

CARI MAKAN

General observations on
building forward better
from COVID-19



PART III
Them/Us

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.

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Foreword

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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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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?

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

* *Tapau* and *bungkus* are the Cantonese and Malay words, respectively, for takeaway.

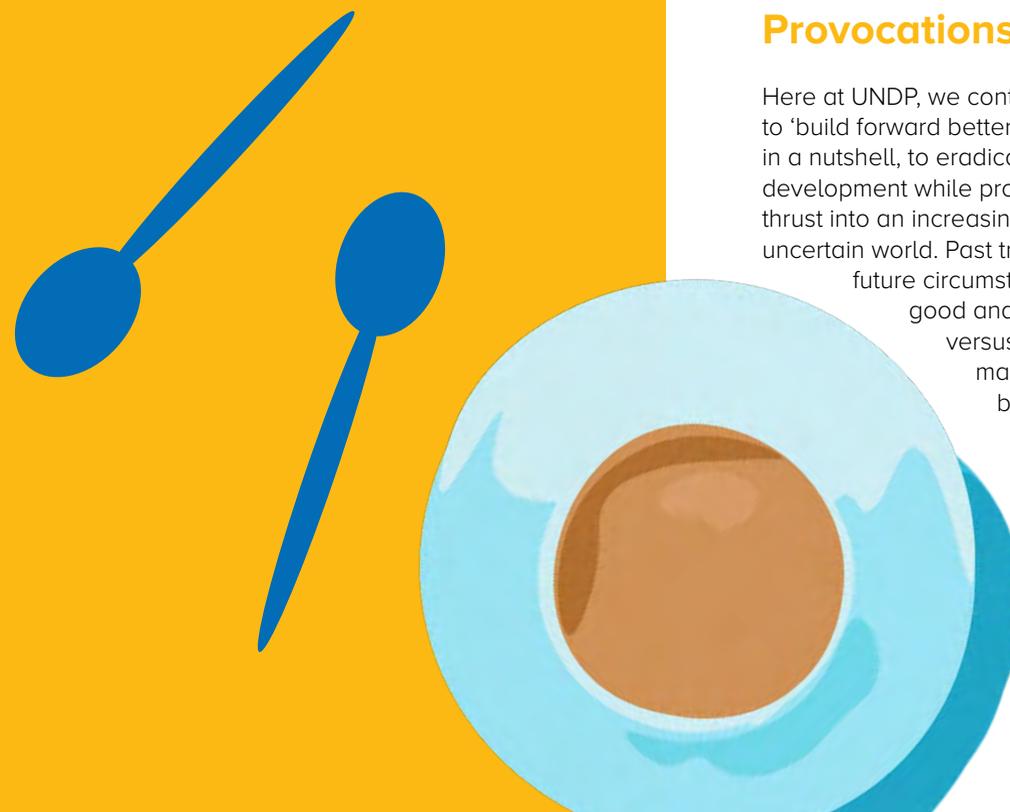
are impacted differently. There is no one policy that addresses the needs of all.

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.



Are these stories subjective? Of course. Knowledge is positional and depends very much on the angle and perspective of the observer¹. 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.

¹ Imagine trying to understand a festival like, say, Thai Pusam. Different people have different motivations for observing it. If you wanted to know the “truth,” who do you speak to? If you spoke to a priest, he may give you the official meaning. But is that the truth? You would want to speak to a devotee, and even different devotees may express the meaning of Thai Pusam differently — and have different personal reasons and motivations for observing it. A nuanced reading is one that factors in complexity and contradiction, for truth is seldom monolithic and unilateral.

“ 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 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.

The COVID-19 pandemic is both an ecological and a social phenomenon.

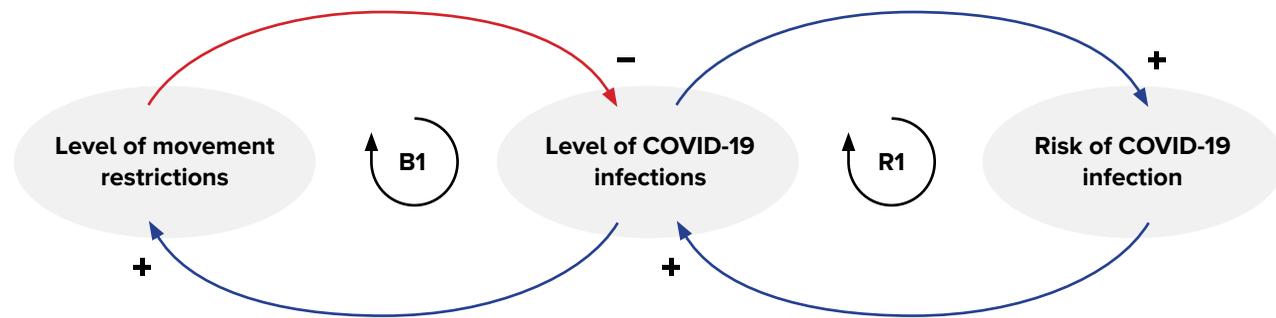
AN INTRODUCTION TO SYSTEMS THINKING

The COVID-19 socio-ecological system and a primer to feedback loops

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.



The COVID-19 infection-and-containment cycle.



