survive. While most of us seek refuge at home, those who experience homelessness have nowhere to go. The public space is their home after all.

The issue of homelessness requires a rethinking of policy interventions. In search of more sustainable solutions, some cities have experimented with a place-based approach to solve homelessness. In a placemaking project in Atlanta, social workers are placed in a park frequented by the homeless population. A multifunctional mobile game cart offering not only games, but also information, power outlets, and other amenities is placed in the park to be used by all and is administered by a case worker who acts as a ‘Trust Agent’, i.e., someone that is supposed to give a positive and supportive vibe rather than act as a figure of authority. By building trust, the case worker can then point persons in need to assistance, job opportunities, shelters, and more.

Alternatives:
Shelters and social housing in the city

Kuala Lumpur is ironically plagued by two contradictory problems: homelessness, and empty buildings. It is a young, lively city that seems to be constantly changing, with new property development sprucing up all the time.

Unfortunately, due to their high price tags, many of these properties are out of bounds for most working-class Malaysians, never mind the homeless.

Meanwhile, it is estimated that the occupancy rate for offices in KL was at a record low, at 69.1 percent in the second half of 2020. Even if the economy bounces back after the worst of COVID-19, the occupancy rate will likely remain suppressed due to mushrooming construction, especially when megaprojects such as TRX and Merdeka 118 are completed. Office supply is projected to increase by 11.6 percent between the second half of 2020 and 2022.

KL is also experiencing a hollowing out as fewer people can afford to live in the city centre. This phenomenon was plain to see during movement restrictions when most people were confined to within 10 km of their homes. According to a baseline study conducted by Think City, close to 55,000 people work within downtown KL’s historic core (Masjid Jamek area), but only about 11,000 live there.


What if some of the old buildings in town could be repurposed as social housing for the homeless and the needy? In recent years urban planners and architects have been experimenting with communal living and micro-housing, building small units — complemented with communal living spaces — near city centres. DBKL has started a pilot micro-housing project, offering single Malaysian youth between the ages of 18 and 35 and earning less than RM2,000 per month a home to rent for just RM100 per month.

Clearly, a readjustment in the way we think about shelters is in order. After all, the line between having a home and being homeless is thin. With high property prices and a gloomy economic outlook, many risk losing their jobs and becoming the new poor and homeless. Ensuring a strong social safety net is the first step to ensure no one will lose the roof over their head.

For a shelter to succeed, it ought to make homeless persons feel ‘at home’. Les Brown, director of policy for the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless goes further and opined that for an individual to break out of the cycle of homelessness, they need a sense of purpose. That is why his shelter, Growing Home, offers homeless persons and formerly incarcerated individuals training and job opportunities at its non-profit organic agriculture business.
The theme song for the beloved local animation, Ejen Ali, became the unlikely rallying cry for Malaysians in face of this prolonged pandemic. The protectiveness of Ejen Ali towards his friends symbolizes the bond that Malaysians share with each other. We were all in the same boat, versus COVID-19, and that has brought us closer together. Many Malaysians rose to the challenge and became Good Samaritans in the times of need.

Cindy was one of them. After losing her job as a tour guide due to the pandemic, she teamed up with her god-brother to start Petaling Street Community Care at his coffee shop. They welcomed people in the streets to their coffee shop, where they can find respite and enjoy a cup of coffee together. “It’s not just about giving them food, but also making them feel like they belong,” said Cindy. “Everybody is equal here.” Cindy went to great lengths to make everyone feel at home. Not only can people in the community come and go at any time for meals, but they also get to eat with proper cutlery and must clean up after themselves. Cindy also encourages the homeless to contribute any symbolic amount for the food they receive, even as little as ten cents. Losing her job has made her empathize with the hardships faced by others, which motivated her to help those in need.

When the community organizers at Dapur Jalanan Kuala Lumpur (DJKL) learnt about the MCO, they were torn between protecting their own safety, and serving the community that they have come to know as friends. It was something a teammate said that tipped the balance: “There are mouths for us to feed.” Not able to bear the thought of deserting the community, they decided to keep the stove on. As a result, many of the organizers of DJKL found themselves having to juggle between their day job and their voluntary work,retreating from food distribution sessions to attend to urgent work matters, often behind the truck that they use to serve food. Some, however, relished this mission as they themselves had lost their jobs due to the MCO. “From the start, our philosophy is clear. We are sharing, not giving. That is why we never refer to them as ‘homeless’, but as ‘guests,’” said one of the organizers.

The risks of COVID-19 and the movement restrictions compelled them to readjust their procedures, reducing the number of volunteers and ensuring that those who came for food observed social distancing in queue. Due to high demand, DJKL had to increase the food prepared from the usual 200 packets, up to a peak of 600 packets. The number of people visiting started to dwindle after a while, as more NGOs resumed serving food to unhoused persons while the Community Welfare Department also increased their shelter services. The number of persons experiencing homelessness increased during the pandemic and these NGOs were crucial in offering a lifeline to these communities during this difficult period.

Some NGOs working with unhoused communities in Kuala Lumpur

- Dapur Jalanan Kuala Lumpur www.facebook.com/dapurjalannankl
- Kechara Soup Kitchen www.kechara.com/soup-kitchen
- Petaling Street Community Care www.facebook.com/Petaling-Street-Community-Care-

Cari Makan

Kita Jaga Kita —
the power of empathy,
the communal identity

Laungkan suaraku memanggilmu
I shout out to you

Bersama lalu jalan berliku
Join me on the winding road

Walaupun tiada yang bersudi
Even if no one is willing

Ku akan tetap berjuang sendiri
I will keep fighting alone

Sentiasa!
Always!

Kita jaga kita!
We take care of us!

Mereka tiada masa untuk kita
They don’t have time for us

Cuma kita berjasa untuk kita
Only we serve each other

Mereka tak tahu rasa hati kita
They don’t know the feeling in our hearts

Sama-sama kita
We are together

Kita jaga kita!
We take care of us!

Kita jaga kita!
We take care of us!
The world we live in has been transformed in a manner not witnessed in recent times. The coronavirus pandemic has triggered what arguably is the worst public health crisis in a century and the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. In a rapidly urbanizing and globalized world, cities have been the epicentres of COVID-19. The virus has spread to virtually all parts of the world, first, among globally connected cities, and now, through community transmission and from the city to the countryside.

The World Cities Report 2020 shows that the intrinsic value of sustainable urbanization can and should be harnessed for the well-being of all. The Report provides evidence and policy analysis of the value of urbanization from an economic, social and environmental perspective, including the unquantifiable value that gives cities their unique character. It also explores the role of innovation and technology, local governments, targeted investments and the effective implementation of the New Urban Agenda in fostering the value of sustainable urbanization.

The World Cities Report 2020 convincingly affirms that well-planned, managed, and financed cities and towns create value that can be harnessed to build resilient cities that can bounce back from the devastating impacts of pandemics, improve the quality of life of all residents, and can be leveraged in the fight against poverty, inequality, unemployment, climate change and other pressing global challenges.

As the world enters the Decade of Action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, the policy recommendations in this Report will be beneficial to governments at all levels, enabling them to deliver programmes and strategies that enhance the value of sustainable urbanization, and in the process, contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals through the effective implementation of the New Urban Agenda.
Unpacking the system: COVID-19 and homelessness

See pp.3-5 for an explanation of causal relationships and reinforcing and balancing feedback loops. Homelessness creates obstacles to accessing regular work, food, shelter, and other necessities. These are essential not only for coping with homelessness, but for developing the capacity to exit homelessness (R3 loop). Homeless persons are more resilient than many realise, and they develop local knowledge and networks that help them access these necessities.

Homeless persons are often drawn to city centres because of the confluence of opportunities there that enable survival. Support structures such as food kitchens, job training, and informal work opportunities also tend to be concentrated there. However, city centres also tend to be centres of commercial, social, and political activities; other users of city centres often consider homeless persons as ‘undesirables’ or see them as threats to health and safety and want them removed. When homeless persons are moved, however, the local knowledge and networks they have developed are disrupted, their ability to cope with and perhaps exit homelessness is threatened.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the challenges posed by homelessness in several ways. Movement restrictions have curtailed the activities of many civil society organizations that provide support to homeless persons in one way or another. Homeless persons have also been perceived as a COVID-19 risk, and many have been placed in various quarantine centres and shelters. Various job-training and job-placement initiatives were announced for these persons, but the effectiveness of these programmes is not yet known. Meanwhile, the economic impacts of the pandemic may well move more persons into a state of homelessness.

Combating homelessness — during a pandemic or under ‘normal’ circumstances — is not an easy task, but it can be done. Effective action requires us to, among other things, understand how homeless persons navigate their world, develop solutions that make sense through their lenses, and create the space for them to live and advance in our cities.
Is drug addiction a crime or an illness? Malaysia has one of the strictest anti-drug laws in the world. Under the Dangerous Drugs Act, possession of 200 grams or more of cannabis or 15 grams or more of heroin or morphine is presumed to be trafficking of drugs, a crime that carries a death sentence. In 2018, nearly three-quarters of the 1,281 people facing the death row were convicted of drug crimes.

Those found possessing smaller quantities of drugs can be fined or jailed, and 60 percent of our prison population are drug-related offenders. Many of them, unsurprisingly, have an addiction issue, and many are recurring offenders that go in and out of prisons.

This has led to calls for drug decriminalization for small possession and to start treating drug addicts as patients instead of as criminals. This would help ease the overcrowding situation in Malaysian prisons, which has contributed to several COVID-19 clusters. With prisons exceeding their capacity by 40 percent, it is impossible for inmates to practise social distancing. Prisons around the world are facing the same problems and many countries have opted to release the non-violent, minor offenders to reduce crowding and COVID-19 risk.

In Malaysia, while the Prison Department has identified 11,018 minor offenders sentenced to less than a year of imprisonment for its Release on License programme, not many actual releases have been reported. Conversely, the Malaysian Government has considered building more prisons, including converting some of the now-defunct National Service campsites, and using the power invested by the Emergency Ordinance to seize private buildings as temporary detention centres. However, this solution will not only fail to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus, but is also expensive and unsustainable.

In a way, COVID-19 has highlighted the existing problems of our prison system and calls us to consider whether incarceration is the answer to all crimes. We know that prisons are tied to poverty, with inmates often stuck in the vicious cycle of imprisonment. It might be time to revisit criminal justice policies and consider alternatives to imprisonments and non-custodial measures. This would require a mindset shift of the concept of ‘justice’ from one that focuses on retribution and punishment to one that emphasizes rehabilitation and restoration. How we decide to resolve this problem will certainly lead us down different development pathways.
I felt a slight burn in my lungs after taking in the fresh morning air outside the prison gates. “Over here!” called out my sister, waiting outside her driverless rickshaw. After fifteen years and two kids, she hasn’t changed much apart from her greying hair. “It’s so good to see you, Along.” I bowed gently.

