Pandemic Papers

LESSONS FROM COVID-19

CONTENT

FOREWORD: EFFECTIVE POLICY KEY TO RESOLVING CRISIS

On 1 April 2022, Malaysia moved into the endemic phase of the pandemic, more than two years since the Covid-19 virus first struck the country's shores. This signalled a major shift towards a Malaysia that will learn to live with the virus and forge a new path forward – one that aims to balance the health ramifications of the pandemic with the necessities of economic revitalisation.

While this is a welcome move that mirrors regional peers in Southeast Asia, the pandemic remains far from over, and Malaysia continues to bear the scars of the past two years. The country's most vulnerable have only been pushed further into the margins, losing their livelihoods and incomes. Inequality has skyrocketed, undermining opportunities for social mobility and deepening the chasm between the haves and have-nots. The healthcare system and workforce were strained to their limits at the height of Covid-19 infections. And movement restrictions to curb infections have engendered a slew of issues, including crippling trade and tourism, and establishing major social challenges related to education, welfare and poverty.

Indeed, there has been no crisis quite as widespread and damaging as Covid-19 has been. Its consequences will persist in our political, economic and social fabric, even as the world moves towards some semblance of normalcy. Amid this backdrop of change, Malaysia has also seen immense political transformation.

It is precisely at this juncture that it is imperative for us to take stock of the damage caused by the crisis in Malaysia. The crisis taught us various lessons. The most crucial being that ultimately, effective policy must be the backbone of any effort at mitigating the worst of the pandemic's impacts and facilitating a sustainable recovery. That approach needs to be implemented with agile governance in mind – keeping pace with the rapid changes the pandemic brings and propelled using emerging technologies. This will need to involve a human-centred, sustainable and inclusive approach in collaboration with a wider range of stakeholders for effective policymaking. To this end, ISIS Malaysia has embarked on a publication to analyse the manifold impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, holding a lens to Malaysia's journey throughout the crisis to distil key policy lessons.

I am pleased to introduce here a collection of analytical articles written by researchers at ISIS Malaysia that aim to cover a range of the most pressing and also the most overlooked impacts of the crisis from a multidisciplinary approach. We begin by considering general policy lessons for policymakers to chart in future crises and the devastating economic damage the pandemic has wreaked on growth and development. We also deliberate what this means for the future of education in Malaysia, for issues related to mental health, and for women.

What sets the Covid-19 crisis apart from previous crises is the role of technology in governing lives, so we consider these intersections with technology to provide insights into how to navigate the digital economy as well as build a robust information ecosystem. Finally, we critically reflect on Malaysia's Covid-19 experience with regard to prominent concerns on sustainability and the climate, security and international relations with counterparts in the Asia region.

It goes without saying that the Covid-19 pandemic has affected our lives in more ways than one – and ISIS Malaysia's *Pandemic Papers: Lessons from Covid-19* aims to capture that multifaceted impact. Even two years in, the circumstances surrounding the pandemic continue to change rapidly with new policy challenges looming over the horizon. As uncertainties mount, there is little space for policymakers to remain complacent – but it is our hope that we can learn from the past to inform our future.

Herizal Hazri
Chief Executive

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 Pemulih 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.

CRISIS OF INEQUALITY: COVID-19'S LONG-LASTING ECONOMIC IMPACTS

CALVIN CHENG

Introduction: Malaysia after the pandemic

The Covid-19 crisis has been the single largest economic disruption in modern Malaysian history. Since the first case was discovered in January 2020, the country has endured at least four major waves of infections and recurrent impositions of strict measures to contain it (Figure 1). These containment measures – coupled with the collapse of international tourism – have mounted intense pressure on the Malaysian economy, households and workers. Despite the scale and scope of the government's economic stimulus packages, these have remained insufficient to safeguard the most vulnerable groups from the ravages of the pandemic. The result has been devastating, with extensive shocks to economic growth and labour markets, and a surge in poverty and inequality among households.

Covid-19's impacts will be long lasting too. More than two years since its onset, we are only now beginning to grasp the extent and persistence of the pandemic's decimation. As data from the past two years are scrutinised, and newer data points become available – the picture that is emerging is dire. Covid-19 has catalysed a self-reinforcing vicious cycle of inequality that will continue to loom large, long after a macroeconomic recovery is achieved. It is the pandemic's lasting imprints on inequality that will form a crucial policy and developmental challenge for Malaysia in the coming decade.