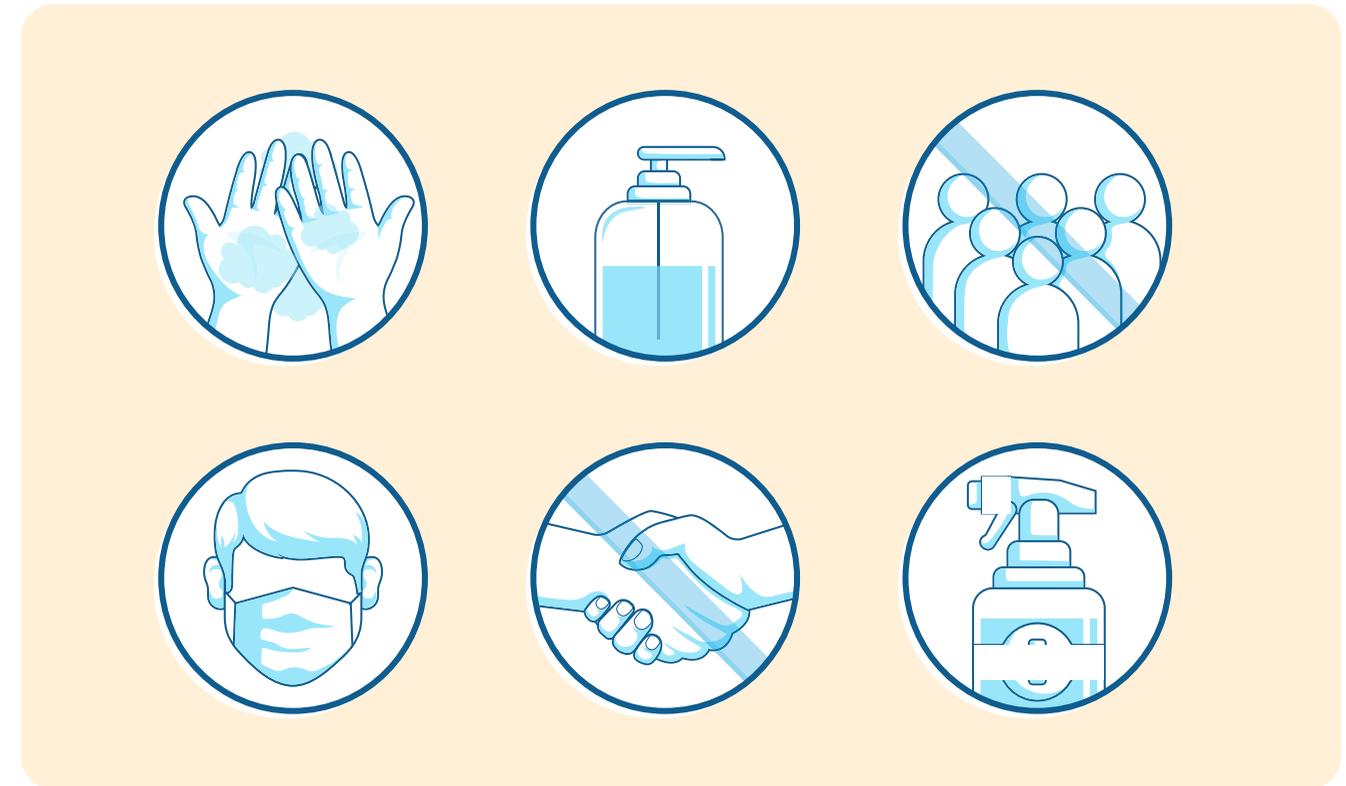
How to read a system map

Causal relationships between driver variables (arrow start) and affected variables (arrow end) are represented with arrows. In positive relationships (indicated by blue arrows and '+' signs), when the driver variable increases or decreases, the affected variable changes in the same direction (i.e., increase in driver variable creates increase in affected variable, and decrease in driver variable creates decrease in affected variable). In negative relationships (indicated by red arrows and '-' signs) when the driver variable increases or decreases, the affected variable changes in the opposite direction (i.e., increase in driver variable creates decrease in affected variable, and decrease in driver variable creates increase in affected variable).

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.

Lau, Alwyn. "We should behave like it is 20,000 cases daily." The Malay Mail, 11 January 2021, www.malaymail.com/news/opinion/2021/01/11/we-should-behave-like-it-is-20000-cases-daily/1939223. Accessed 1 October 2021.

Part III

Them/Us

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



Diary Entry 1

14 June 2020

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 Samaritans 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.

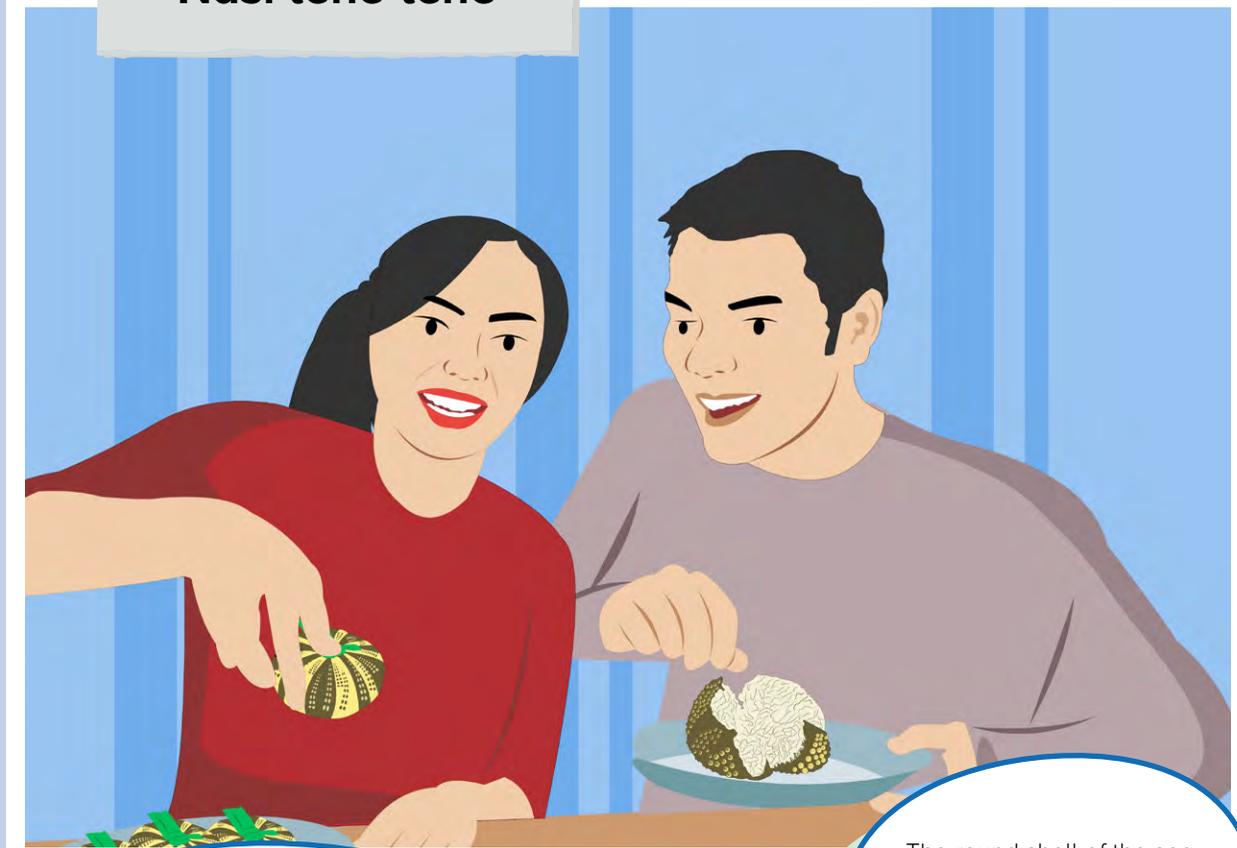
Jason invited me to join him for dinner. He had prepared a famous Bajau Laut dish, *nasi tehe-tehe* (sea urchin rice) which he had learned from the community. It was my first time trying it and it was delicious!

