



# POLICY FAILURES AND LESSONS FROM COVID CRISIS

CALVIN CHENG & HARRIS ZAINUL

Policymakers around the world grappling with Covid-19 have learnt a harsh lesson in the last two years. This is no less true in Malaysia. Between 2020 and March 2022, Malaysia has recorded about 3.5 million cases of Covid-19 – this is equivalent to one case for every 10 people in the country – while more than 32,000 have died.

Even more have lost their livelihoods. At the peak of the movement restrictions in May 2020, more than a million Malaysians were either unemployed or pushed out of the labour force altogether. Alongside the health and economic ravages of the pandemic, Malaysians contended with growing social and political uncertainty and disastrous floods across the nation.

Yet, challenges create opportunities to learn. Amid an increasingly uncertain post-Covid world, there are vital policy lessons from the pandemic as we enter the third year of combating the virus. We highlight four broad lessons below.

## **1. Inequality exacerbates inequality**

Policies need to account for the fact that inequality begets inequality. The socioeconomic chasms between the haves and have-nots have widened since the Covid crisis. Worse, these pre-existing inequities have made marginalised groups more vulnerable to the triple economic, health and socio-developmental impacts of the pandemic.

As Covid-19 cases rose in Malaysia, it was blue-collar, lower-wage workers who were the least able to transition into remote work – leading to higher infection risks for a population already contending with pre-pandemic health inequities, including higher rates of mortality and morbidity.

Likewise, these same lower-wage jobs were also among the most affected by Covid-19, further deepening economic vulnerability for lower-income families – even while higher-income households were left relatively unscathed.

These health and economic impacts then intersected with pre-existing disparities like unequal access to education and the digital divide – further compounding Covid-19's impacts on the human capital development of children in lower-income families. Asian Development Bank estimates suggest "learning losses" for Malaysia's children from the shift to remote learning are among the highest in Asia – directly harming the future economic prospects and social mobility of the communities most in need.

**The failure to counter the self-reinforcing nature of inequality will have long-term consequences for Malaysia's progress towards an advanced nation.**

To this end, reducing inequality of opportunity needs to be a top developmental priority and policymakers need to commit to undoing the deep-seated structural inequities in Malaysia's political and social economy.

**2. Investing in building crisis resilience**

Policy lags matter. In a crisis, conditions can change suddenly and abruptly. Often, the time taken for policymakers to recognise the problem, establish a response and implement the policy action can be significant – especially when coupled with the complexity of politics.

For example, at the height of the third wave in May 2021, the government imposed a nationwide "total lockdown". However, the Pemulihan economic stimulus measures were announced at end-June and households only received the first Bantuan Khas Covid-19 payments in August. Throughout the Covid crisis in Malaysia, we have seen similar policy lags compound the long-term economic, health and social consequences for the vulnerable.

**Investing in developing more "automatic" policies will reduce these lags and ensure that vulnerable communities are protected in a crisis. In turn, this will bolster the resilience of the economy and society.**

To this end, we would need to strengthen the social-safety net infrastructure and legislate automatic triggers that kick in to expand these programmes when conditions worsen. This would entail tabling legislation to automate the triggering of crisis-time policies like the wage-subsidy programme and emergency Bantuan Prihatin Nasional (BPN) cash transfers during a crisis.

**3. Clear policy communication**

Effective policymaking requires effective communication. Policies can only succeed if there is clear communication to secure compliance and effect behavioural change. Nowhere was this truer than during the pandemic and the need to communicate multiple messages to address a constantly evolving situation.

Public health measures – to prevent infection, degrees of movement controls, shifting risk profile of Covid-19 and the importance of vaccinations – were doled out against the backdrop of evolving science and mutating virus. And in an environment where evidence and expertise could be contested, information became more muddled. Exacerbating matters was the fact that people wanted to take reasonable measures to protect their family, friends and loved ones. This created a heightened demand for information, which if left unmet because of incoherent or insufficient communications could lead to a non-compliant populace and room for misinformation to thrive.

**In times like these, communication strategies need to be underpinned by evidence to ensure accuracy, tailored to specific audiences to ensure relevancy and delivered by credible spokespeople for trustworthiness.**

We cannot afford to conflate availability of information with accessibility. Only then can we ensure that these policy communications are not only heard but understood.

#### **4. Trust in public institutions**

Public trust is crucial for policy compliance. At nearly every stage of our response to the pandemic, trust played a key role to ensure the effectiveness of measures introduced. This included Covid-19 containment, mitigation and vaccination efforts. At its core, it is trust between those governing and those being governed that facilitates compliance with social and legal norms – the key to securing collective behaviour – without resorting to punitive threats. For the Covid-19 pandemic and previous health crises, including SARS, H1N1 and Ebola, a recent United Nations report found that high public trust in public institutions was a crucial determinant for successful crisis responses.

On the other hand, a lack of public trust reduces the effect of policy interventions while raising the costs for governments to ensure compliance. For example, distrust in government can lead to non-compliance with containment and mitigation measures, while distrust in health institutions can increase rates of vaccine hesitancy.

Public trust is easy to lose but difficult to build. A first step towards building trust in public institutions is the need to ensure institutions and policies work for the populace. Likewise, accountability and transparency mechanisms need to be baked into these to prove that public institutions are worthy of trust. This would involve a greater commitment towards more open and accessible government data – an area Malaysia regularly underperforms in.

**Finally, to build trust, policymaking itself has to be more participatory and inclusive. This means genuine attempts at engaging a wider range of local stakeholders in policymaking, from citizens to civil society groups.**

The past two years have been a maelstrom of economic, social and political change. But the Covid-19 crisis is far from over. There are more policy lessons in the coming years before Covid-19 ceases to be an omnipresent threat in the public consciousness. Nonetheless, with the right mix of inclusive decision-making, effective policies, active communication and implementation, we may be able to protect the most vulnerable from the impacts of future crises.

---

*This article first appeared in Forum, The Edge Malaysia Weekly, on 14 March 2022.*

**CALVIN CHENG** and **HARRIS ZAINUL** are senior analysts at the Institute of Strategic & International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia. They can be contacted at [calvin.ckw@isis.org.my](mailto:calvin.ckw@isis.org.my) and [harris@isis.org.my](mailto:harris@isis.org.my).