FIGURE 1. Malaysia's Covid-19 containment policies have been relatively stringent
OxCGRT stringency index (0 = least stringent, 100 = most stringent)
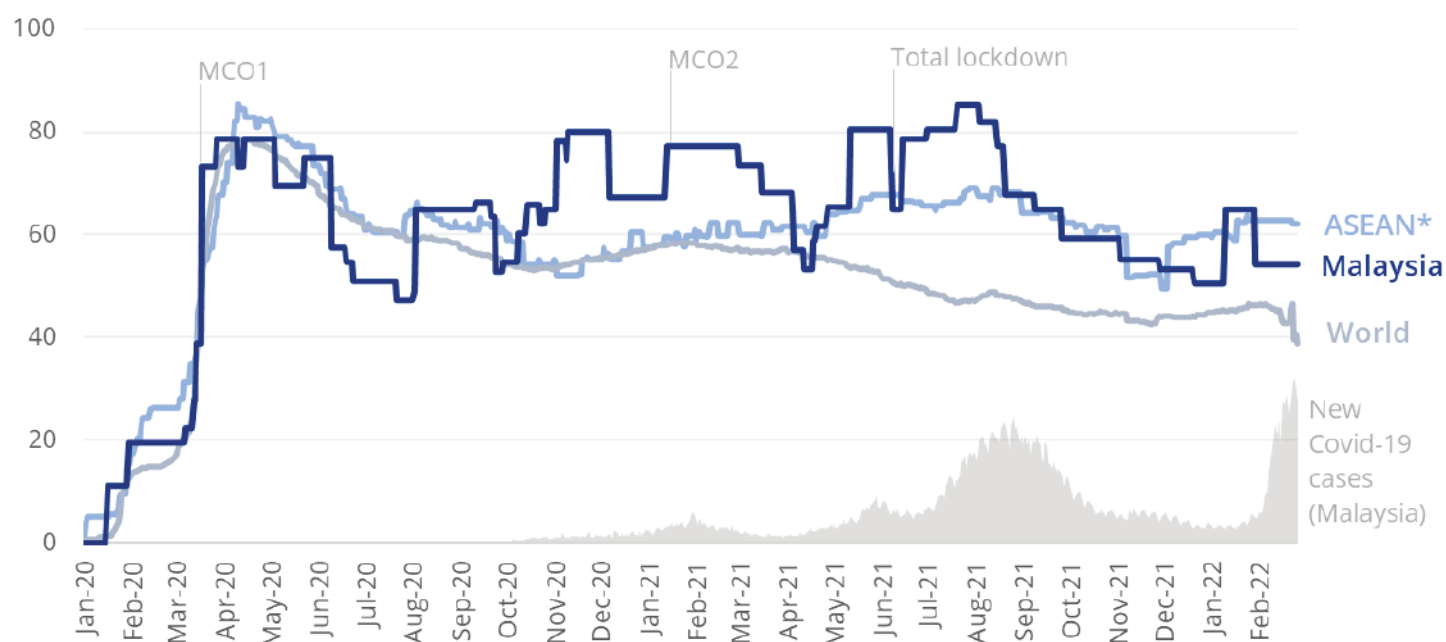
Source: OxCGRT, Our World in Data
Note: Asean = average of major Asean countries, excluding Malaysia (Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines and Vietnam); MCO = movement-control order; World = simple average of all countries with available data in the OxCGRT dataset

Economic impacts of the Covid-19 crisis

Economic growth and macro-developmental impacts

The Covid-19 crisis caused the largest negative growth shock on record since the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and the second largest since Malaysia's independence in 1957.[1] In 2020, Malaysia's GDP contracted by 5.6% compared with the preceding year, driven primarily by steep declines in investment (fixed capital formation) and real exports (see Figure 2) and weighed down by an unprecedented decline (-48% year-on-year) in services exports as international tourist arrivals ceased (Figure 3). The economic and health impacts of the virus continued to dampen the pace of economic recovery well into 2021. The emergence of the Delta variant and the ensuing imposition of lockdowns depressed private consumption growth and investment (Figure 2), even as goods exports continued to recover. In general, Malaysia's economic recovery from the Covid-19 crisis has been slower than both the global financial crisis and the Asian financial crisis – pointing to the uniquely damaging and persistent impacts of the pandemic (Figure 4).

The negative growth impacts from the Covid-19 crisis have also delayed Malaysia's progress towards becoming a high-income economy. Pre-Covid economic projections suggested that Malaysia was on track to surpass the World Bank's high-income nation threshold[2] by 2022 (Figure 5).[3] However, new post-Covid-19 baseline projections indicate that the growth impacts of the pandemic have delayed these projections by about three years.[4] Going forward, a weaker ringgit relative to the US dollar as global interest rates rise may further delay Malaysia's aspirations of becoming a high-income nation.

FIGURE 2. Malaysia's GDP has been heavily affected by the Covid-19 pandemic

Real GDP (% change from a preceding year)
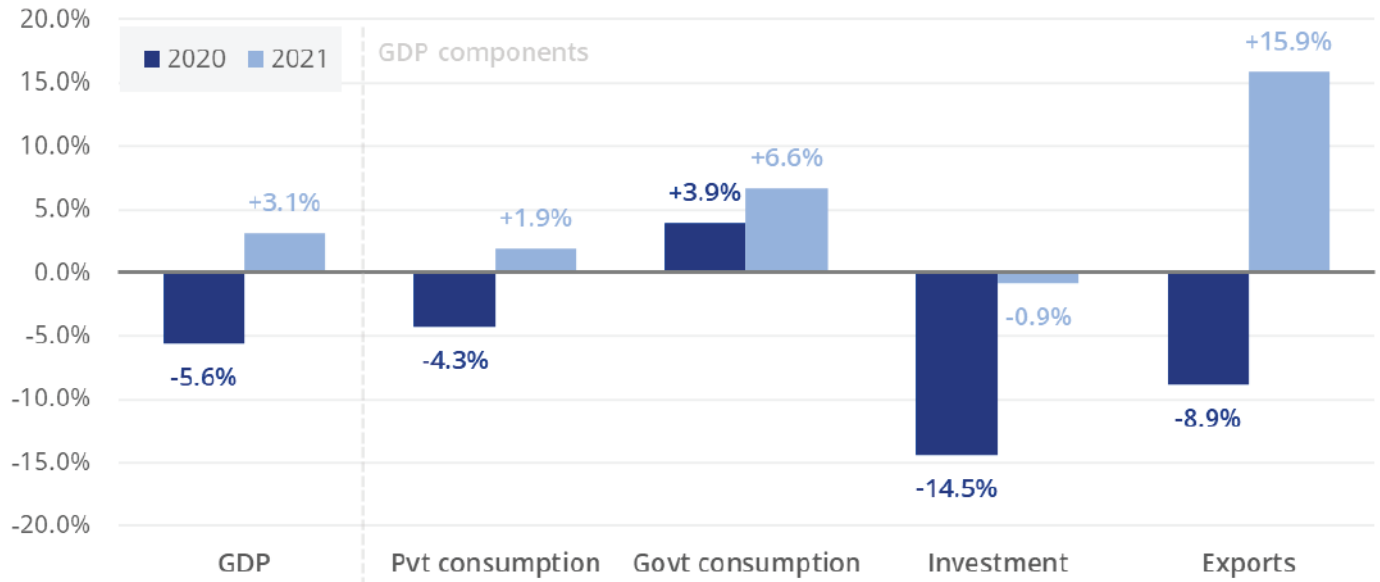
Source: DOSM, author's estimates
Note: Exports include real exports of both goods and services