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.

Nasi tehe-tehe



Tehe-tehe rice or sea urchin (sea hedgehog) rice can be eaten raw, or cooked and eaten with putu or steamed tapioca.

The round shell of the sea urchin serves as a small pot to cook the rice.

To enhance the taste, other types of seafood such as squid and prawn which are finely sliced and added into the rice.

The rice is not only popular with residents but foreign tourists, too.



Diary Entry 3

12 July 2020

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 pondok* 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 la 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.

Glossary

Sangat susah sekarang ni, kena cuba hari-hari – It is difficult now, have to try day after day

sekolah pondok – school in a hut

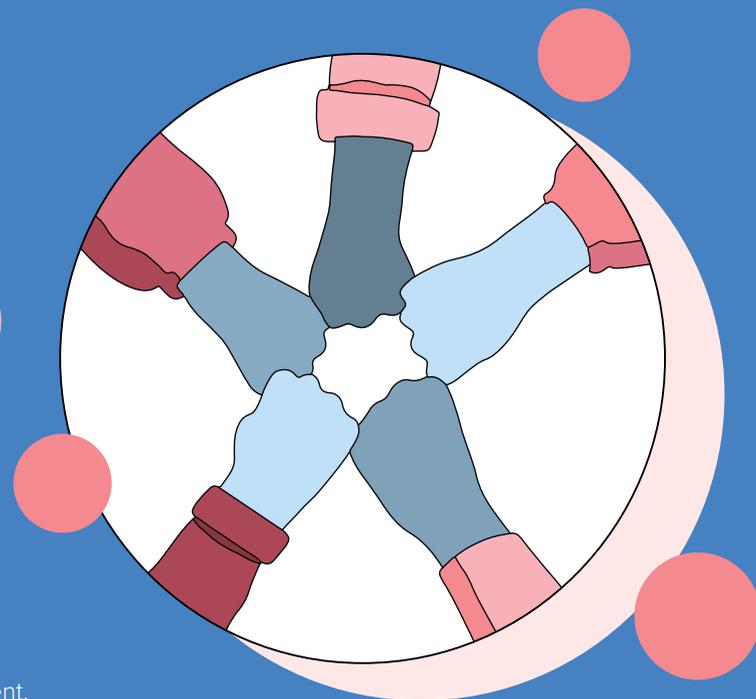
Kira-kira, tambah tolak – Count, add, and subtract

Mau susahkan kita seja – They just want to make life difficult for us

Macam tu la 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 (BPN), 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 get 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 elsewhere because of their stateless status. Because of that, many did not dare go down to the markets and stayed put in their homes.

Stateless communities all around the world face difficulties navigating everyday life because they cannot rely on the basic rights that citizens take for granted. For example, in Malaysia, they do not have access to healthcare, education, and other basic services. The lack of access to social safety nets and fear of authorities makes the COVID-19 pandemic all the more difficult for stateless persons, especially as movement restrictions affect their livelihoods.

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.

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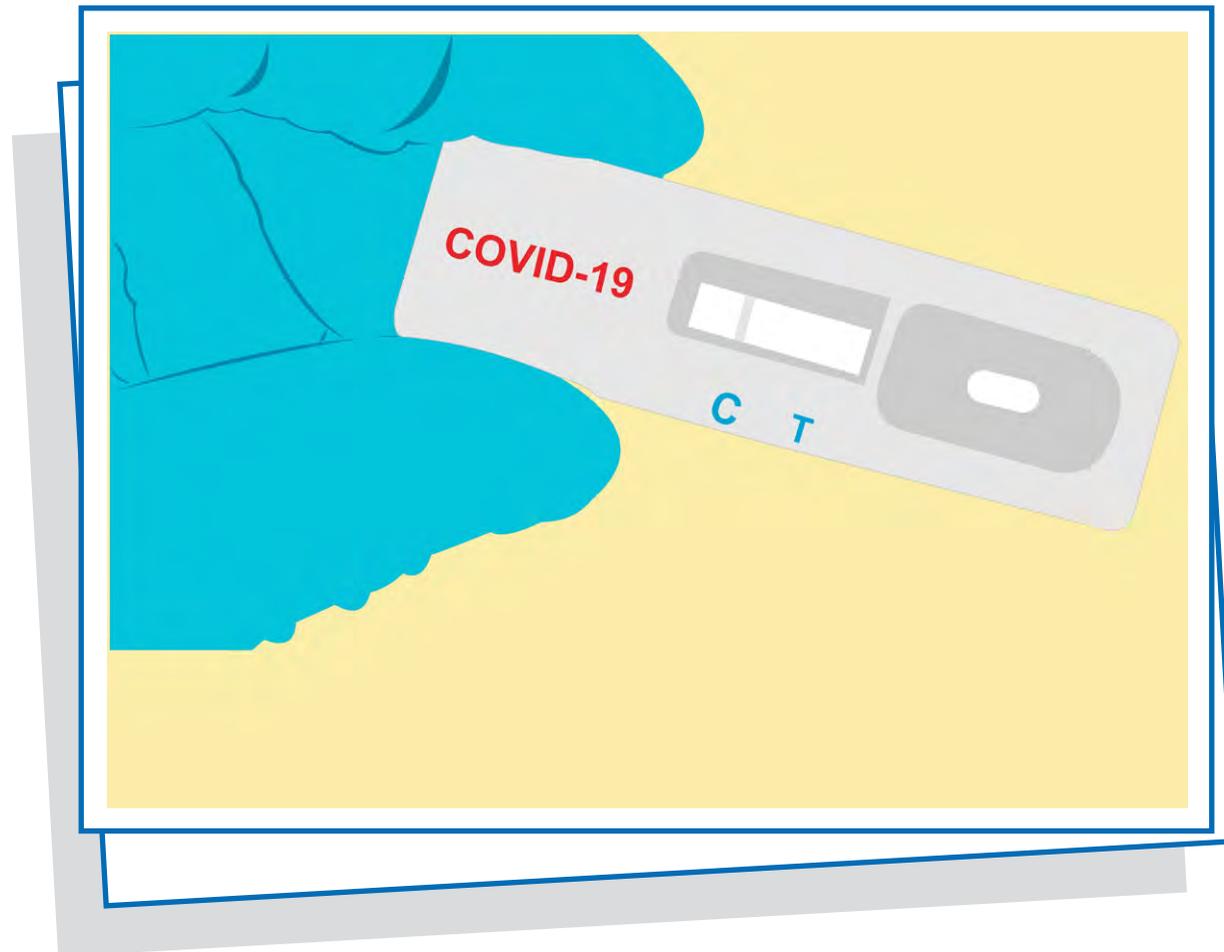
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Some NGOs working with stateless peoples in Sabah

