CARI MAKAN

General observations on building forward better from COVID-19

PART I

Stranger Skies
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.


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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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INTRODUCTION

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 heathens 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?

Provocations

Here at UNDP, we continue to wrestle with what it means to ‘build forward better’ post-COVID-19. Our mission is, in a nutshell, to eradicate poverty and promote human development while protecting the planet. We have been thrust into an increasingly complex, ambiguous, and uncertain world. Past trends are not good predictors of future circumstances. COVID-19 is complex. Its good and bad are blurred. Take health versus economy trade-offs: a lockdown may be good for containing the virus, but it has consequences on the economy. The work from home experience is drastically different for corporate executives and street vendors. Some of us had a Plan B, but many did not. Different communities are impacted differently. There is no one policy that addresses the needs of all.

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.

The ‘war’ we are now waging is not merely against a virus; COVID-19 exposed vulnerabilities and exacerbated complex issues for which there are no textbook solutions or best practices — the crisis is ongoing and, like the virus itself, mutates as it goes along. Even when the ‘invader’ is finally defeated, collateral damage will remain. 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.
Our hope is that this will open a door into more reflexive, foresighted, and inclusive policymaking.

**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 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 more than a collection of stories. It 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 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.

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 R₀, which describes the number of new infections each patient generates. If R₀ 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 R₀. 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 R₀ 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.

Part I

Stranger Skies
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 flustering about 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.

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.

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, 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.”

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

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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 newbirths. 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 their careers and families. Programmes such as its Deloitte Dads also helps 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 gingerly 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 deep breaths 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 him. She listened to the caller as best as she could, all the while muttering 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 planned to finish up some reports in the afternoon. But Zach has an afternoon class and he'll need to use her laptop.

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.

"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.

"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 Aiman 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.


The great digital oversight

The fact that everyone was confined to their homes seemed like a great opportunity to kick-start a national experiment in e-learning. Teachers explored the use of digital technologies in education to ensure the learning process among students continued uninterrupted. But in reality, the education system was not prepared for the large-scale move, although online learning is a part of the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025.

The pandemic has revealed weaknesses in infrastructure, inequalities in access to online classes and the inability of various stakeholders to cope with e-learning, including teachers, students, and parents.

Families have not always had enough devices for everyone’s use and uneven internet access has made it difficult for students to join online classes. A study last year, which involved more than 670,000 parents and up to 900,000 students in Malaysia, found that only 6 percent have a personal computer, 5.76 percent have a tablet, 9 percent have a laptop and 46 percent have a smartphone.

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 auditory 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.
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 dialled 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...I...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 hesitated. “mmmm...I...uh...mmm.” “It’s OK, take your time. You can just tell me.”

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.

“Where’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.

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 hinder 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

Produced in partnership with

WOMEN’S AID ORGANISATION
PERTUBUHAN PERTOLONGAN WANITA

Level of activity by WAO

Level of police presence available for rescue

Freeing domestic violence victims from the cycle of fear

Level of domestic violence

R2

Fear of leaving home

Ability of victim to leave home

Fear of leaving home

Level of police presence available for rescue
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.


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 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.
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.

The proportion of RAHIS respondents who reported experiencing negative behaviours in their homes was highest among larger households (≥ 9 members).
Alternatives:
Taking care of employees’ mental health

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.

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’ benefits packages and to enable open conversations on mental health at the workplace to create a safe space for employees to talk about their challenges with mental health. 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.

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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.

The 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 doorsteps 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?

She 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.

Without hesitation, she jumped onto their holograms, and they caught her.

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.
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. This 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.


Naz: Sekarang, macam mana?


Dennis: Can tahan or not?

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.

Naz: Tu lah.

Kam: I don’t know, man. When it rains, it pours, right?
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 his 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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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 had aeroplanes to steer started delivering food from house to house and reporters who were put out of jobs went into ride-hailing services.

However, startups or companies with innovative technologies are looking at ways to automate delivery. Companies like Google’s Waymo are developing autonomous vehicles that promise a safe and easy way to get around without the need for anyone in the driver’s seat. Robots were also seen delivering food in Europe during the coronavirus lockdown. And drones have been 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 at alternative ways to distribute the gains from automation, to ensure that we are not caught off guard when the robots come rolling in.


2.04 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.


2.05 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 consoled 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.


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.

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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 and project-based work as a sustainable way of making a decent monthly salary in exchange for uncertainty.

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.

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?

Currently, 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’ Socso 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 such as 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 skills 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.

In recent times, the value of flexibility has also been brought to the forefront thanks, in part, to the growing gig economy. According to Workforce 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 among the younger generation; those more established in their careers are increasingly looking at freelancing as a way of exploring other options.


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?*

**Now**

*Do you have any questions for me?*

*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?*
- 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?
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.

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