FIGURE 3. Real services exports fell sharply over the past two years

Real exports (% change from preceding year)
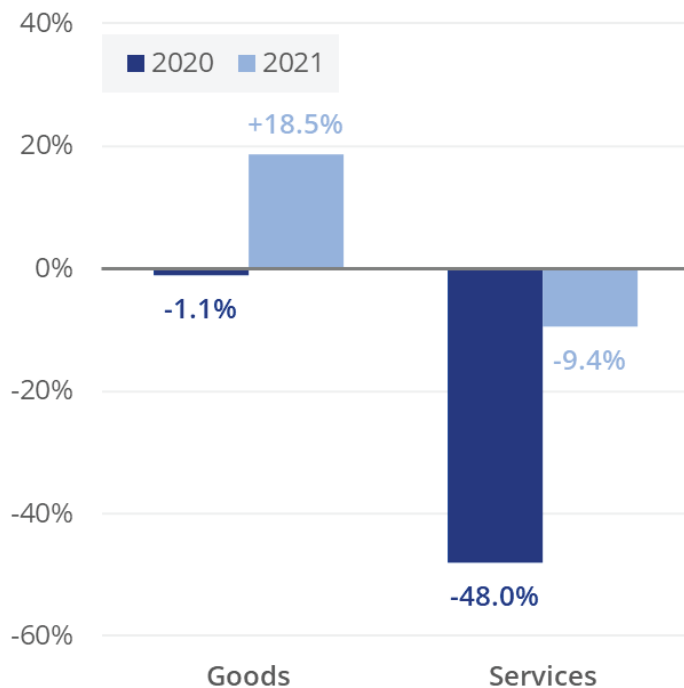
Source: DOSM

FIGURE 4. The economic recovery from Covid-19 has been slower than in previous crises

Real GDP (% change from pre-crisis level (-1))
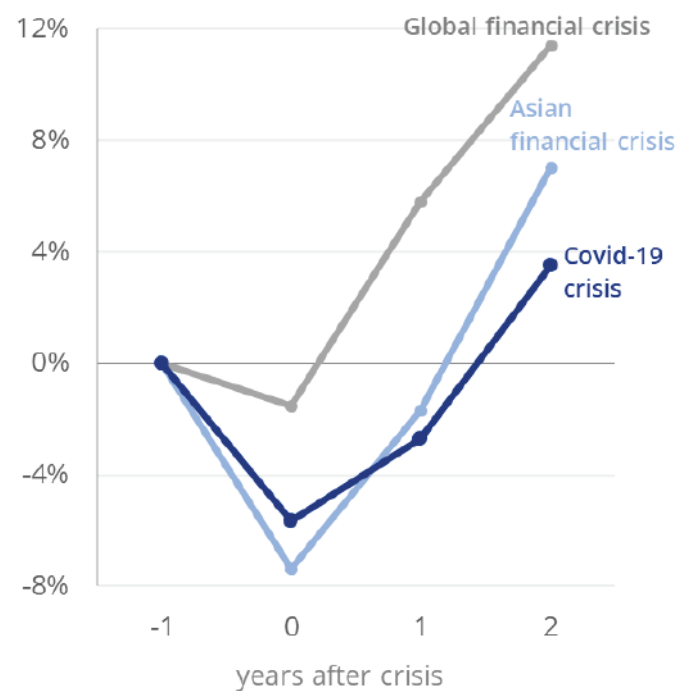
Source: DOSM, author's estimates
Note: 0 = crisis year