- **Borneo Komrad:** www.borneokomrad.com
- **Iskul Sama DiLaut Omadal:** www.facebook.com/iskulsamadilautomadal

Some NGOs working to help others affected in Sabah

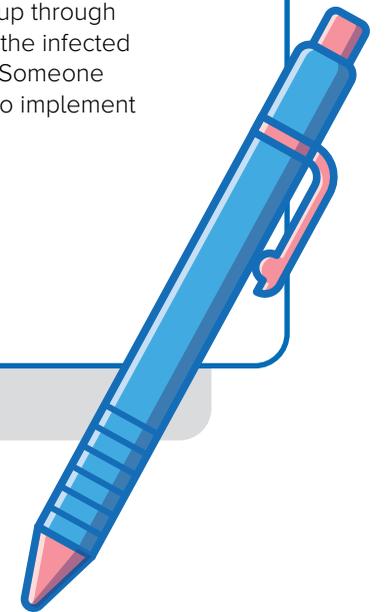
- **Semporna Heroes:** www.facebook.com/SempornaHeroes
- **Osimal Foundation:** www.facebook.com/osimalfoundation
- **Sabah Next Generation:** www.facebook.com/SabahNextGen



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





Diary Entry 5

16 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... Aiyo, 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

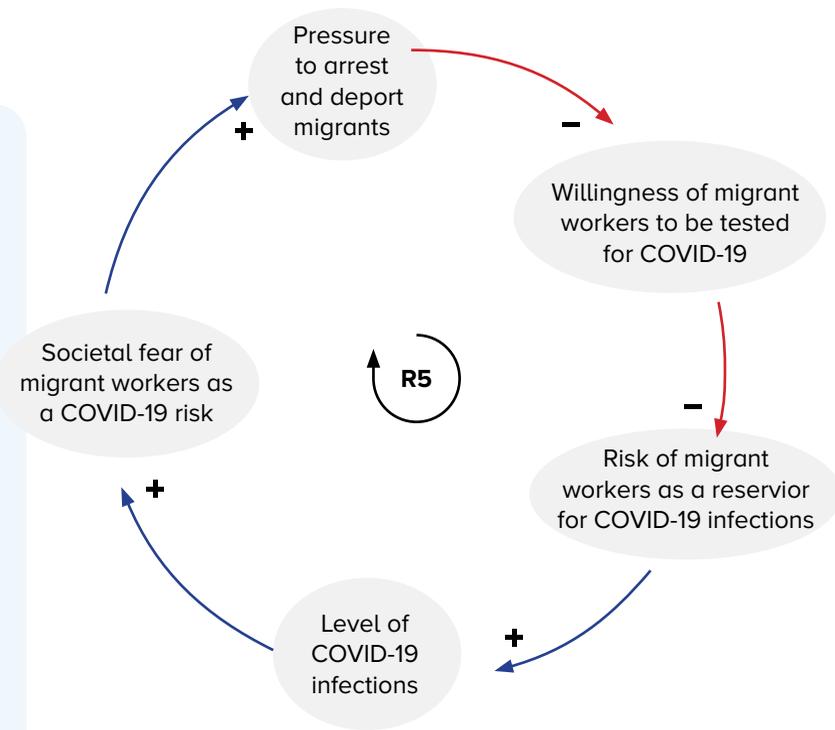
Suruh mereka bersiap sedia, kita dah kena gerak secepat mungkin... Aiyo, diorang ni susah mau jaga tau –
Tell them to get ready, we need to go as soon as possible...
These people are difficult to take care of, you know

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

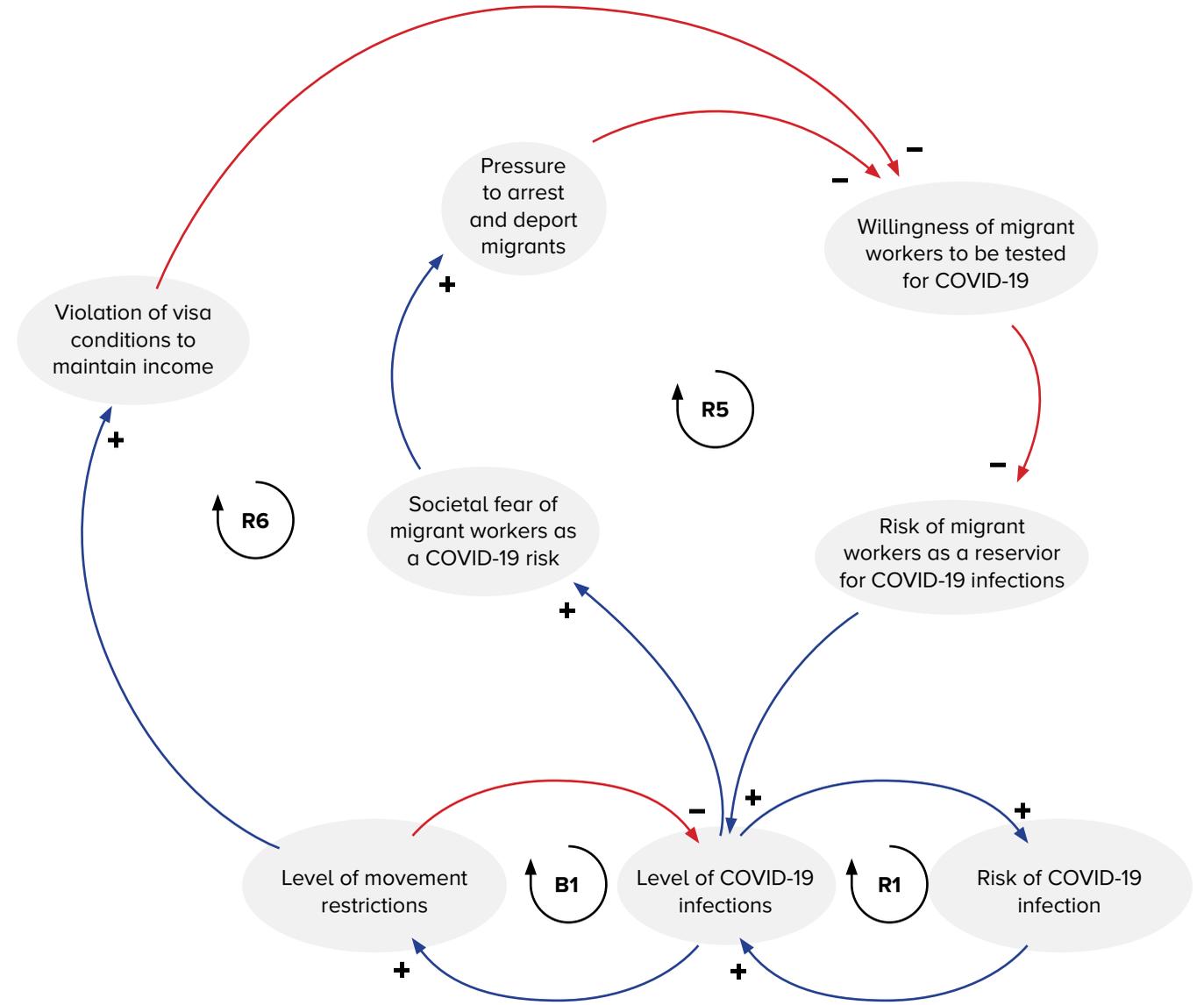
Unpacking the system: COVID-19 and trust between vulnerable groups and the Government