“I’m just glad it’s finally over, Adik. Come on, I know you can’t wait to see Mak,” she said while keying in our next destination on her foldable tablet. As we stepped into the rickshaw I nodded with a smile, acknowledging her usual ability to read my mind.

Back when Mak was juggling jobs to make ends meet, Along tried her best to keep her little teenage brother out of trouble. To me she was such a nosy nuisance; always one step ahead of whatever mischievous plans I had. In hindsight, perhaps my time in prison was for the best. She got her chance to live her own life, and being in solitude helped me to find peace within my rebellious self.

The electric rickshaw wasn’t the quickest mode of transport, so it was safe to stick my neck outside for a better look. Not much had changed about Kuala Lumpur, though it now looked a bit deserted. Since the Uprising, people moved away to places that were more affordable and less crowded. Naturally other towns began to grow, and this city was not as attractive as it used to be.

Along said since there was a labour shortage, employers don’t mind hiring even ex-convicts for decent job openings; though I didn’t get her joke about it being harder for ex-politicians. An old cellmate once suggested I should try head up north where there was plenty of trade-related jobs near the new Thai Canal.

As we reached the city centre, Along pointed to one of the old office towers with a refurbishment sign at its entrance. Apparently her current house was getting too cramped for her husband’s consultancy business and the teenage kids wanted more privacy. “They suggested this place as a suitable home-office.”

I gave a puzzled look. “Who?”

I immediately regretted that question as my lecturer-sister went on a history lesson on how people-powered data and self-learning algorithms have been helping everyone. “Oh, you’ll find out all about it later,” she cut her story short after noticing my distracted gaze at delivery drones flying over the clear blue skies.

Our ride slowed to a halt once we reached the cemetery gates. Along immediately went to scan in her pre-booked visiting time slot to release the gate locks. Mak was one of the many pandemic casualties, and the regret of being helpless during her final moments still hurt to this day. “I miss her too,” said a teary Along as we approached Mak’s grave. I could sense her guilt of not being the dependable big sister after Mak’s passing.

“You’ve done your best. She will be happy with how we turned out today,” I consoled her. We both said our prayers and promised Mak another visit soon.

After stepping outside the gates, Along handed me an envelope. “Adik, you know I can’t be there for you all the time, but I think they can help you with starting over.” Inside was a silver coloured tablet, with an onion-looking panel to scan my thumbprint.

“Bawang?” I chuckled at the resemblance as I glimpsed through the daily list of recommendations of a new future displayed on my tablet screen.

First recommendation today: A complimentary welcome-back lunch for two at an old dining haunt. Tomorrow: Computer retraining lessons from a former schoolmate.

I have a strong feeling I’m going to be just fine, Along.

Glossary
Along – eldest sibling
Mak – mother
Adik – younger sibling
Bawang – onion
The drastic slowdown of economic activity, especially from factory shutdowns and reduced travel during the early weeks of the Movement Control Order (MCO), provided a picture of what the environment could look like if we had a lighter footprint. Urban residents saw bluer skies and experienced a reduction in air pollutant emissions, while changes in river quality were visually apparent not only to riverine residents but even to Google Maps users. These physical improvements were accompanied by changes in the behaviour of wildlife, such as regular sightings of dolphins and turtles laying eggs at Port Dickson's beaches in Negri Sembilan.

These environmental benefits also have important consequences for health. The World Health Organization estimates that in Malaysia, air pollution caused 6,251 deaths in 2012, accounting for one percent. These pollutants affect respiratory systems, below 2.5 microns in diameter dropped by 27 to 70 percent. These pollutants affect respiratory systems, aggravating conditions like asthma and contributing to heart conditions in the long term.

However, these improvements in environmental conditions are being reversed as the nation and the world head into economic recovery and activities resume. We already see heavy traffic on the roads and manufacturers, construction sites, and many businesses are back in full operation, attempting to recuperate losses due to the MCO. This is a global challenge.

Nations across the world experienced a sharp reduction in air pollution levels as human activities were curbed to prevent COVID-19 transmissions, but pollution has rebounded as economic activity resumes. For example, cities including Beijing, Cape Town, Los Angeles, Madrid, Melbourne, and New York have seen air pollution levels rebound and exceed pre-lockdown levels. As lockdowns lift, emissions from industries, transportation, and energy power plants have been amplified in search of restoring GDP growth. Indeed, the reduced economic activity did little to improve global greenhouse gas emissions.

While there are many cases of environmental pollution rebounding, there is also real effort for and investment in green recovery. In Pakistan, thousands of people who lost their jobs due to COVID-19 have been given the opportunity to earn from planting saplings — mulberry and acacia trees as a green recovery initiative; likewise, Ethiopia aims to plant five billion seedlings in 2030. Such initiatives might seem ambitious but actually have precedent: in 2019, Ethiopia planted 350 million trees in one day to combat deforestation. France has allocated one-third of its recovery funds for green economy initiatives, ranging from green infrastructure to incentives for better farming practices, increasing the adoption of environmental protection and conservation practices while also creating job opportunities. Likewise, Malaysia is committing to green recovery practices, allocating funds specifically for the sustainable development agenda for the first time in Budget 2021; this will see the continuation of the Green Technology Financing Scheme, strengthening environment enforcement activities, allocate funds for green economy initiatives, ranging from green infrastructure to incentives for better farming practices, increasing the adoption of environmental protection and conservation practices while also creating job opportunities.

The cessation of human activity enforced by the pandemic was never going to be a permanent solution to our environmental challenges. Rather, it showed us what a world less pressured by us could look like. It is a world we need to work towards by decoupling our economic activity from environmental degradation and learning to live within our planet’s means.
Section 2: A day on Jalan Petaling

“Hello Uncle Chong, good morning.”

“Hello Peter, how are you? Slept well or not?”

“Ok lor, like that lor. Now CMCO period, not many people came to city centre, we the homeless people got more space to use lah, can sleep anywhere I like,” chuckled Peter as he hurried away to attend to his chores.

“Boss, give me one wan tan mee, please.” a familiar voice came from afar.

“Ok, coming right up. How’s your business Ms. Teh?”

“Not so good lah uncle. My tour guide company really suffered this year. No tourists, no money lah. Everybody work from home, but for me susah lah,” Ms. Teh lamented as she dragged the nearest chair and sat herself down at her usual spot.

“Haiya, this year everyone also susah lah. My hawker stall also closed for so many months, luckily I have my son and daughter to support me, plus the BPN Government gave, can get by lah. Now business still ok, at least I can hire Peter again. Kesian him also.”

“I hope things get better soon. They say they found the vaccine already, but our Government needs to go fight and convince the producers to sell it to us.”

“Can work one or not? I heard they can change our genes or something. I’m scared,” mused Uncle Chong while putting down a bowl of fresh, hot wan tan mee on the table. “Haiya, got vaccine also die, no vaccine also die.”

“No lah Uncle Chong, it’s safe. Don’t believe everything you see online. Nowadays a lot of fake news! You better take care of yourself ah, you meet so many people everyday and with your age, you are in high-risk group already you know.”

Uncle Chong sighed. “What to do, my backache is quite bad, my daughter asked me to go X-ray at hospital but so troublesome lah, nowadays with the SOP and all the extra forms need to fill up.”

“No need to work already lah Uncle Chong, just ask your kids to support you lah.”

“Siao ah, they are only employees ok, not rich taukehs. Times are bad now, I don’t want to be a burden to them.”

“It’s true Uncle Chong, we need to take care of each other during this difficult time. Kita Jaga Kita mah! I have an idea: why don’t I find some sponsors for you to cook for the homeless. We can help people like Peter, and you get more business also. Win-win!”

“Good idea! You are the best lah, Ms. Teh.”

Glossary

lah – a colloquial expression in Malaysian English, typically used at the end of a sentence. Depending on the context, ‘lah’ can soften the sentence, make it harsher, or emphasize a point.

lor – an expression with Chinese roots, used to express acceptance or resignation.

CMCO – Conditional Movement Control Order

wan tan mee – a type of dumpling noodle

susah – difficult

BPN – a one-off cash assistance payment to B40 (Bottom 40% of the Malaysian household income group) and M40 (Middle 40% of the Malaysian household income group) households

kesian – pity

haiya – an expression with Chinese roots, used to express annoyance, pain, or surprise.

siao ah – an expression with Chinese roots, which means crazy

taukehs – businessmen

Kita Jaga Kita – we take care of us
Universal Basic Income, yay or nay?

**Expenditure**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>February 2020</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ingredients (for business)</strong></td>
<td>RM2.50 per day x 26 = RM65.00</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Keris</strong></td>
<td>RM21,000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Masak meal</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mee Tarik</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Soap, Lanc, face wash</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Dance lesson</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Staff Rental</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Peter's salary</strong></td>
<td>RM21,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coking gas and others</strong></td>
<td>RM21,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>House Rental</strong></td>
<td>RM21,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grocery (food and sundries)</strong></td>
<td>RM21,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fuel for motorbike</strong></td>
<td>RM21,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Utilities (Water, Electricity &amp; Phone)</strong></td>
<td>RM21,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weekend tuition lesson with friends</strong></td>
<td>RM21,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Medicine (for high blood pressure)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Insurance</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Gift for granddaughter's birthday</strong></td>
<td>RM21,000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Motorbike repair &amp; maintenance</strong></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Earnings</th>
<th>RM23,900</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Allowances from children</strong></td>
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<th>April 2020</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ingredients</strong></td>
<td>RM20</td>
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<td><strong>Staff Rental</strong></td>
<td>RM20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Salary</strong></td>
<td>RM20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>House Rental</strong></td>
<td>RM20</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Weekend tuition lesson with friends</strong></td>
<td>RM20</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Grocery (food and sundries)</strong></td>
<td>RM20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fuel for motorbike</strong></td>
<td>RM20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Medical</strong></td>
<td>RM20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Insurance</strong></td>
<td>RM20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Utilities</strong></td>
<td>RM20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Newspaper &amp; cigarettes</strong></td>
<td>RM20</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total spending</th>
<th>RM21,300</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Staff business</strong></td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**June 2020**

| RM21,300 |
|---|---|
| **Newspaper and cigarettes** | RM21,300 |
| **Total spending** | RM21,300 |
| **Total income** | RM21,300 |
| **Savings** | RM21,300 |
| **Staff business** | One kind of Wes Tan Mee, Wes Baru average sales: 50 bowls per day Days open: 26 Total income: RM21,300 |

**HOMME-LESS: SEARCHING FOR BELONGING IN TIMES OF COVID-19**
Universal Basic Income (UBI), a 17th-century idea, is once again at the forefront of policy debates. Proponents of UBI believe it is one way to cushion the economic impact caused by COVID-19, as it guarantees a decent standard of living for all and provides for meaningful participation in society, the opportunity for personal and family development, and freedom from severe financial stress. According to the report, 27 percent of KL households are living below the living wage. The living wage is more than double the current minimum wage, and about RM300 more than the Malaysian median wage (RM2,442) in 2019.