FIGURE 5. Covid-19 sets back Malaysia's high-income aspirations by more than 3 years
Gross national income (GNI) per capita (current US$, Atlas method)
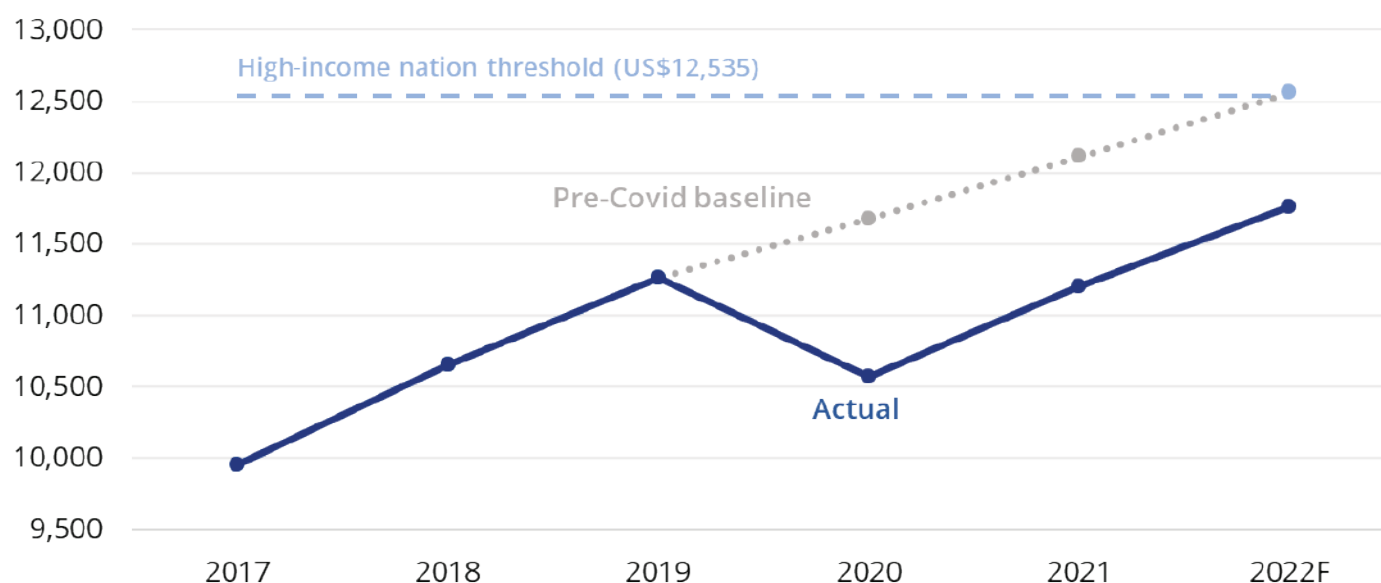
Source: World Bank, DOSM, author's estimates
Note: World Bank's 2021–2022 high-income threshold = GNI per capita of US$12,535

Jobs, workers and labour market

The growth impacts of the pandemic have also devastated Malaysian workers. Throughout the past two years, the intermittent resurgence of Covid-19 cases and the imposition of containment measures (Figure 1) precipitated the largest disruption to Malaysia's labour markets on record. About two months after movement restrictions were imposed in March 2020, the national unemployment rate peaked at 5.3% in May 2020 – the highest level in more than four decades (Figure 6). Throughout 2020, the average unemployment was 4.5% – far greater than the annual average during the height of the global financial crisis (3.2%) and Asian financial crisis (3.7%).

Beyond the aggregates, the impacts of Covid-19 on the labour market have been vastly unequal across different worker groups.

Overwhelmingly, vulnerable workers, who were already contending with pre-pandemic inequalities, were disproportionately devastated by the pandemic. Our research over the past two years has highlighted vulnerabilities across three main dimensions: age, gender and education. Over the last two years, groups at the intersection of these vulnerabilities, such as younger workers, women and lesser-educated workers in lower-wage jobs, were the hardest hit.[5]

In 2020, workers under 35 – particularly women – and those without a tertiary education faced employment losses up to 18 times higher than the average worker (Figure 7). These employment losses were coupled with labour force exits that were especially large for women – hinting at the role of pre-pandemic inequalities in unpaid care work.[6] Women and young workers able to remain in the labour force and escape employment losses still had to contend with exponentially higher rates of underemployment[7] compared to the average worker.[8]

Moving into 2021, the partial labour market recovery that followed has been similarly uneven. Certain vulnerable workers have continued to be left out of the recovery, while there are signs that many more moved into less desirable forms of employment. The latest data for the fourth quarter of 2021 indicate that the employment ratios[9] for women

below 25 years of age, men aged 25–34 and lesser-educated workers have deteriorated below pre-pandemic levels (Figure 8). While there have been encouraging signs of a recovery in employment-to-population ratios for women in the 25–34 age group in Q4 of 2021 (Figure 8), this coincided with higher rates of part-time work and underemployment for women in the same quarter. In fact, the underemployment gap between men and women has continued to diverge in recent quarters with more women moving into underemployment (Figure 9).