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).



COVID-19 and the cycle of mistrust between society and migrant workers (part one).



COVID-19 and the cycle of mistrust between society and migrant workers (part two).

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.



Diary Entry 6

17 July 2020

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.

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.

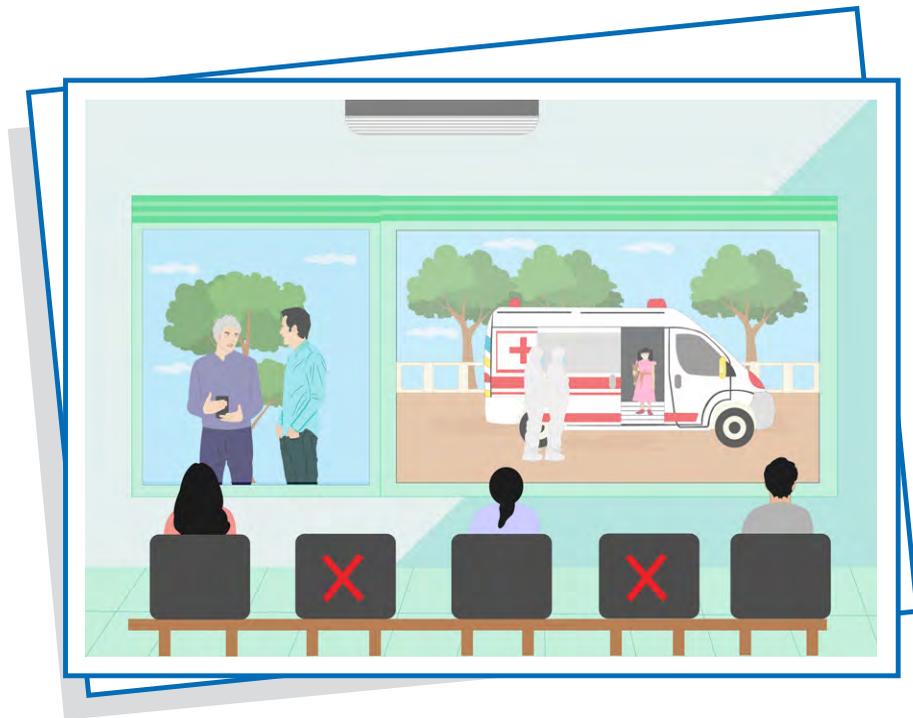
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Diary Entry 7

24 July 2020

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.

Glossary

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

Diary Entry 8

01 August 2020

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 Omdal — 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.

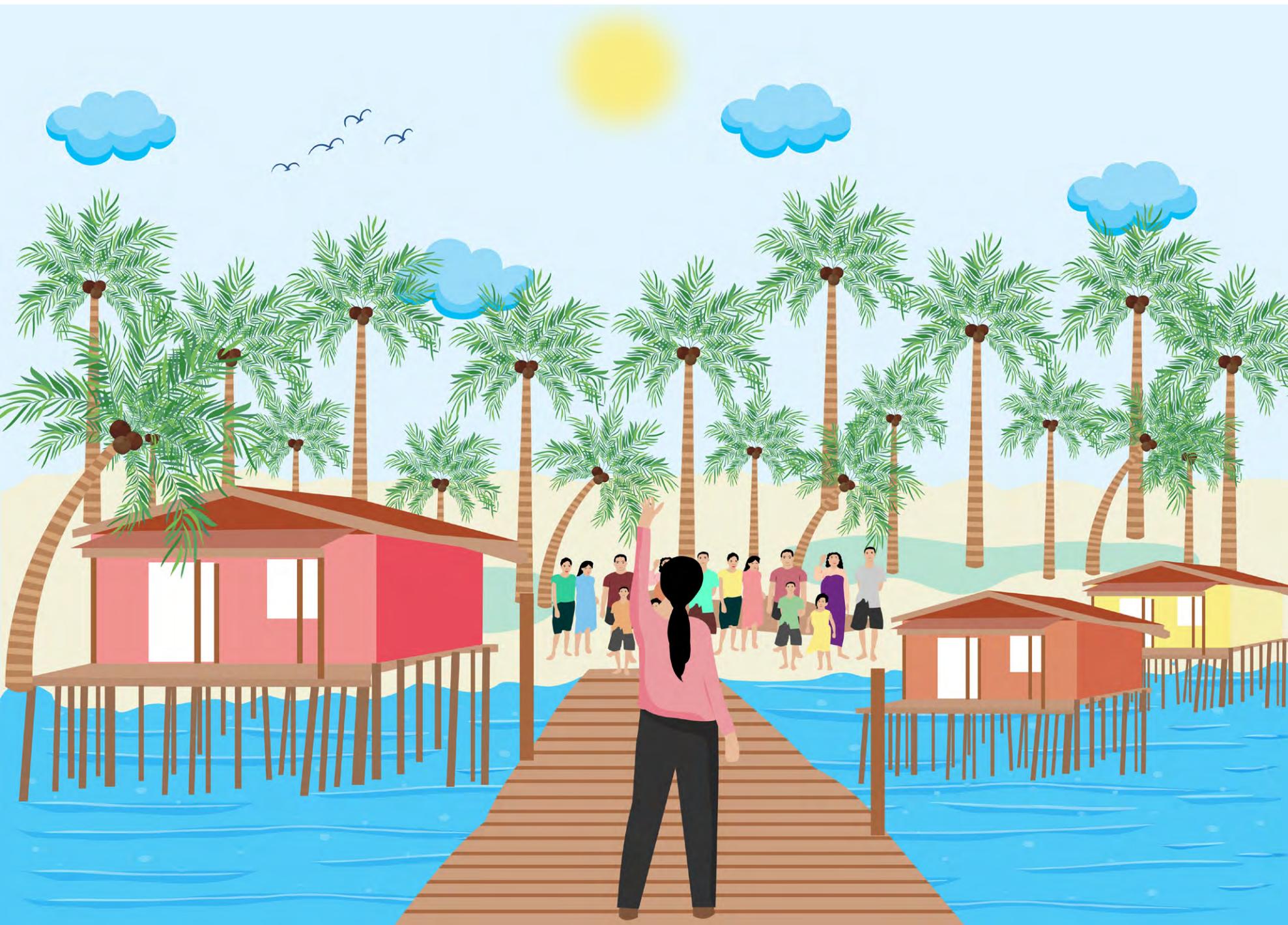
On the flight back, I thought about the situation of the Bajau Laut community, the migrants, refugees, undocumented, and underprivileged. I thought about