Meanwhile, the social protection system has also been hard pressed to cater for an increasingly informal workforce, a trend accelerated by COVID-19. As workers shift from job to job, employment benefits will no longer be tied down to one place of employment. In the future, many may also be displaced by automation. There is an urgent need to rethink our social safety nets to ensure the welfare of all workers.

UNDP has advocated for a temporary basic income (TBI) for the world’s poorest 27 billion in 132 countries. This unconditional emergency transfer has proven to be an effective way to mitigate the effects of crises such as COVID-19 and made up for income loss, especially for low-income households that lack access to social assistance or insurance coverage. It proposed three policy options:

i. Top-ups on existing average incomes in each country up to a vulnerability threshold;
ii. Lump-sum transfers that are sensitive to cross-country differences in the median standard of living; or,
iii. Lump-sum transfers that are uniform regardless of country.

In the long run, some form of basic income can also help an impending problem: aging. As we become an aging population, a strong social safety net for the elderly will be crucial. With suppressed wages and ballooning cost of living, many lack sufficient retirement savings.


detached workers, a trend accelerated by COVID-19. As workers shift from job to job, employment benefits will no longer be tied down to one place of employment. In the future, many may also be displaced by automation. There is an urgent need to rethink our social safety nets to ensure the welfare of all workers.

Universal Basic Income (UBI), a 17th-century idea, is once again at the forefront of policy debates. Proponents of UBI believe it to be an appropriate response to rising inequality. It might suppress wages, or worse, discourage work. As workers shift from job to job, employment benefits will no longer be tied down to one place of employment. In the future, many may also be displaced by automation. There is an urgent need to rethink our social safety nets to ensure the welfare of all workers.

In 2018, Bank Negara Malaysia introduced the concept of Living Wage and set it at RM2,700 for a single individual and RM6,500 for a couple with two children living in Kuala Lumpur. Above and beyond the basic needs that define the poverty line, a living wage also provides for meaningful participation in society, the opportunity for personal and family development, and freedom from severe financial stress. According to the report, 27 percent of KL households are living below the living wage. The living wage is more than double the current minimum wage, and about RM300 more than the Malaysian median wage (RM2,442) in 2019.

Meanwhile, the social protection system has also been hard pressed to cater for an increasingly informal workforce, a trend accelerated by COVID-19. As workers shift from job to job, employment benefits will no longer be tied down to one place of employment. In the future, many may also be displaced by automation. There is an urgent need to rethink our social safety nets to ensure the welfare of all workers.

UNDP has advocated for a temporary basic income (TBI) for the world’s poorest 27 billion in 132 countries. This unconditional emergency transfer has proven to be an effective way to mitigate the effects of crises such as COVID-19 and made up for income loss, especially for low-income households that lack access to social assistance or insurance coverage. It proposed three policy options:

i. Top-ups on existing average incomes in each country up to a vulnerability threshold;
ii. Lump-sum transfers that are sensitive to cross-country differences in the median standard of living; or,
iii. Lump-sum transfers that are uniform regardless of country.

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In the long run, some form of basic income can also help an impending problem: aging. As we become an aging population, a strong social safety net for the elderly will be crucial. With suppressed wages and ballooning cost of living, many lack sufficient retirement savings. The Employees’ Provident Fund (EPF) has shown that 32 percent of contributors have less than RM5,000 in their Account 1.

Ultimately, the UBI conversation — whether we agree with the idea or not — invites us to revisit our notion of livability, jobs, and dignity. We must do so, for all our sakes.


Related to this debate is the issue of poverty. According to 2019 statistics, 5.6 percent of Malaysian households (about 400,000) live below the absolute poverty line, i.e., with only RM2,208 per month, while about 17 percent of households (about 1.2 million) live in relative poverty on less than RM3,000 per month, that is half the median income. This group is especially vulnerable to shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which can send them into absolute poverty.
Chapter 4

The frontliners
February 1, 2020:
Hi, just started work today. My factory is the best. My boss is a good person and colleagues are friendly.

March 15, 2020:
This is scary...

April 5, 2020:
I had to work overtime again today. Many orders, have to rush. Very tired from seven straight days of work. But it’s alright, I’m grateful to have work... Have heard that many other factory workers have been fired.

May 4, 2020:
That’s great! I didn’t get because I’m not a Malaysian citizen. Buy me dinner later!

May 24, 2020:
Eid greetings to everyone... Sorry, I can’t return to celebrate this year.

August 31, 2020:
Finaly got to go out... Hung out at KLCC with the going...

November 7, 2020:
MCO again? It’s all the same to me. Still working. It’s enough just to not get COVID.

November 22, 2020:
Be carefu, Aisyah!

November 24, 2020:
I got COVID. I will be admitted to hospital. Pray for the best for me.

December 10, 2020:
Praise be to God. I have recovered. Thanks to the doctors and nurses who took care of me.
Protecting our (other) frontliners, the factory workers

If confronting COVID-19 is a war, then the factories producing gloves, personal protective equipment (PPE), face masks, and all the other essential equipment that will keep us safe from the virus, are the proverbial military industries. And their workers are frontliners in this battle against COVID-19.

Ironically, the unseen heroes producing the much needed ‘weapons’ to combat the pandemic, are not protected themselves. As of January 2021, 6,934 cases had been reported from the Teratai cluster — linked to a glove factory — accounting for about 4.3 percent of the then total cases in Malaysia.

This is in contrast with the fortune that these companies that manufacture gloves and other protective equipment have made. Malaysia supplies around 60 percent of medical gloves worldwide, and this year has been a boom year. Top Glove, one of the biggest glove companies, reported a twenty-fold jump in their net profit, recording RM2.38 billion (US$585.49 million) for the September-November period compared with RM111.4 million a year ago. Revenue also rose 294 percent to RM4.76 billion.

This windfall — along with the sudden spike in share value — also indirectly benefits Malaysia’s economy and society. Their profits increase tax revenues and create a stake in ensuring the welfare of migrant workers. The government could step in to provide grants to help companies automate, while putting in place safeguards for workers’ welfare. Technological transformation is never easy nor cheap, but it will be good for both the economy and for workers in the long run.

As the ultimate beneficiary of their contributions, we have a stake in ensuring the welfare of migrant workers. The announcement by the Malaysian Government that migrant workers — including those who are undocumented — would receive vaccines for free was much welcomed. However, subsequent exercises to arrest undocumented migrants undermined this promise. We need to take care of the workers who are an instrumental part of our society. After all, we are only as strong as our weakest link.

COVID-19 has highlighted the predicament of migrant workers, where their cramped, unhealthy housing arrangements have made it difficult to contain the spread of the virus. Most importantly, COVID-19 has shown us how we are connected, as a society. We can no longer turn a blind eye to their fate because we have a stake in it.

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that some parts of the Malaysian economy are significantly sustained by migrant workers, with various industries relying on cheap imported labour. But is cheap labour really cheap? The hidden costs have been borne by the workers themselves. If they are treated fairly, it might cost companies more, making this business model no longer cost-efficient.

A restructuring of our economic system, along with adoption of automation and technology that helps increase productivity while treating and paying workers better, is sorely needed. The government could step in to redress. A retraining of our economic system, along with adoption of automation and technology that helps increase productivity while treating and paying workers better, is sorely needed. The government could step in to provide grants to help companies automate, while putting in place safeguards for workers’ welfare. Technological transformation is never easy nor cheap, but it will be good for both the economy and for workers in the long run.

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The Star


Unpacking the system:
COVID-19 and migrant housing

Malaysia has a long-standing dependence on cheap migrant labour. While adoption of technology and automation has long been advocated to increase productivity, economic dependence on cheap labour has been an obstacle to implementation, creating a chicken-and-egg problem (R4 loop). Migrant workers have been a substantial source of cheap labour, and one means of keeping the costs of migrant labour low has been to house them in cramped dormitories or even makeshift shelters. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, there have been concerns about migrant workers as a source and reservoir of communicable disease such as tuberculosis. While migrant workers who are brought in illegally — and are thus unscreened for diseases — are a problem, crowded and poorly ventilated living conditions also contribute to this problem.

Unfortunately, the rise in cases among migrant workers has created hostility toward them among certain segments of society — whereas it is the business practices creating poor housing conditions that deserve scrutiny. In the short term, unskilled and low-skilled workers must be properly protected. In the longer term, we need to improve labour productivity while distributing the benefits equitably.

See pp.3-5 for an explanation of causal relationships and reinforcing and balancing feedback loops.
Above All Else
(a KISAH Futures story)

By Jacie Tan Cheng Hwee

Kuala Lumpur is not what it used to be.

Sometimes, Din wished he had been born just a few years earlier, just so he could experience the country's former economic capital in its heyday. Back when there were still such things as economic capitals. When cities were where prosperity reigned, not languished.

But Din had been born 29 years ago, in the exact year when the virus reached his nation's shores. His earliest memory was of his mother leaving, because his father hadn't been prudent enough to buy a rural plot of land before the real estate there skyrocketed to unimaginable prices. When a contact-transmitted virus remains at large with no vaccine or cure, the last place you want to be is somewhere as close-quartered as KL.

And so the wealthy left. To newly-built housing areas, all marketed as having ample amounts of space, because space was a key commodity in a world where distancing was a necessity. They fitted their homes with high-speed Internet and continued with their jobs that never required them to set foot outdoors.

Din wasn't so lucky. He was one of the orang luar, who still lived in an apartment in the city and made his living outside of his dwelling. He did the odd jobs that couldn't be done over Zoom, because as much as the orang daman (oranges) pretended that their COVID-proof lifestyles were the yardstick of normal, it couldn't be sustained without people like Din.

Still, Din felt no animosity for the orang daman. After all, every sen he earned was so he could be one step closer to becoming one of them. He didn't even mind the gigs that required him to quarantine in a holding centre for two weeks before entering the home of an orang daman; they offered a glimpse into the kind of life he was aiming for.

This was why he was here at a beautiful three-storey house in Kampar, Perak, with another orang luar workman named Lau, patching up the leaking ceiling belonging to a lady named Mrs. Jaish.