FIGURE 6. Malaysia's national unemployment rate remains at multi-decade highs
Unemployment rate (%)
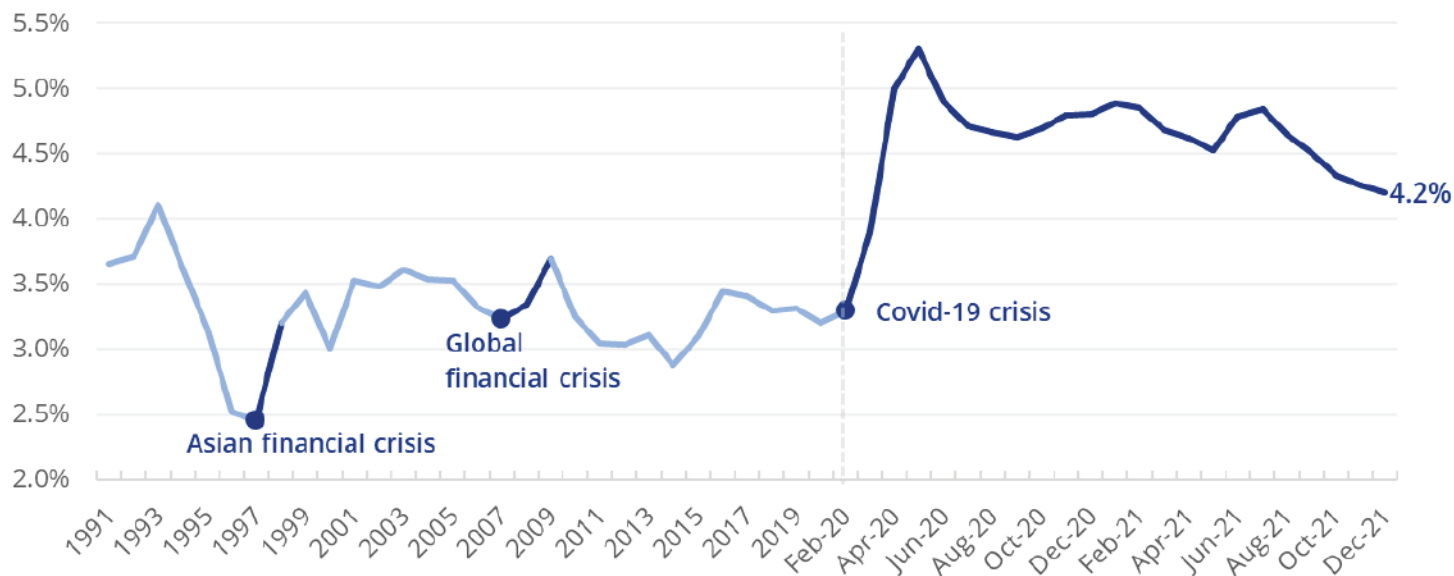
Source: DOSM
Note: Annual data until 2019; monthly data from 2020 onwards

FIGURE 7. The unequal labour market impacts of Covid-19
Labour market outcomes (2020 vs 2019, % change)
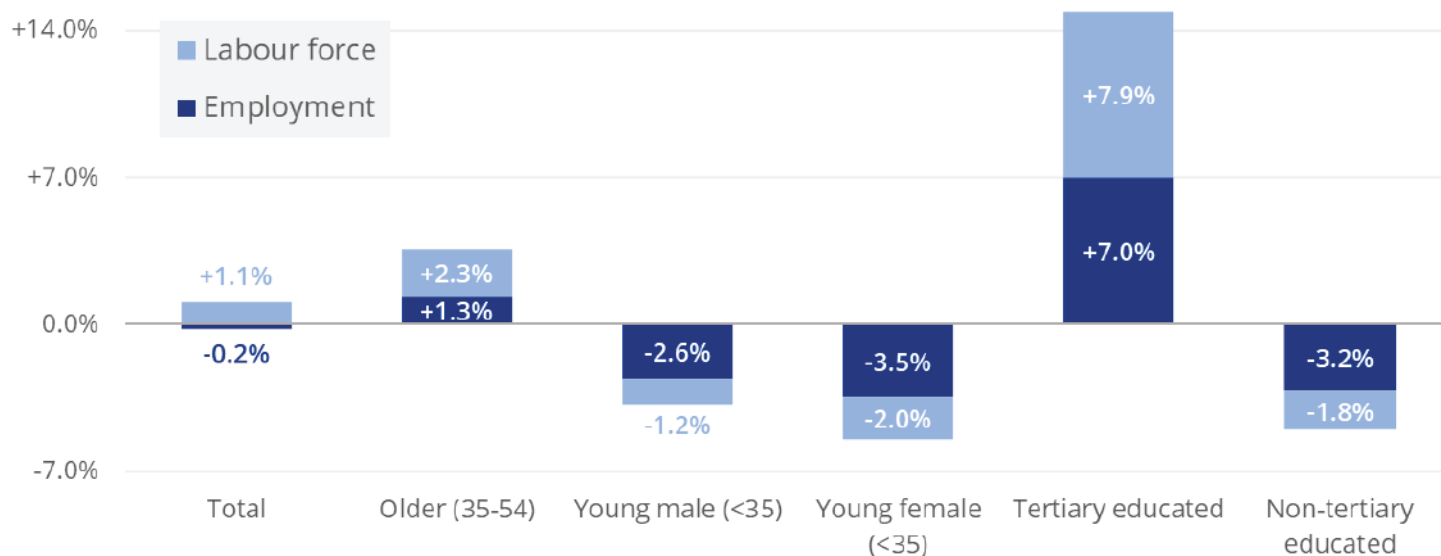
Source: DOSM, author's estimates