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

Jumpa lagi, Kak Josephine! – See you again, sister Josephine!



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Hikmah di Sebalik Musibah

(a KISAH Futures story)

By Mohamed Afiq Amani bin Mohamed Nahdirsha



Namaku Seroja. Aku anak Orang Asli suku Batek yang tinggal di tebing Sungai Tembeling. Tenang dan mendamaikan, sama seperti 20 tahun yang lalu. Datuk aku seorang Tok Batin yang sangat dihormati. Patriotik dan begitu berbangga dengan darah Orang Asli yang mengalir di dalam tubuhnya. Keadaan di sini tidak lagi seperti dulu. Sudah maju dan jauh ke depan. Serba-serbi canggih dan cukup lengkap. Setanding dengan kehidupan di ibu kota. Paling menakutkan, khazanah flora dan fauna masih kekal terpelihara. Tidak lagi disentuh pencemaran mahupun pembalakan haram.

“Tak lapar?” sapa Tok yang menjengah masuk ke ruang kamar sambil ditemani pembantu setia, Jinggo. Berkerdip-kerdip matanya memandangi aku. Jinggo ini unik. Robot ini memiliki kemampuan mengenali wajah manusia dan mempunyai kecerdasan buatan melangkaui sepuluh tahun ke depan. Jinggo merupakan pelaburan Tok untuk membantu membangunkan perusahaan nanasnya.

“Lapar tapi kerja tak habis lagi. Lepas habis kerja ni kita makan tau,” jawab aku selamba sambil jari-jemari ligat menyentuh layar sentuh hologram. Pertanian pintar yang diusahakan menggunakan satelit, dron, kecerdasan buatan (AI) dan perisian ramalan cuaca banyak menyumbang kepada produktiviti tanaman nanas. Revolusi teknologi yang luar biasa ini tidak memerlukan aku untuk turun ke ladang.

“Jinggo, pergi stor nanas, ambil semua kotak susun kat depan pondok. Kejang lagi kurier nak datang ambil,” Tok memberi arahan. Nanas yang dikutip pagi tadi akan dihantar kepada pemborong secepat yang mungkin bagi memenuhi permintaan yang semakin tinggi. Jinggo mengangguk tanda faham lantas beralu pergi.

“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 kejatuhan harga minyak suatu ketika dahulu adalah langkah yang tepat. Tenaga angin berjaya menyumbang kepada ekonomi negara berasaskan pertanian.

“Tak apa Tok. Nanti Seroja bincang dengan Putera. Kita boleh minta mereka datang dan tambah lagi.”

Putera salah seorang anak Orang Asli Suku Batek yang pulang ke tanah air setelah menamatkan pengajian di Belanda dan mengusahakan kedai kincir angin. Ramai anak muda yang menganggur diambil bekerja di kedainya.

“Kalau boleh cepat lagi bagus. Jangan lengahkan. Tok risau nanti musim hujan air melimpah tak sempat nak kering,” Tok meluahkan rasa bimbangannya. Mungkin pengalaman lepas mengajarnya untuk lebih berhati-

hati. Kincir angin mampu melancarkan sistem perparitan tetapi perlu dilakukan dengan cara yang tersusun dan sistematik.

“Okay Tok. Jangan risau ya. Sekarang ni Putera tengah sibuk sikit uruskan kilang kincir angin yang baru nak buka tu. Seroja dengar ramai pelabur luar yang melabur. Nampaknya, peluang pekerjaan semakin bertambah kan?” ujarku dengan rasa bangga. Pencapaian Putera bukan biasa-biasa. Krisis COVID-19 benar-benar mengubah dunia 360 darjah.

“Ni lah hikmah bencana COVID-19. Kejatuhan kuasa Amerika Syarikat dan kebangkitan negara-negara baru sebagai kuasa besar membuka mata dunia bahawa kita tak selama-lamanya berada di bawah. Hanya masa yang menentukan,” semangat Tok mengatur bicara. Ada benarnya juga kata-kata Tok. Sejak krisis COVID-19, negara maju seperti Amerika Syarikat, Perancis, United Kingdom, Itali dan Sepanyol gagal menangani pandemik berkenaan sehingga menyebabkan ekonomi mereka lumpuh.

“Mujur negara kita cepat bertindak. Sekarang ni pertanian dah jadi nadi utama ekonomi negara. Insentif yang berterusan untuk bangunkan generasi petani milenium dan digital sebenarnya tak sia-sia. Kita mampu melahirkan usahawan pertanian digital yang berdaya saing,” aku meneruskan bicara. Tok mengangguk sambil menguntum senyum. Aku amat kagum dengan usaha kerajaan mengurangkan kadar pengangguran ketika krisis COVID-19 melanda dengan menggalakkan penglibatan generasi Z memodenkan sektor pertanian pintar secara kreatif.



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

my.undp.org/content/malaysia/en/home/library/kisah-futures-antology.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 Batin*, 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.

"I am a little hungry, but my work is not done yet. Once it's finished, we'll eat together, *Tok*," I reply as my fingers moved effortlessly on the hologram touchpad. We have implemented smart farming into our plantation, supported by satellites, drones, AI and weather forecasting software. This has contributed immensely to our productivity in

pineapple yields. This superb technological revolution means I hardly need to go out to the fields.