Later, when asked about the incident, Din would say it happened too quickly to register. One minute Lau was on his ladder, smoothing out plaster on the ceiling of the dining hall. A heartbeat later, Mrs. Jaish's three-year-old son had appeared out of nowhere, running at full speed towards Lau's ladder. Din gave a shout of warning and Lau scrambled down in haste, but then —

The unthinkable happened. Lau's hand clamped down on the little boy's bare arm, just as his three-ply mask slipped down past his nose. And Mrs. Jaish walked in and saw it all.

“The direct contact was an accident,” said a tired Din to the COVID division officer on his laptop screen. “Lau was protecting himself from injury.”

The officer looked unimpressed. “It is a crime for orang luar to touch orang daman, or be unmasked in their vicinity. Mr. Lau is guilty of both.”

“Yes, but,” — Din rubbed his face in frustration. “We quarantined before entering Mrs. Jaish’s house. Lau posed no risk of infection!”

“In the eyes of the law, it doesn’t matter”

Din spoke without thinking. “Then the law is wrong!”

There was a beat of silence. “Mr. Din,” the older woman said. “May I remind you what else is written in the law?”

Din repeated the words that had been drilled into him and every Malaysian since birth. “Above all else,” he whispered, “health before self.”

The officer nodded. “We have come this far as a nation because that is our priority,” she reminded him. “If we were to make exceptions and excuses, we would all be lost to COVID-19 by now. Surely, as a law-abiding citizen, you agree with this?”

Din swallowed. “Yes, ma’am.” Something made him blurt out further, “But Lau will face prison for his crime.”

A dismissive wave of the hand. “Only for a few weeks.”

“That’s long enough, isn’t it?” Din didn’t say the unspoken words. Long enough for Lau to risk catching the virus in there.

The officer caught Din’s gaze firmly through the webcam. “Above all else, Mr. Din.”

And the screen went black.

Glossary

orang luar – outsider
orang daman – insider
sen – cents (One Malaysian ringgit is equivalent to 100 sen)
Sangeetha’s Diary

Hello diary, it has been a while. I can’t remember the last time I lifted a pen to put my thoughts together. Between work and family, writing has become a luxury these days.

I have always enjoyed the excitement that comes with life as a nurse. I know there will be surprises every day, that I will go to work each day without knowing what I will deal with.

But today, I feel like I’m on the brink of breaking down. This really bubbly girl came into hospital yesterday, along with 20 others from the same factory. They are already the third batch this week. The numbers are not showing any signs of going down, and I’m worried that the hospital will not be able to cope anymore. We are already almost operating at breaking point.

It just really saddens me that people like Aisyah are put in danger to produce the equipment that protects me while I do my job. These gloves and PPE are literally the only things between me and the virus. I’m scared, but I need to be strong for my patients and for my family.

I’m also angry. Since January this year, we have been fighting this invisible enemy. We were doing such a good job, bringing it down to single digits. But one mistake, and now we are three digits, and the number is increasing.

COVID-19 is a real life-changer. Never throughout my nursing career have I seen such a crisis. Even with the vaccines, it’s still a long journey to make sure they are affordable and accessible for all of us. We need to vaccinate at least 80 percent of our population to reach herd immunity.*

I’m burnt out, this is already the third day on night shift. This long-drawn battle on COVID-19 is taking a toll on me. I haven’t been able to spend quality time with the kids for many months, and I miss them very much. Even though we still live together, I have decided not to go near them for fear of infection. Praba’s work schedule is becoming even more irregular and longer, with all the patrolling duty. I’m so glad that Ma agreed to come and take care of the household. Muru has been a great help in taking care of his younger siblings too, making sure they are all set up for their online classes, Ma would have been hopeless with technology. He himself is having his SPM trial exam next week.

This COVID-19 virus has really ravaged our country and the world. I guess we will all have to adapt to the ‘new normal’, but for now there is no end in sight. I really don’t know if I can do it anymore. But do I have a choice? I guess the best option is just to hope for the best and soldier on.

Time to sleep, we live to fight another day.

* Malaysia reached the target of 80 percent of its adult population being fully vaccinated on 21 September 2021.
This pandemic is taking a toll on our mental health. Many of us face uncertainty, anxiety and loneliness as we are locked away at home. Helplines set up by the Health Ministry and NGOs such as Befrienders Kuala Lumpur and Mercy Malaysia have been buzzing with callers seeking psychosocial support during this difficult time. For our healthcare professionals (HCPs), who cannot stay at home, these worries are even more intense. Overworked and underpaid, they are burnt out with long hours, separated from their families, and anxious about the risks they face. As of February 2021, there had been 4,800 COVID-19 cases among Malaysian healthcare workers. Indeed, two percent of COVID-19 cases in Malaysia so far are healthcare workers.

The uphill challenge of combating COVID-19 is made even more challenging by the strained resources in hospitals, especially when numbers climbed. Many have even resorted to the press to voice their grievances anonymously, citing the lack of basic amenities and support.
Apart from having adequate resources to ensure their safety, such as PPE and training on occupational health and safety measures, these medical practitioners also need support to ensure their emotional and mental well-being. Many professional groups have urged hospitals to adopt a zero-violence policy and provide adequate mental health services and family support to HCPs. The World Health Organization (WHO) has published a five-step guide to better protect health workers.

Meanwhile, many junior doctors face career uncertainty. Although the Public Services Department of Malaysia has approved 10,675 permanent posts, only 5,984 of these had been created as of September 2020. As contract staff, junior doctors enjoy very few career progression opportunities, fewer benefits than permanent doctors, and risk unemployment after their two-year contract ends. In 2020, only about 15 percent of these contract doctors have been offered permanent positions.

To respond to the increasing needs in the healthcare sector due to COVID-19, the government has taken steps to recruit 3,000 contract nurses and medical officers and has called for volunteers to support frontline workers. This is useful to alleviate the immediate burden faced by HCPs and has arguably helped moderate the unemployment figures due to job losses caused by COVID-19, but this is only a temporary measure.


Some NGOs that have been helping on mental health issues
- Befrienders www.befrienders.org.my
- Humankind #Talian Buddy Bear www.humankind.my
- Mercy Malaysia www.mercy.org.my
- Relate Malaysia www.relate.com.my/relate-for-moh-frontliners

Some NGOs that have been helping our frontliners
- Bantu Hero Kami www.sedunia.me/campaigns/bantu-hero-kami-fundraising-for-icu-equipment/about
- IMAM Response & Relief Team (IMARET) www.facebook.com/imamresponseandrelief
- Malaysian Health Coalition www.myhealthcoalition.org
- Rumah Kita – PPE for Frontliners www.100percentproject.org/en/rumahkit
Environmental interlude: Clinical waste from face masks and other PPE

Face masks, gloves, and other personal protective equipment (PPE) are essential gear for protecting ourselves and one another from the COVID-19 pandemic. Face masks sharply reduce the release of virus-carrying aerosols while speaking and breathing; therefore, the Government has mandated the use of face masks in public spaces to curb the spread of the virus. PPE usage for frontliners, especially healthcare workers who handle COVID-19 patients, has increased as well. One unintended consequence is that at least 10 million single-use face masks are now used and disposed each day in Malaysia, along with other single-use PPE, exacerbating the pre-existing waste challenge.

Used PPE from personal use is treated as ordinary solid waste and can be disposed accordingly. Used PPE from hospitals and clinics need to be treated as clinical waste, potentially contaminated by active pharmaceutical agents or infectious disease. Clinical waste must be sterilized before further disposal, and the process must be approved and licensed by the Department of Environment, Malaysia. Both categories of waste are being generated at a rapid rate.

Most solid waste, including treated clinical waste, in Malaysia ends up in landfills. In 2019, Malaysia generated 3.11 million tonnes of solid waste, including 33.8 thousand tonnes of clinical waste. In 2020, clinical waste production increased by an estimated 6.6 thousand tonnes, 20 percent more than the previous year, due to COVID-19 (see chart below). Moreover, an estimated 86 tonnes of face masks are being disposed of daily during the COVID-19 pandemic, or about 31.4 thousand tonnes per year. Non-PPE waste has also increased, with solid waste generation from residential areas increasing by 20 to 30 percent during the implementation of the first MCO in March 2020.

Malaysia faces waste management challenges, ranking as the eighth worst country in management of plastic wastes, mismanaging 0.94 million tonnes of plastic waste in 2010, of which 0.14 to 0.37 tonnes reached ocean environments. While we do not get know how well we are managing PPE waste or the impacts it will have, macaques in Kuala Lumpur have been spotted nibbling on mask straps. Face masks that end up in the ocean can lead to choking turtles and dolphins and damaging corals via entanglement. Improper disposal could also contribute to clogging of drainage systems, increasing risk of flash floods.

Even when properly disposed of, disposable face masks still present an environmental problem. Most face masks — three-ply or surgical — are mainly composed of mixtures of non-woven artificial fabrics and polypropylene thermoplastic, which are not readily degradable. Used PPE cannot be recycled as it may be contaminated with pathogens and infectious diseases which could lead to indirect infections if it enters the recycling system.

All this does not mean that we should stop using face masks! Face masks remain a critical part of the strategy to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we need to recognize the environmental impacts generated by disposable masks and minimise these impacts through proper disposal and limiting trips that require the use of face masks. Furthermore, we should look for ways to reduce our use of disposable products, as it is not just PPE that creates environmental impacts.

**Clinical waste generation in Malaysia, 2013-2019 data from Department of Environment (DoE) Malaysia Environment Quality Reports; 2020 estimate from DoE statement to the Dewan Rakyat.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Clinical waste generation</th>
<th>Clinical waste attributed to COVID-19 in 2020</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2020</td>
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</tbody>
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**Clinical waste generation in Malaysia, 2013-2019.**


For more insights into whole-of-society support to the Government’s pandemic response, from supporting frontliners to empowering diverse communities in crisis communications during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia, listen to our podcast series with the Malaysian Health Coalition.

collective-intelligence.my/reading/kisah

Produced in partnership with

Malaysian Health Coalition
In these two fictional narratives based on actual events, we reflect on identity and the quest to find a place in the future, from communities at the margins of society to a generation that will inherit the uncertain days ahead.

Told from the perspective of an NGO volunteer working with communities in remote places, Chapter 5 explores issues of fear, distrust, partnership and identity.

Chapter 6 takes us through a season in the life of a college student waiting to return to her hometown during lockdown, reflecting on her future job and opportunities for change, transformation and meaning.
Chapter 5

Musings of a volunteer in Sabah with the Bajau Laut community
I am disturbed by the news I read online this morning during breakfast. COVID-19 has been around for a couple of months. However, I’m only now starting to realise just how other communities not usually highlighted in the news are facing adversities during this pandemic.

For example, the Bajau Laut community in Sabah, my home state, has been hit hard. Villagers are unable to fend for themselves for a couple of months now with so many mouths to feed. Thankfully, the news article mentions Good Samantons who have helped out with aid packs.