FIGURE 8. Some groups have been left out of the recovery

Employment-to-population ratio (percentage point (pp) difference from pre-pandemic baseline)
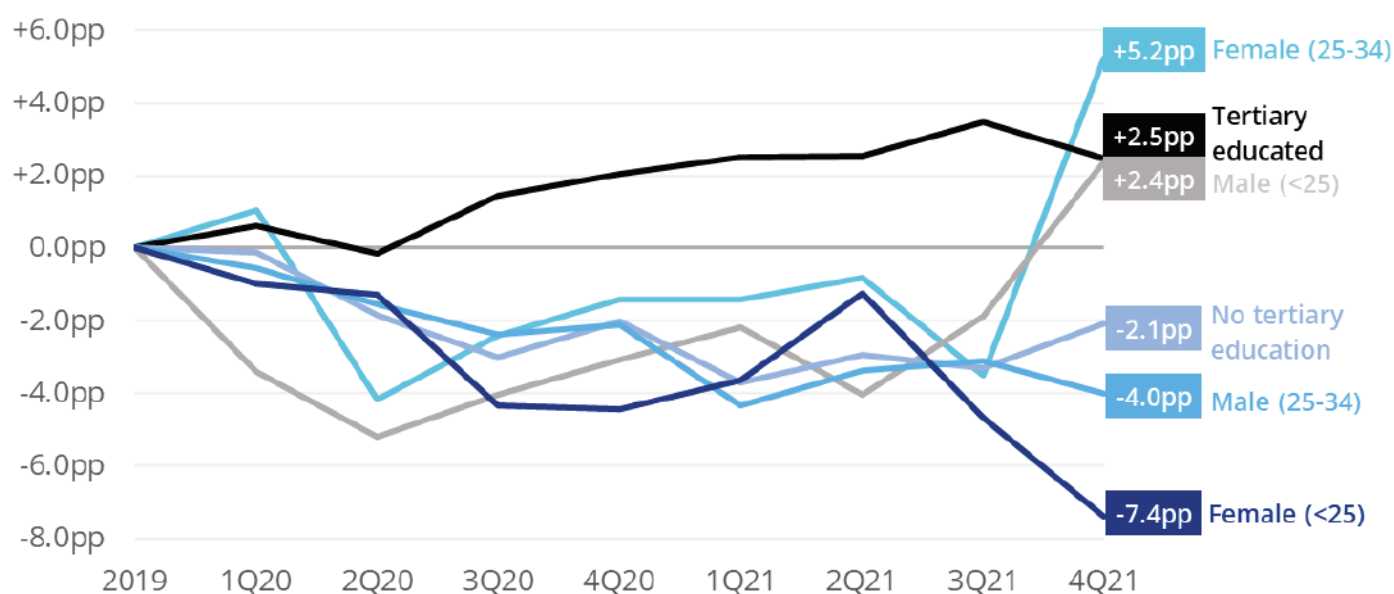
Source: DOSM, author's estimates
Note: 0 pp change = equal to 2019 pre-pandemic baseline

FIGURE 9. Growing underemployment gaps between women and men

Overall underemployment rate (percentage of employed workers by gender)
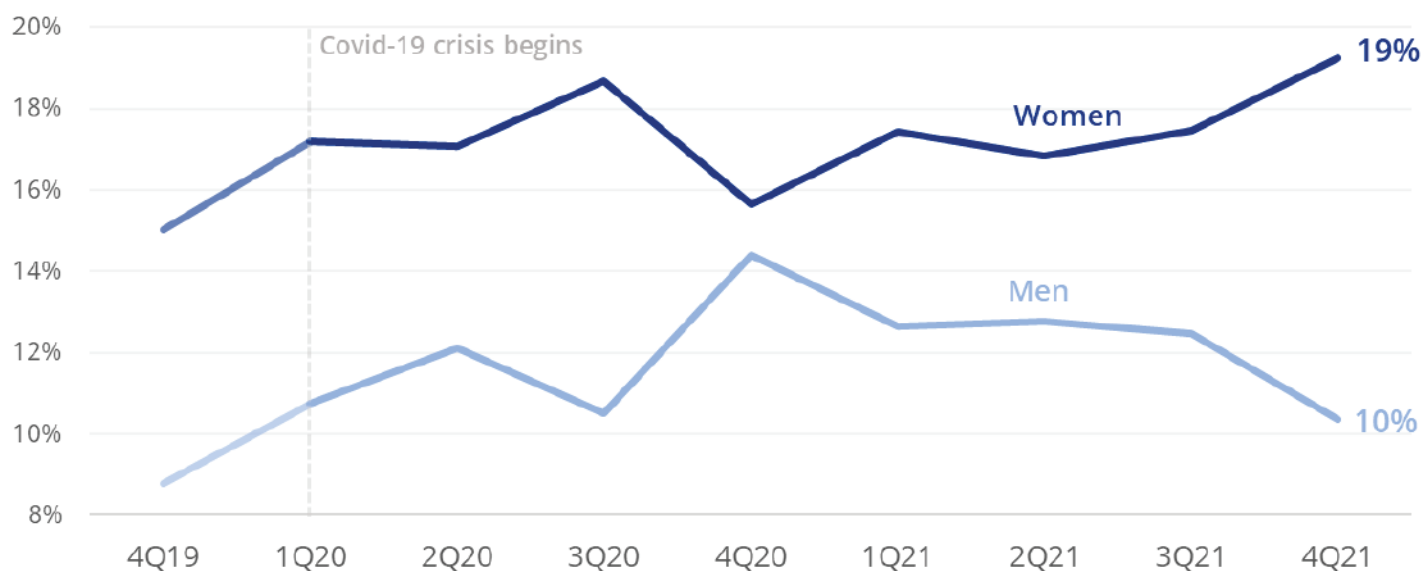
Source: DOSM, author's estimates
Note: Overall underemployment is the sum of skill-related and time-related underemployment

Poverty, inequality and the fate of families

Malaysia has become both poorer and more unequal over the last two years. Inadequate social protection for the most vulnerable meant that the employment impacts of the Covid-19 crisis have had enormous effects on household incomes. In 2020, the median monthly household income fell by a whopping 11.3% compared with a year ago. Moreover, because lower-wage workers were disproportionately affected by the unequal labour market impacts of the crisis, poorer households have experienced the greatest declines in their household incomes.