"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.

"That's all right, *Tok*. Seroja will discuss with Putera shortly. We can ask his team to come and install more."

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.

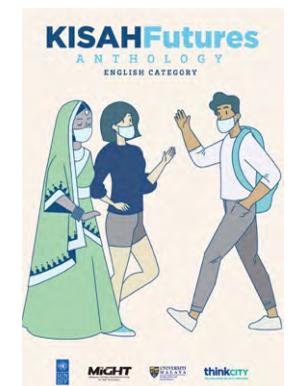
"As soon as possible would be best. Don't dally. *Tok* is worried the monsoon season will fill the water systems

up to the brim, and they won't dry up in time," a concerned *Tok* advises. Perhaps his experience has taught him to be more careful this time. The windmills are more than capable of running a smooth drainage system, but it has to be done in an orderly and systematic way.

"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.

"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.

"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 whenever 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.

Glossary

Umi – mother

COVID-19 and students stuck in school

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

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Photos courtesy of YSS



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



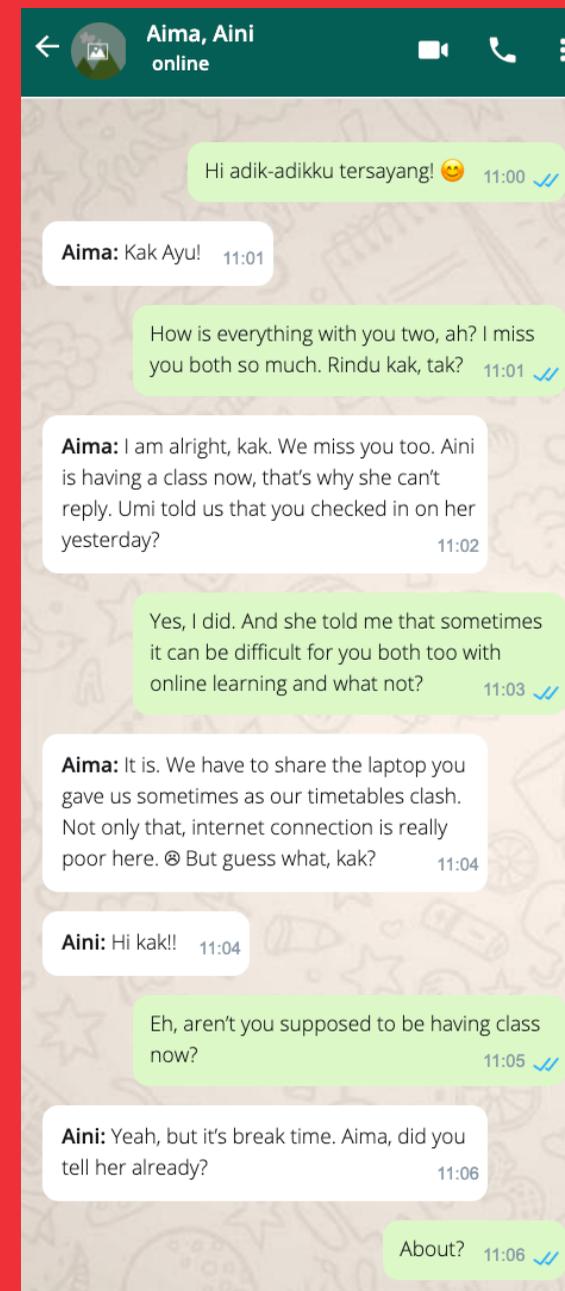
It didn't feel complete just catching up with her *Umi*. So, Ayu started a conversation with her two younger sisters, Aini and Aima in their sisters' group chat the next day.



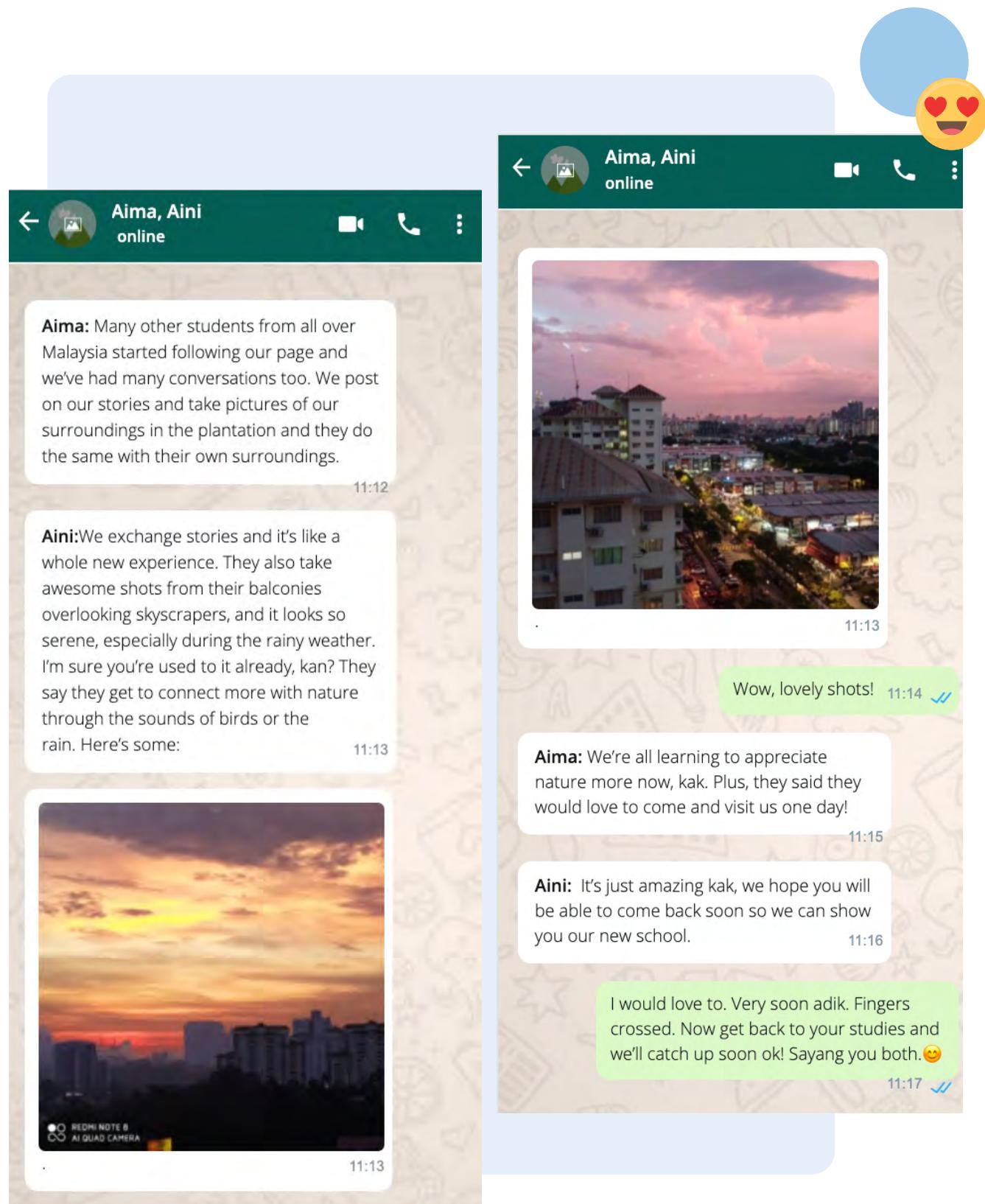
For more on UNDP's work in supporting rural e-commerce during the COVID-19 pandemic, read our blog, 'E-commerce for rural development: A response to COVID-19 recovery'.