Reading the day’s news on my laptop, I feel upset. My volunteerism spirit — something which I am passionate about — is waiting to be unleashed. I have not been back to Sabah since I took on a full-time position here in Kuala Lumpur two years ago. I just didn’t know what I could do to help — until now.

During lunch, I heard an ad on the radio saying that a medical charity needed some volunteers on the ground in Sabah to help with COVID-19 swab testing of the Bajau Laut community. They are looking for volunteers to work with them for at least a month. Amazingly, I read about them again on Facebook in the afternoon. Two mentions in one day! Could this be a sign?

I felt conflicted for the rest of the day. On the one hand, I want to go back to Sabah to volunteer. But on the other hand, I am aware that my job as a doctor is demanding. Plus, I have a home to take care of and my nanak, Rosalin.

After dinner, I chatted with my family about my desire to volunteer. I am pleasantly surprised when they encouraged me to go. Herbert tells me, “Josephine, once you have something in mind that you want to do, you better do it bah!” He knows me too well. Before I can start sharing why I’m torn about taking on the volunteer position, he reminds me that I have such an understanding work team in the hospital. Even when I have other tasks at hand, I have always managed to juggle them with my work efficiently without hiccups. As for the house and my nanak, he jokingly asks me, “Haven’t I been of great help to you all this while?” He has always been a top-notch support (that’s why I didn’t add him to my list of concerns!). I feel very blessed because he plays an equal part when it comes to the home and family. Most of the time he even does more! More surprisingly, Rosalin was willing to let me go. "I’ll miss you, Ma, but they need you more," she said.

Anyway, with the positive signs I received, I decided to take up the opportunity and register to be a volunteer.

Glossary

nanak — daughter
bah — a Sabahan expression, similar to ‘lah’
Ma — mother
Communities give back to society during COVID-19

During the pandemic, there has been a workforce shortage to help contain the spread of COVID-19 in society. While frontliners were experiencing mental fatigue, exhaustion, depression and burnout, organisations and people came together and realized that they can also play a part in supporting frontliners through different initiatives. Some of these include sewing PPEs, face masks, and donating food to frontliners in hospitals among others.

In addition, a public campaign, Sukarelawan VCEE19, was launched by the Malaysian Public Health Physicians’ Association (Persatuan Pakar Perubatan Kesihatan Awam Malaysia (PPPKAM)) to recruit more community volunteers to help fight the spread of COVID-19. This exemplified community volunteerism at its best in Malaysia. It also shows that even though many may not be part of the healthcare profession, there is still a part for everyone to play in fighting the spread of COVID-19.

Diary Entry 2
29 June 2020
I am finally in Sabah! I reached Pulau Omadal in the early evening, ready to spend a month doing COVID-19 swab tests for the Bajau Laut villagers. I haven’t been here before. The place is beautiful!

However, interacting with the community was not exactly what I expected. When I first arrived, some fled toward the forest. Others retreated to their houses, away from me. I was surprised because I thought the community was expecting me.

There was only one person who didn’t do that and actually came up to me to introduce himself. He is Jason, a long-term volunteer from Penang who has been staying with this community for some time. He learned about the Bajau Laut community when he was in university and had a vision of staying with the community after graduation to help them. He teaches the children in a school he built, and also participates in a community farm.

Jason explained that there had been some trouble with the government authorities at the nearby market just a couple of days ago, due to misunderstandings about SOPs. Because the Bajau Laut are stateless, some in the community were worried about being detained. Indeed, the Bajau Laut usually hide when newcomers arrive, especially if they think that person may be an authority figure. As it was already late, Jason said it would be best to make introductions the next morning.

I settled down in one of the makeshift homes that was vacant for some reason — next to Jason’s — and unpacked. After that, I took a quick walk around the place just as it was nearing dusk. The ambience was breathtaking! The sunset, the breeze... everything!

Many of the villagers were still shy, remaining in their homes. But at least I could see them, and they could see me. I took every opportunity to smile at them. Some smiled back at me. I hoped that the introductions tomorrow morning would break the ice.

Jason invited me to join him for dinner. He had prepared a famous Bajau Laut dish, nasi tehe-tehe (sea urchin rice) which he had learned from the community. It was my first time trying it and it was delicious!

About 20 minutes through our dinner, I saw a little boy shyly edging close to Jason, curious about what we were doing and talking about. Jason was kind enough to tell him that everything was ok and that he had nothing to worry about. “Josephine is a friend” — pointing at me. “See, it will be fine. They’ll warm up to you,” he said.

Tonight, I am going to sleep with a full tummy. I feel hopeful about finding ways to connect with the community.
The swab testing has been going smoothly. I began by taking time to explain what COVID-19 is, why it was important for them to get tested, and what the procedure would be like. I tried to give simple explanations and avoided medical terminology and was encouraged that they were interested to know more. However as with any community, they had their own understanding of what the virus is and how to treat it. They shared with me that they believe the virus can be contained by drinking small amounts of salt water and soaking under the scorching sun.

As they shared this with me, I heard them out. These practices must be helpful against some of the diseases they face. I tried to explain how COVID-19 is different from other illness and how there are additional treatments. I am not sure if they were convinced, but they have agreed to let me carry out the tests.

Conducting the swabs on a community like the Bajau Laut is not an ‘efficient’ process. The way they keep time is different, not like us city folk who live by a clock. It is not unusual for me to have stretches of time when all I can do is wait, watch and converse with whoever is around. At times, I worry about being able to complete all the testing in the time that I have. On the bright side, being forced to slow down has allowed me to get to know the people here and to experience their lives in Pulau Omadal. I have managed to build rapport with almost everyone here — the women, the children, and even the men.

In the mornings, I’d wake up and observe how the men go out far to sea to fish and bring back some catch to sell in the local markets. “Sangat susah sekarang ni, kena cuba hari-hari,” they say while preparing to leave on their boats.

It is always special to spend some time with the children when I am able to. Sometimes in the evening once they are done with their sekolah pandok with Jason, I join them to play along the beach, splashing each other with water. They share their thoughts and what they learn in school too. “Kira-kira, tambah tolak.” Jason says it is important to teach the children not to be afraid of anyone so they can be fearless in going after their dreams. He wants to teach them that their dreams can come true — just like everyone else. They are very enthusiastic in learning!

I have grown close to the mothers too. We share many different stories of motherhood and its challenges. These conversations usually happen when they are preparing food and let me help. Seeing them juggle work and taking care of their children, I wonder how they do it. But they told me that it isn’t easy. They also must be on the lookout for authorities. They shared with me how once, they were accused of a theft they did not even commit but the officer made their husbands find the thief and did not recompense them for their effort when they managed to do so. “Mau susahkan kita seja.”

Day by day whenever I hear of such stories from the mothers, my heart aches for them. No wonder they are always on their toes, not wanting to overstep their boundaries or do anything that may threaten their place there — although they have been there for generations. “Macam tu ia Kak, kami stateless seja,” they would say. But they would keep a smile on their faces and continue their work.

I am learning a lot from them and try to help too whenever I can — be it through cooking with the women, carrying the fish that the men bring back from the sea in the evenings, or even teaching the children once in a while with Jason.

**Diary Entry 3**
12 July 2020

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**Glossary**

_Sangat susah sekarang ni, kena cuba hari-hari_ — It is difficult now, have to try day after day
_Sekolah pandok_ — school in a hut
_Kira-kira, tambah tolak_ — Count, add, and subtract
_Mau susahkan kita seja_ — They just want to make life difficult for us
_Macam tu ia Kak, kami stateless seja_ — That’s the way things are, we are just stateless
_Kak_ — literally ‘sister’, used as a term of respect when addressing an older or more senior woman
Statelessness and COVID-19

During COVID-19, ordinary people have lost their income, but some could still get assistance like cash handouts under Bantuan Prihatin Nasional (BNP), and other economic stimulus packages from the government. Unfortunately, the nomadic, seafaring way of life of the Bajau Laut clashes with national borders and citizenship, making them stateless persons. As the Bajau Laut are non-citizens, they are unable to access to these packages. Be that as it may, the Bajau Laut still need to get on with their lives to survive.

Pre-COVID, they fished for their livelihoods, selling seafood in local markets in town. However, this has been brought to a halt. During the first Movement Control Order (MCO), many industries and workers were under strict, and sometimes unclear, Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). The Bajau Laut could not afford the RM1,000 (approx. US$250) fine for violating SOPs. Moreover, they feared that they might be caught by authorities and sent away either to detention camps or be deported — accusations of crimes, detention, and deportation. Disconnected from mainstream society, such groups may be unaware of regulations, such as the MCO SOPs, and the reasoning behind them — leading to more hostile interactions. Thus, these groups often avoid contact, the reasoning behind them — leading to more hostile interactions. Thus, these groups often avoid contact, fearful of government authorities. This is unsurprising as their interactions with authority figures are often hostile — accusations of crimes, detention, and deportation. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has called for all countries with stateless communities to observe basic practices during the pandemic. These guidelines include providing free healthcare and education, and not detaining or deporting them. These guidelines are important for their dignity and wellbeing, and for establishing the trust necessary to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

Apart from that, stateless communities like the Bajau Laut in Malaysia are often suspicious towards and fearful of government authorities. This is unsurprising as their interactions with authority figures are often hostile — accusations of crimes, detention, and deportation. Disconnected from mainstream society, such groups may be unaware of regulations, such as the MCO SOPs, and the reasoning behind them — leading to more hostile interactions. Thus, these groups often avoid contact, making it difficult to establish cooperation and provide aid during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is difficult to develop the rapport with groups that are marginalized, something much needed for cooperation during a crisis. Establishing reliable and continuous connections with stateless persons and other groups that are marginalized to increase their trust in the government needs to be an ongoing process. Only through building trust can better long-term outcomes be achieved for these communities.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) called for all countries with stateless communities to observe basic practices during the pandemic. These guidelines include providing free healthcare and education, and not detaining or deporting them. These guidelines are important for their dignity and wellbeing, and for establishing the trust necessary to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.
Everything was going well until today. The earlier results had come back clear, but we just discovered a batch of 18 positive cases in the community, and my heart sank. I was sad because we have started becoming so close to one another that we started to treat each other like our own. I was worried for their health.

It was a frantic scramble after that, sending the information up through the appropriate channels, and then trying to figure out who the infected patients had been in contact with over the past two weeks. Someone from the state health department will be arriving tomorrow to implement the quarantine procedure. I feel too tired to think.