This led to a jarring increase in absolute poverty. More than 234,000 Malaysian households fell below the national poverty line in 2020, with the absolute poverty rate climbing from 5.6% in 2019 to 8.4% in 2020 – reversing progress in poverty reduction by more than four years (Figure 10).[10]

Yet, the poverty impacts were unequal. Across the country, lesser-developed states endured greater increases in poverty compared with higher-income states (Figure 11). Absolute poverty rates in Kelantan and Perlis surged by 8.8 and 6.0 percentage points respectively – while more affluent regions like Kuala Lumpur and Selangor saw only minimal rises in poverty (Figure 12). As of 2020, about one in four households in Sabah and one in five households in Kelantan live under the national poverty line.

The stratification of these poverty impacts has widened the already yawning divide between lesser-developed and affluent states throughout Malaysia – as well as between households.

The share of income held by the top 20% of households (T20) has grown since the start of the pandemic while the share of income held by middle 40% and bottom 40% shrank (Figure 13). Likewise, latest data on Malaysia's Gini coefficient indicates that Covid-19 has accelerated the rise in inequality since 2016 – with the Gini coefficient rising to 0.411 in 2020 (Figure 14). This puts Malaysia's income inequality now roughly on par with unequal nations like the United States and the Philippines.

Inequality is self-reinforcing and multi-dimensional in nature. This rise in poverty and inequality further interacts with Covid-19's impacts on learning and the digital divide – creating knock-on effects on the human capital development and social mobility of children in lower-income families across the nation. It is the coalescence of these inequalities that will be both a defining characteristic and a legacy of Malaysia's experience with the Covid-19 crisis. Going forward, a failure to reckon with these deep-seated structural inequities will, in the long term, undermine Malaysia's social cohesion, socio-political stability and democratic participation.[11]

FIGURE 10. Covid-19 has increased poverty
Absolute poverty incidence, 2020 (%)
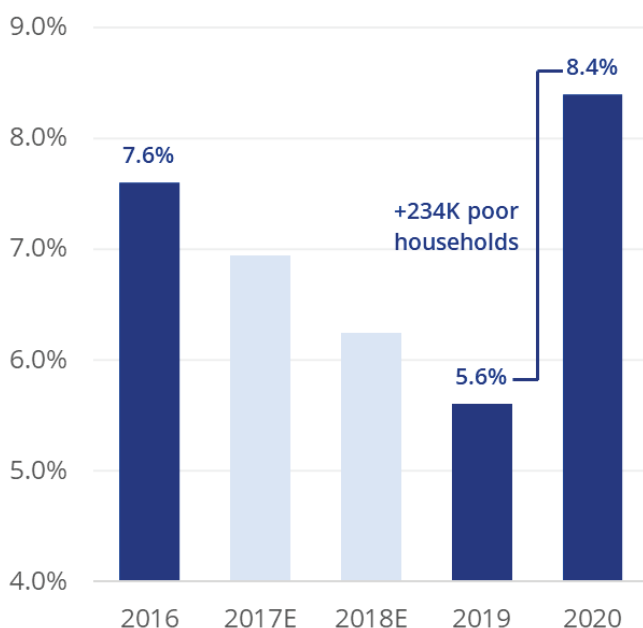
Source: DOSM, author's estimates
Note: No data for 2017 and 2018; based on national PLI

FIGURE 11. Poorer states were hit harder
Change in state poverty rates vs state-level per capita household incomes (2020 vs 2019)
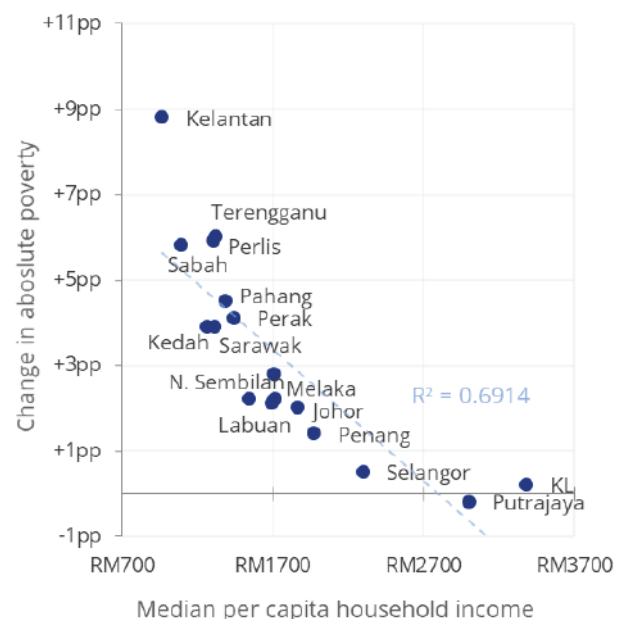
Source: DOSM, author's estimates
Note: Based on national PLI