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

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Adik – younger sibling



6.05

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.

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Scene 4: Business takes a dip at the café



While Aini and Aima's story helped to keep Ayu going for a week, she met with unfortunate news at the café.

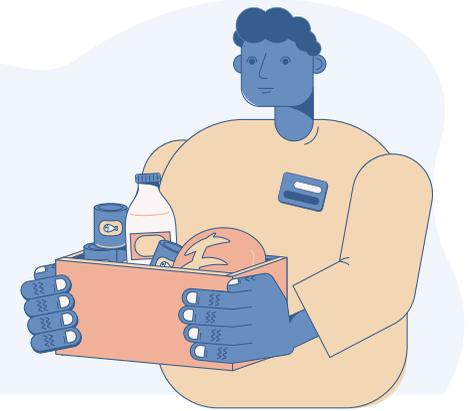
Her boss, Chan Yong told the staff about the financial status of the café. They all knew it was struggling, but Ayu had not realised just how bad things were. It was not just the MCO; with customers worried about their jobs and finances, business would not go back to usual after the movement restrictions 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.

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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.

Glossary

Cikgu – teacher
Popo – grandmother
Abah – father
cili padi – bird's eye chili

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.

“So uh, my favourite possessions in the world are my plants, which are in this solar-powered greenhouse. *Abah* and I are working on it! It has sensors that can tell



how humid it is in here, and if it gets too dry, the sprinklers will automatically spray water all over the place...”

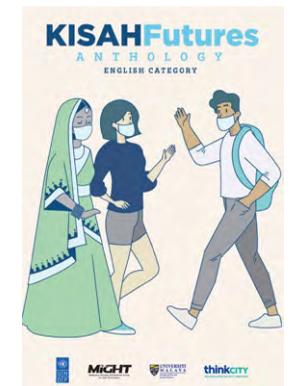
I did not know of Abed's interest in gardening nor the fact that he spent the last six months of quarantine creating a personal utopia of sylvan colour. I noticed the other students paying attention, a rarity in our classroom. Some of them looked confused, as if *cili padi* trees were extra-terrestrial, or purple carrots could give them superpowers.

The way he spoke of his 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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my.undp.org/content/malaysia/en/home/library/kisah-futures-anthology.html

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 cosy room -- instant noodles and Milo.



Alternatives: Affordable therapy during COVID-19



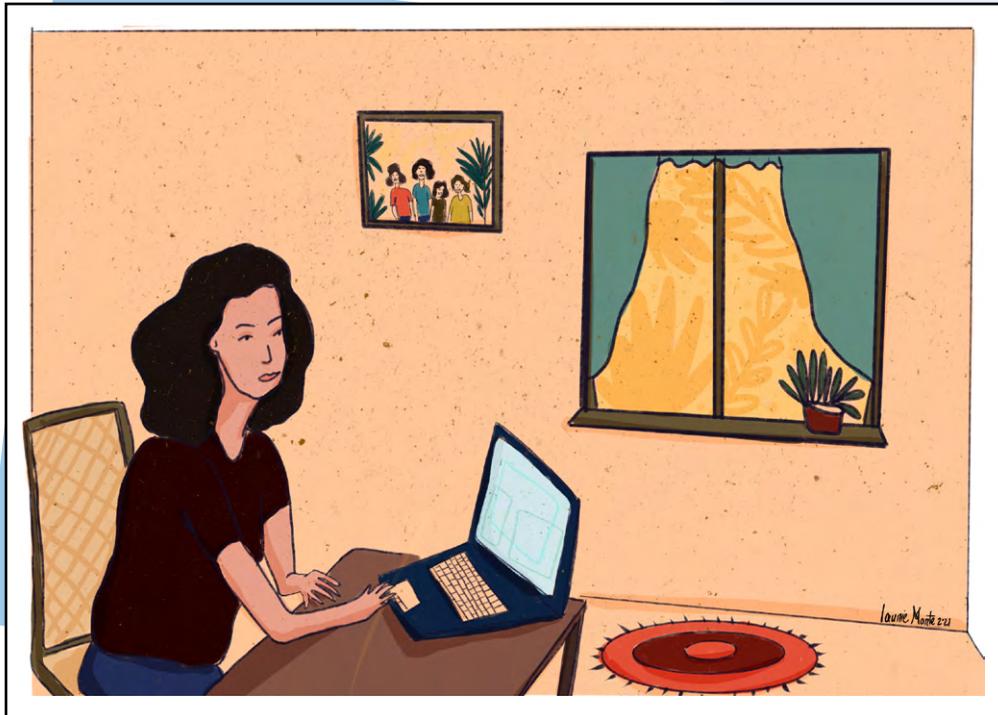
As COVID-19 disrupted lives in many different ways, including students, government and non-governmental organizations raised awareness about mental health and coping mechanisms. For example, free counselling services were offered by Unit Pakar Kesejahteraan Psikologi dan Kaunselling (PKPK), UKM, conducted 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.

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Scene 6: Epiphany

Ayu persisted in looking for solutions after losing her job at the café. While she performed well, cafés and restaurants were not hiring and she needed an alternative. Perhaps she could find a way to make her passion for her artwork and crafts pay? It was therapeutic, she could produce her art from home, and it was work she could keep doing whether she was in the Klang Valley or at home in Pasir Mas.



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 strongly!" 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.





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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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