Diary Entry 4
15 July 2020
Today was an emotional roller coaster ride. The day didn’t begin well. Tuan Shafie from the state health department came with his assistant first thing in the morning to get the patients ready to go to the quarantine centre on the mainland. When he came, most of the community members fled the scene and went into hiding, just like they did when I first arrived. I understood their fright and Jason was with me to greet the two visitors. Tuan Shafie was very adamant about getting the patients ready right away as he said: “Suruh mereka bersiap sedia, kita dah kena gerak secepat mungkin… Ayoh, diorang ni susah mau jaga tau.” The situation was tense. Jason and I had a hard time at first trying to speak to Tuan Shafie and his assistant. We were shocked because I had been told that the state health officers would have a conversation with the Bajau Laut community leaders to reassure them of the process. I was not expecting to have the positive cases ready to leave right away. I took a deep breath and put myself in his shoes. Tuan Shafie certainly had a lot to manage with the COVID-19 situation and wanted to get things done as quickly and efficiently as possible. I too had some frustrations when I first arrived and often found myself waiting impatiently for the Bajau Laut for stretches of time when conducting the swab tests. But I realised that working with their perceptions of time and understanding their way of life helped us work better together.

I told them that it was not a good idea to force them to come without getting community buy-in. We needed a public consultation that would allow everyone to voice concerns, and even help shape the plan. We would need their cooperation in the long run, especially for contact tracing and to monitor for new cases that might develop. Especially given their suspicion of figures of authority, we needed to diffuse tension and establish trust through conversation — and find a way forward that would make them feel safe. Behind me, I saw Jason talking to the community leaders, explaining to them how Tuan Shafie was here to help. Between us, we were trying to bridge two worlds.

Thankfully, Tuan Shafie agreed to take time to participate in the conversation with the community leaders to explain the process and hear them out. During the dialogue, Jason was also crucial — if he had not been there to be a bridge, I am not sure how we could have persuaded the patients to come out of hiding. By mid-afternoon, we decided collectively that I would go with the patients to the quarantine centre, and that the state health department would send someone to continue the swab tests and contact tracing work. The patients were still anxious, but as I packed my things and got on the boat with them, I remembered the turning point in the discussion: “Nak Kak Josephine ikut kami.”

Glossary
Suruh mereka bersiap sedia, kita dah kena gerak secepat mungkin… Ayoh, diorang ni susah mau jaga tau — Tell them to get ready, we need to go as soon as possible... These people are difficult to take care of, you know

Nak Kak Josephine ikut kami — We want sister Josephine to come with us

Diary Entry 5
16 July 2020
Unpacking the system:
COVID-19 and trust between vulnerable groups and the Government

See pp.3-5 for an explanation of causal relationships and reinforcing and balancing feedback loops.

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, Malaysian federal health officials had highlighted the importance of providing COVID-19 testing to both legal and undocumented migrants without cost and without risk of deportation. They warned that if undocumented migrants avoided COVID-19 testing because of fear of financial or legal consequences, they could become an undetected reservoir for COVID-19, increasing the risk to the general public. Ironically, such perceived risk would increase pressure to arrest and deport undocumented migrants, further reducing their willingness to cooperate with COVID-19 testing and contact tracing (R5 loop).

The amnesty advocated by health officials was initially practised. However, once the amnesty was revoked and undocumented migrant workers started being rounded up, other undocumented migrant workers became even more wary of government authorities, including healthcare providers. This exacerbated the mistrust already present between undocumented migrant workers and authority figures and made it more difficult for government authorities to engage with migrant worker communities as part of efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

Concurrently, movement restrictions and economic impacts have caused many documented migrant workers to become unemployed or face difficulties and delays in renewing work permits. As a result, some have chosen to violate their working visa conditions to maintain their incomes. This contributes to the pool of undocumented migrant workers who may choose to avoid the healthcare system (R6 loop) and also keep spreading COVID-19.

The importance of trust in combating COVID-19 is not limited to trust between migrant workers and governing authorities. The cooperation of many other groups that may be reluctant to interact with governing authorities (e.g., undocumented persons, certain Orang Asli/Orang Asal (indigenous) communities, and the homeless) may be important in contact tracing. Additionally, anti-vaccination attitudes globally are strongly interlinked with mistrust of governments and medical institutions. Thus, policies and practices that demonstrate and build trust between governing bodies and all segments of society are critical to enabling resilience and response in times of crisis.
On the boat to the quarantine centre, there was an old newspaper, dated a few days back. A headline caught my eye.

It was about another group, the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia and their plight during the pandemic.

Some Orang Asli communities retreated into the forest for protection from the virus. They packed their essentials before going deep into the forest, building blockades on trails to make it difficult for outsiders to trespass. Such was their defence against the virus and the outsiders who might bring it with them. Furthermore, the pandemic had cut off their access to community markets to sell their produce and earn small incomes, as well as access to nearby towns to purchase goods.

Anita, one of the patients, and I read this news together and talked about how such communities, just like the Bajau Laut, have deep knowledge and wisdom that outsiders overlook. Deep in the forest, these communities gathered produce, hunted for game, fished from rivers and built farms. They could survive this way, avoiding the markets in cities. But the retreat to the forest may also be a harder life I thought — temporary shelters and no access to modern medicine and other services.

How ironic, I thought sadly, that one community had to head to the forest to protect themselves from authorities whereas another decided that the forest could help them cope with the pandemic.

Diary Entry 6
17 July 2020
Alternatives:

Retreat to the forest and food sovereignty

The retreat of various Orang Asli communities to the forest highlights an alternative pathway for coping with the loss of income and threat to health caused by the pandemic. Traditional knowledge and practices allow these groups to make use of forest resources and spaces that would otherwise be inaccessible. However, illegal logging, encroachment by plantations, poaching and other environmental degradation has reduced both the forest area available and the quality of the water and food resources it can provide.

Regardless, in the forest, indigenous communities can develop a system similar to food sovereignty for themselves through small-scale forest farming that will hopefully keep them going for as long as the pandemic remains. Food sovereignty in the forest works by using the surrounding land for small-scale farming or agriculture. Whatever they plant or harvest is rightfully theirs. For instance, they can plant a variety of fruit trees, vegetables and even get involved with animal husbandry. Doing these not only helps them sustain themselves but strengthens their connection with the forest since the forest already plays a significant role in their identity, traditions, spirituality and culture. In addition to that, they retain respect for the environment. Thus, they make sure that their small-scale forest farming is sustainable — where it does not harm the environment but helps conserve it. The Orang Asli have always traditionally relied on natural resources for food and shelter. Having food sovereignty on their ancestral land is sound, practical, and may also help them achieve economic self-subsistence. However, before this can come to fruition in Malaysia and before the Orang Asli can fully reap the benefits of food sovereignty, there are some issues that need to be resolved, like land rights that must be upheld by enforced policies.


I have not been able to write as frequently as I wanted to because I have been so busy attending to the needs of my Bajau Laut friends in the quarantine centre. Fortunately, the tests show that I am COVID-free so far. Over the past two weeks I have seen a lot of thought-provoking things.

For instance, I have observed all the big bags of PPE waste piling in yellow hazard bags for proper medical waste disposal by medical assistants and officers. When I was back at the hospital, at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, I never saw the amount of waste we were creating. Then, PPE always felt so scarce. How can there be too little PPE but too much PPE waste? I wish there was a more sustainable way of handling this.

The Bajau Laut community members at the quarantine centre often tell me that they miss their families back home. So, Jason and I use WhatsApp so that they can catch up with their loved ones. I am glad when I see how happy they are to see each other virtually. Sometimes in the evenings, we go near the entrance of the quarantine centre where there is a bench and observe what takes place outside. “Lepak aje, tenangkan fikiran.”

We’ve seen many faces come and go. But some people are stuck at the quarantine centre when they are no longer patients — at least until someone helps them out. This happens when recovered patients are allowed to return home but are either financially unable to or do not know how to return to their faraway homes. I think of how easy it is to get around the city using smartphones and e-hailing apps.

A few children arrive at the quarantine centres without any guardians or parents and are left all alone. The worry for them keeps me awake some nights because I cannot imagine that happening to my nanak, Rosalin.

And then, my thoughts start to wander. I wish I could do more to help. What should I do when my time here is up? Hopefully, the answer will come to me soon.

I got to go home today! It was such a relief when the medical officer in charge gave us good news and the green light to return to Pulau Omadal — and for me to go back to Kuala Lumpur — because we all tested negative. We were all excited and jumping for joy because we had missed everyone at our homes. We all wanted to hug it out but remembered to practise physical distancing.

I made arrangements for a boat to get everyone back to the island. Everything went well. It was so difficult for me because I did not have the heart to tell them that I had to return to KL since my volunteering stint was up. The month had gone by so quickly.

I could not hold back my tears as I said goodbye. The Bajau Laut mothers assured me that we would meet again. “Jumpa lagi, Kak Josephine!” I promised them that I would return.

On the flight back, I thought about the situation of the Bajau Laut community, the migrants, refugees, undocumented, and underprivileged. I thought about people like me, my family, and everyone else, young and old — what we all go through and how difficult it has been during the pandemic. I then thought of Herbert, Rosalin and how I just wanted to create a better future for her and for the future generation. I believe we can all do better.

The experience has taught me a lot about working with groups on the margins of society. I want to focus my volunteer work where there are gaps in the system. I saw so many gaps this past month — relationships with the community, logistics and transportation of people arriving and departing quarantine centres, waste management, and more. Yes, it is a lot. Surely, I will find some volunteer opportunities back in KL.

Glossary

Lepak aje, tenangkan fikiran – Just rest and clear your mind

Jumpa lagi, Kak Josephine! – See you again, sister Josephine!
References and further reading


Revolusi teknologi yang luar biasa ini tidak memerlukan aku untuk turun ke ladang.


"Seroja, Tok rasa kita kena tambah jumlah kincir angin lagi. Ladang kita semakin luas dan perlukan kuantiti air yang banyak." Ternyata langkah yang diambil kerajaan untuk mengurangkan impak kejadian yang menyakut ketinggiadahah adalah langkah yang tepat. Tenaga angin berjaya menyumbang kepada ekonomi negara berasaskan pertanian.


Cerita ini adalah sebahagian daripada Antologi KISAH Futures, koleksi cerita masa hadapan Malaysia pasca-COVID-19. Kebanyakan cerita dalam antologi ini dhasilkan oleh para belia. Bacaan di sini:

my.undp.org/content/malaysia/en/home/library/kisah-futures-anthology.html
A Blessing in Disguise

(a KISAH Futures story)

By Mohamed Afiq Amani bin Mohamed Nahdirsha

Translation by Fariza Alia Mohamad Nasir

I am Seroja, the child of the Batek clan, an indigenous community. We live along the riverbank of the Tembeling River. Just as it was twenty years ago, the river continues to bring us tranquility and peace. My grandfather is the respected Tok Botin, head of the clan. Those who meet him can never miss his patriotism and unwavering pride for the Indigenous people’s blood coursing through his veins. But things are not as they were. Life here has moved at top speed, advancing and keeping up with the latest technologies. I would say, at par with life in the big cities, if not more. Amazingly, this was achieved while maintaining the richness of our flora and fauna. The virgin forests remain untouched by pollution and illegal logging.

“Not hungry?” is the greeting I receive from my Tok as he walks into the room with his loyal subject, Jinggo. Its eyes blink a couple of times at me, as if to figure out who I am. Jinggo is unique. This robot has the ability to recognize faces and an artificial intelligence (AI) ten years ahead of its time. Jinggo was an investment made by my Tok to assist him in his pineapple plantation matters.

“Jinggo, go to the pineapple store. Take all the boxes out and arrange them nicely in front of the shed. The courier will be arriving soon to pick them up,” orders Tok. This morning’s yield needs to be delivered to the suppliers as soon as possible, to fulfil the growing demand for pineapples. Jinggo nods curtly and goes off.

“Seroja, Tok feels we might need to add a few more windmills in the area. Our fields are expanding by the day, and we need a lot of water.” Indeed, the government made the right call to switch to wind energy when oil prices plummeted. Wind energy has substantially contributed to our agriculture-based national economy.

“This is the blessing that COVID-19 has brought upon us. The fall of the United States’ influence and the rise in power of new countries has made the world realize that no one will ever be the underdog forever. It is only a matter of time, and only time will tell,” Tok expresses with vigour. There is truth to Tok’s words. Since the COVID-19 crisis, giants like the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Italy and Spain have failed to handle the pandemic, causing a dramatic decline in their economies.

“Okay, Tok. Not to worry. Putera is quite tied up now in managing the windmill factory that is opening soon. Seroja heard that there are quite a number of investors pitching in. It looks as though many jobs will be created for our community,” I beam with pride. What Putera has achieved is outstanding. The COVID-19 crisis has truly forced the world to come in full circle.

“Seroja, we have to go to the pineapple store this morning’s yield needs to be delivered to the suppliers as soon as possible, to fulfil the growing demand for pineapples. Jinggo nods curtly and goes off.

“Putera is a son of our indigenous community, the Batek clan, and has just returned to the homeland after completing his studies in the Netherlands. He manages a windmill business and has given jobs to many unemployed youths.

We are lucky our country responded quickly. Now, agriculture has become the backbone of our economy. Incentives to propel the development of a new generation of millennial and tech-savvy farmers have borne fruit. We have managed to create competitive digital entrepreneurs out of our farmers,” I continue. Tok nods in agreement, beaming away. I am proud of the government’s efforts in decreasing the rate of unemployment that hit us during the pandemic, by encouraging Generation Z to creatively modernize and develop the smart agricultural sector.

This story is part of the KISAH Futures Anthology, a collection of stories of post-COVID-19 Malaysian futures, told (mostly) by youth. Read the book here: my.undp.org/content/malaysia/en/home/library/kisah-futures-anthology.html
Chapter 6

When time will tell
Scene 1: Awaiting a call from Mum

Ayu looked out of the café window at the rain. She was working the afternoon shift and counting down to five o’clock — when her shift would end, and she could go back to her hostel and call her mum. It had been some time since they had seen each other. The café would normally be busy, even in the middle of the afternoon, as Ayu had discovered working here over the past few months. The virus had changed things though. And the rain was keeping take-away customers at home. So, while looking outside, she drew a steaming cup of coffee on the misty window with her fingers and stood back to admire her art.

Ayu missed Pasir Mas, Kelantan. She had been stuck at her university in the Klang Valley since COVID-19 hit and the Movement Control Order (MCO) was implemented to contain the spread of the virus. Students from out of town were not able to return home but many people, including a student volunteer group, worked around the clock to take care of students like her while they awaited news about student repatriation. She was thankful for that. Earlier that morning, she had filled up a spreadsheet about her needs. She didn’t have much to fill out, as a student volunteer had stopped by two days ago with food, drinks, sanitary pads, and the latest news on the development of the repatriation process.

Ayu wondered how her mum was doing. Her mum had taken care of the family singlehandedly after her father left — when her two younger sisters, Aini and Aima were born. “It was too much for him to handle” her Umi said last time.

Umi had taken on quite a number of odd jobs so that she could make ends meet. Living off a meagre income and juggling an irregular working schedule was challenging. So, Ayu tried to do as much as she could while growing up — seeing to the house chores, cooking simple food and guiding her younger sisters through their homework. Umi had to do all that now — another reason why Ayu was anxious to go home. She wondered how her family was coping with the pandemic.

Ayu had vowed to be independent and to help provide for her family. So, when she was accepted to university two-and-a-half years ago, she took on a couple of part-time jobs and worked hard on her studies. Rather than asking for an allowance, she sent money back to her home wherever she could, just as she had promised herself.

Ayu had a lot on her mind as she neared the completion of her studies. What would she do and how could she work in the middle of a pandemic? Would there even be job openings available? Would she be able to still provide for her family? Such questions often clouded her mind.

“Just two hours and thirty minutes left,” she thought to herself. Ayu sighed and started tracing a slice of cake on the window — next to the cup of coffee — while wiping a teardrop off her face.
When SOPs were introduced to contain the spread of COVID-19, many activities were curtailed: no movement across districts, limits on the number of people allowed in workplaces and even in universities and colleges. This was how students were stuck in their respective universities.

Being stuck in universities also caused a strain on the mental health of students. For one, they experienced high levels of stress because they were stuck in the hostel, away from their families. Besides that, they also had to cope with the remaining study period during the pandemic. All this proved to be overwhelming and had taken a toll on them because these were unprecedented experiences. Fortunately, the Government did extend help to them under the Bantuan Prihatin Nasional (BPN) economic stimulus package where students received RM250 (approx. US$62.50) each. In addition, universities had different methods of taking care of each student’s welfare. These include ensuring there were meal coupons or vouchers for students, other welfare packs and a discount in fees since learning took place online. All of this was done to alleviate students’ burden in terms of their overall wellbeing and to make sure that students were able to cope with the pandemic.

Some organizations that supported student repatriation

- Pertubuhan Kebajikan Impak Komuniti Sabah (PIKOS) #BahBantuSiswa: www.facebook.com/pikosabah/posts/3420047044697631
- Yayasan Sukarelawan Siswa (YSS): www.sukarelawansiswa.my


For more insights into student repatriation, volunteer-led community organizing, and student volunteer action during the first Movement Control Order (MCO) and beyond, join us in conversation with the Alumni of Yayasan Sukarelawan Siswa (Student Volunteers Foundation).

collective-intelligence.my/reading/kisah

Produced in partnership with
Scene 2:
Zoom(ing) in on Mum — update on my family back at home

Ayu: Umiku tercinta! How are you?

Umi: Hi nak, I’m alright. I’m trying to take it one day at a time, but I must admit that it isn’t easy.

Ayu: Why, Umi? What’s been on your mind lately?

Umi: Well, it is difficult to sell anything now. You know I have been selling vegetables, fruits, and spices from our garden, but the local market — no customers from town these days because of MCO. Nobody is buying my handicraft either, now that the tourists are gone.

Ayu: That must be quite a challenge. I wish I was there with you Umi, so that I can help you with everything.

Umi: I know, nak. You’ve always been there for us. But on the bright side, I have recently been introduced to an e-commerce project by Aunty Kim. Remember, Umi’s old friend from Penampang? She is also struggling, but she says if the project takes off, she can sell beyond her town — and even sell to Semenanjung one day! She was taught to market her products online and has made some sales over the past two weeks. I want to do something like that also, but the project is in Sabah only. So, what can I do? If you were here, maybe you could help Umi get started. I’m just hoping this MCO will end soon, you know?

Ayu: I hope it will too, Umi. And, I hope to be back soon. Anyway, how’s Aini and Aima doing?

Umi: They are fine too, getting used to online learning. I am so proud of them, but I wish I could help them with their studies. I am not tech savvy lah. Also, the internet connection is not always stable... They miss their Kak Ayu who has always been there to guide them. Anyway, don’t you worry about us nak. I’m more concerned about you. You have been quiet these days. Are you OK? Is there anything that is bothering you?

Ayu: I’m alright, Umi. I’ve been worried about the future especially with job prospects but I’m also doing the best I can to cope with everything. I guess I just really wish I can be home with all of you and discuss future plans with you now that my studies are coming to an end. But, as you always advise me: tabahkan hati and redha, correct? Keep me in your doa and I will do the same too OK? Sayang Umi!

Glossary

Umiku tercinta – My beloved mother
nak – child
Semenanjung – Peninsular Malaysia
Kak – older sister
tabahkan hati – strengthen your heart and persevere
redha – accept fate
doa – prayers
Sayang Umi – Love you, Mum
Scene 3:
Keeping up with my sisters

It didn’t feel complete just catching up with her Umi. So, Ayu started a conversation with her two younger sisters, Aini and Aima in their sisters’ group chat the next day.

For more on UNDP’s work in supporting rural e-commerce during the COVID-19 pandemic, read our blog, ‘E-commerce for rural development: A response to COVID-19 recovery’.

my.undp.org/content/malaysia/en/home/blog/2021/e-commerce-for-rural-development--a-response-to-covid-19-recover.html

Buy from Koondos at www.koondos.com
Alternatives: Makeshift schools and physical dropbox

Faced with inaccessibility to online facilities, some have become creative in getting around this challenge. For example, a sister duo from a rural area in Malaysia created their own makeshift school on top of an oil palm plantation, where internet connection and signal strength were stronger than where they lived. The school is sustainable in that they made use of materials from the plantation and the forest, including logs for benches and tables, and burned used egg cartons to ward off mosquitoes while learning. News of this makeshift school went viral, becoming an iconic picture of the struggles to access education and the ingenuity of students in overcoming this challenge. While heartening, this picture illustrates the digital divide and calls for other modalities of learning that can be accessible to such students.

Now that there are quite a number of makeshift schools that were built in rural areas to cope with the pandemic, can these be turned into full-fledged schools supervised by the Ministry of Education? This would prove the sustainability of the schools since they have been ‘in the running’ already and can accommodate quite a number of students from around the same area who are facing similar problems, such as difficulty in accessing the internet. To improve the conditions and infrastructure of the schools, perhaps further in-depth discussion about hiring proper teachers and providing necessary resources would be beneficial to keep these makeshift schools going. Be that as it may, it also means teachers must be trained for this model and although it may be time consuming and subject to budget constraints, this can be food for thought in making sure education is sustainable and accessible in times of a pandemic in rural areas.

Another alternative is having a physical dropbox in schools that is able to help many students and families without adequate internet access get up to date with assignments and modules while maintaining physical distancing. The dropbox allows parents to pick up and receive their children’s assignments while submitting completed homework at the entrance of the school. The dropbox comprises multiple drawers, each belonging to a specific classroom. So, what parents ought to do is collect and submit their children’s work according to their children’s classroom at least once or twice a week. Not only that, but there are also efforts in some other schools such as having a drive-through to collect homework as well. These solutions help to bridge the gap and make sure students don’t fall behind, even as long-term investments in digital infrastructure take place.


Scene 4: Business takes a dip at the café

While Aini and Arma’s story helped to keep Ayu going for a week, she met with unfortunate news at the café. Her boss, Chan Yong told the staff about the financial status of the café. They all knew it was struggling, but Ayu had not realised just how bad things were. It was not just the MCO; with customers worried about their jobs and finances, business would not go back to usual after the movement restrictions end. So, with a heavy heart, Chan Yong had no choice but to let the five of his staff, including Ayu go.

Chan Yong knew how all of them would have wanted to stay on as they were students. But it was better to let them go now — while he could still give them two weeks’ pay to try to tide them over until they could find another job.

Ayu appreciated Chan Yong’s honesty but her worry grew. How would she provide for herself, let alone help her family after being retrenched in the midst of a pandemic? Also, she didn’t know how long more she would be stuck in the Klang Valley. All this worried her.

Nevertheless, she pulled through and still gave her best on her last day at work. Walking back to her hostel after her last shift and after saying her final goodbyes, she felt disheartened. Her legs felt as heavy as her heart and mind. She hoped that Rina, her roommate, would be around when she got back.

Alternatives: Food banks for community support

Due to job losses and/or pay cuts among other factors, people from all walks of life struggled to feed their families. To meet this need, community-led food banks were created across the country.

Owners of these food banks set up shelves where they place food items such as sugar, rice, canned food, flour, and snacks among other food. These foods are provided by the owners using their own earnings from work or businesses. Every once in two to three days, these food banks are replenished. Extra donations from other people in the community add to the food banks’ supplies.

Food banks usually rely on the sincerity of the people in the community to take only what is needed, as it is not supervised by anyone. However, in some cases where food banks are set up near laundry services, then the staff of these service providers will help keep a lookout for potential abuse.

It is a good initiative to help those in need. This effort is now being implemented in schools, too. A teacher in Perak had noticed her students not having anything to eat during recess due to financial constraints and set up a food bank in school through a donation drive. After a successful drive, the food bank was filled with items such as rice, sugar, canned sardines, ketchup and flour. It costs between RM350 and RM400 (approx. US$87.50 and US$100) to fill up the shelves. The students can bring home up to four items at a time for their families to cook at home. The food bank is called Gerobok Rezeki and is open 24 hours a day so that anyone who needs food can come by anytime to collect them.

The school also plans to set up a ‘mini bundle’ store where second-hand items such as clothes and shoes would be available for free for underprivileged students. Having a food bank has created awareness in society and is gaining traction among different people all around the country that now, more and more people, corporations and social institutions are getting on board to start their own food banks and convenience stores to serve those in need.


Abed’s Garden
(a KISAH Futures story)

By Timothy Ong

“Shen Yang is here — Nadir, please turn on your camera — Timo, please mute yourself — Excuse me, who is HotMess21?! — Farah, we can hear your dad singing ABBA in the background.”

The class burst out in giggles, followed by a spray of questions:

“Cikgu, who is ABBA? Farah can you sing too? Sing for us! Who is the Dancing Queen?”

So here I am holed up in my room, in my blouse-and-sweatpants combo trying to control 30 Standard 6 students. And of course, our government-mandated-video-conferencing-app needs updating. Again!

They told us that things would return to normal after the clinical trials for the vaccine were over in 2021. The only things becoming normal were fast-fashion PPE, Social Media Detox programmes, and the unpredictable interruptions to banal routines. My trip to the dentist, our family’s annual visit to Popo’s grave in Ipoh, our wedding and honeymoon have been postponed indefinitely.

I let out a sigh so loud it caused silence to ensue among the students in the virtual classroom. It wasn’t the first time my pessimism commanded more attention than the lesson I had to attend to.

Unlike myself, my students were excited for today’s lesson.

“Show-and-tell has been a highlight of my online classes — a chance for me to sit back and relax and let the kids speak without restraint (well, kind of).

“Nadir, I still can’t see your video.”

“But Cikgu, I don’t have a camera,” Nadir responded. A common excuse, but for Nadir, his family just couldn’t afford one.

Poorer students like Nadir were reliant on large corporations to provide the technology for online learning. Thankfully, closing businesses provided a huge supply of used devices that could be redistributed. It took time for these to get to the students though.

“It’s OK Nadir, you’ll have your turn when you get your laptop OK?”

Farah, has your dad stopped singing yet? What do you have for us today?”

One-by-one, students whipped out their latest muses: Their latest handphone, The Diary of a Wimpy Kid book collection, a completed Among Us Lego set.

“Um... Cikgu, is it OK if I bring my laptop outside?” Abed’s voice interrupted the class. “I want to show you all something but we have to be outside.”

A little stumped by the change of pace, I agreed, while the other kids glued themselves to the screen.

“Abed, your paradise rang with sentiments of biophilia — how he is selling his ripened tomatoes to his neighbors, his mum extracting essential oils out of the flowers, and how he’d love to grow trees and flowers in Malaysia’s concrete jungles, discover caves, and take care of national parks.

“Amazing, Abed!” I exclaimed. My pessimism dimmed in the shadow of Abed’s child-like faith. Abed grinned with cheeks as flushed as his cherry tomatoes.

Abed’s enthusiasm stirred the entire class. It opened the students up to talk about their ambitions — from energy engineers, botanists, to city planners and teachers — unhindered by the grim reality of COVID-19. I felt the energy dip as I gave them a written assignment to wrap up class.

“The new normal is their normal,” I thought to myself as I dressed in full. Peering out my window, I noticed for the first time my neighbours’ kids in their pyjama bottoms and school-attire tops snacking on fresh tomatoes from their own balcony garden patch.

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Scene 5: Sharing is caring

Teary-eyed Ayu shared her bad news with Rina, who sobbed along with her, wrapping Ayu up in a hug.

Rina too had an exhausting and mentally draining day at work. She had to attend to 40 students on Google Classroom during her English lesson for three hours straight without a break. Her voice was hoarse, and her eyes strained. It was overwhelming to teach online like this day after day.

Rina had graduated from Ayu’s university the previous semester. Being a teacher during the pandemic posed a lot of challenges. She had been adapting to the classroom setting and gaining confidence as a new teacher. She had shared her experiences with Ayu about planning lessons in a way that would account for the range of her students’ academic levels and managing a classroom — the kind of work she was passionate about. Now, she felt like a tech trouble-shooter, teaching her students and their parents how to access the digital platforms she used for her classes. More than half her students had their videos off, making it hard to feel connected to them. She felt like she was learning the ropes all over again.

Rina kept in touch with the experiences of other teachers around the country through her friends, some of whom teach in rural areas. One was posted to Rina’s hometown back in Sarawak. These teachers would go the distance to visit each student in their village to hand them their assignments and then collect them to grade them. Some of them do this at least twice a week. Remembering this helped her keep her own challenges in perspective.

For now, though, Ayu needed Rina. Letting go of Ayu, Rina headed to the pantry to prepare some comfort food for them both to enjoy in their cozy room — instant noodles and Milo.

Alternatives: Affordable therapy during COVID-19

As COVID-19 disrupted lives in many different ways, including students, government and non-governmental organizations raised awareness about mental health and coping mechanisms. For example, free counselling services were offered by Unit Pakar Kesejahteraan Psikologi dan Kaunselling (PKPK), UKM, conducted by their trainee counsellors. Government hospitals also offered therapy at a fee of RM5 per visit. These and other offers provide an avenue for affordable therapy. The effort to highlight such services is also a step in the right direction in addressing the stigma and taboos around mental health, which is as important as any other aspect of health.


Scene 6: Epiphany

Ayu used to post pictures of her artwork on social media and received many likes from followers and friends. Occasionally, someone would encourage her to consider selling her work. She had never taken it seriously — it seemed too uncertain to invest the time and energy to try. But now, she had nothing to lose. She switched tabs from job ads to her Pinterest account. How should she go about testing the waters?

A few days later, she received a private message about one of her paintings. It was of a girl travelling on a bus, looking out the window. There was a bright grin on that girl’s face. Ayu wasn’t sure why she had painted this picture, it had just felt right. Maybe it reflected her own desire to get on a bus and go home. Maybe her prospective buyer felt the same way.

“I can so relate with the picture so strangely!” the message read. “Is this still up for grabs? Please PM me about price.”

It was just one piece. She still didn’t know if it would work out in the long term. But it was a start and worth the try. Things were starting to move in the right direction.

Scene 7: I’m coming home!

Ayu glanced at her phone. Three new e-mails had come in this morning. She had been receiving occasional commissions for new artwork in addition to selling already-completed pieces. Perhaps she had received another request?

Ayu pulled up her e-mail and saw the heading she had been hoping for. No, not a big commission. Something better yet!

It read, “Repatriation in effect next week.”

Ayu read and reread the e-mail, the news not quite sinking in. She would finally be able to go home! She sank back into her chair and called home. “Umi, I have great news...”

Five days later, after placing all her things in the luggage compartment, Ayu settled into a window seat on the bus. Looking out at the sunshine, she had so many reasons to smile. She was looking forward to finishing her final semester at home, to continuing to explore her art business, and — most importantly — to being reunited with her family whom she missed dearly.

She grinned so hard thinking about how she would run straight into her mother’s arms. She sent off a message “Bus just left the station. I’m coming home, Umi!” her text read.

The weather outside matched her spirit and feelings: it was hopeful and bright, just the way she liked it.
References and further reading


The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the ways in which we *cari makan* (look for food). It has also opened up new conversations about how to *cari makan* (earn a living).

*Cari Makan* is an anthology of stories. The response to COVID-19 is a story with many observers and points of view. The picture becomes more complete (and complex!) the more voices we listen to, for the general observer is every one of us. Our collective perspective — our collective intelligence — is strengthened when we are in this together.

*Cari Makan* is but a starting point for conversations, reflection, and action. Let us seek out alternatives to the dominant development paradigms. Let us find and share solutions that are community-based, indigenous, under-the-radar, non-mainstream, or even counter-intuitive. Let us strive for a far more inclusive society than what we have today, where lives and livelihoods can thrive.

UNDP is the leading United Nations organization fighting to end the injustice of poverty, inequality, and climate change. Working with our broad network of experts and partners in 170 countries, we help nations to build integrated, lasting solutions for people and planet.

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