FIGURE 12. Widening economic disparities between states and regions
Absolute poverty incidence (percent of households, by state)
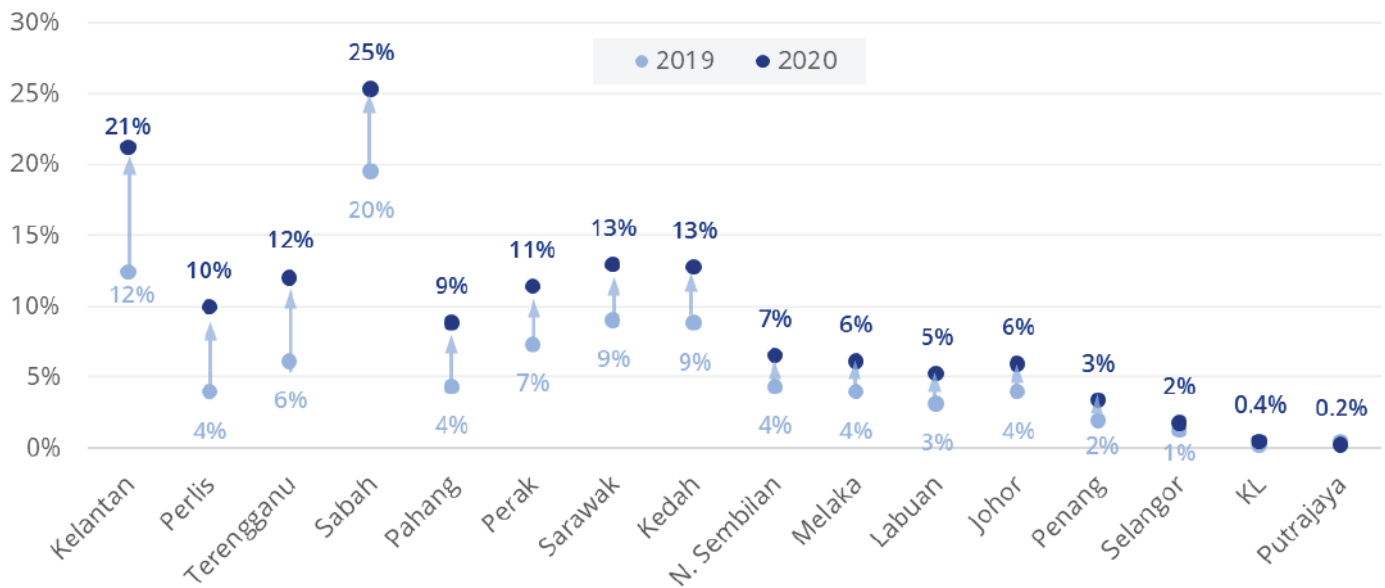
Source: DOSM, author's estimates
Note: 0 pp change = no change from pre-pandemic baseline

FIGURE 13. Income shares for top 20% have grown
Change in household income share, 2020 vs 2019
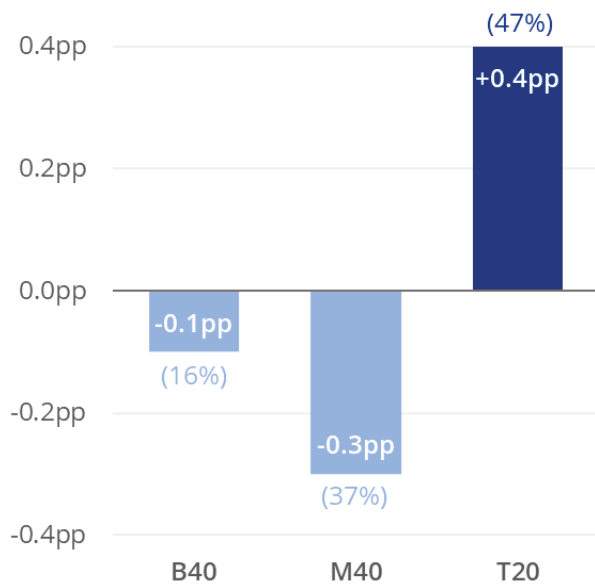
Source: DOSM, author's estimates

FIGURE 14. Income inequality rose
Gini coefficient (0 = most equal, 1 = most unequal)
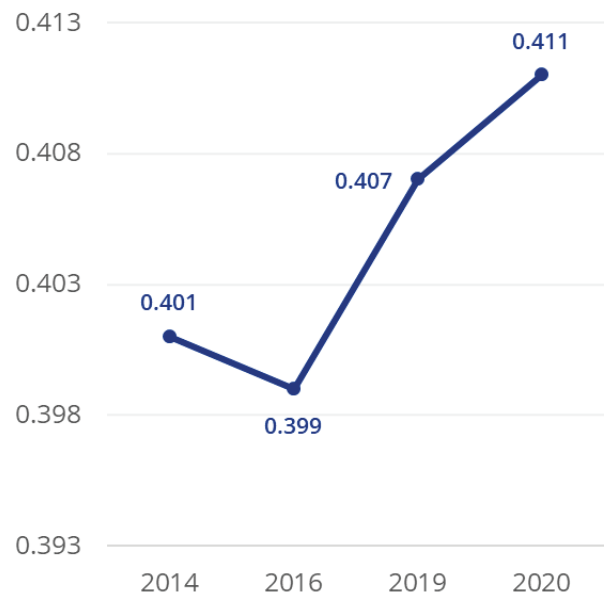
Source: DOSM

Economic responses to Covid-19 and shortfalls

The Malaysian economic response to the Covid-19 crisis has been unprecedented in scale and scope. Since the start of the pandemic, the government unveiled eight stimulus packages, totalling about RM530 billion or about 37.5% of GDP (Figure 15). This is about four times larger than the economic response during the 2009 global financial crisis.[12] The eight stimulus packages comprise numerous assistance measures for businesses, workers and households – focusing on five key areas: loan moratoriums, business loans, pension-related measures, wage and employment subsidies, and cash assistance.[13]

But these efforts still failed to mitigate the wide-ranging socioeconomic ravages of Covid-19. This is especially so considering the severity of Covid-19 infections and the stringency of the containment measures (Figure 1). We highlight three main limitations of Malaysia's Covid-19 economic response: size, timeliness and coverage.

Size: The RM530 billion stimulus amount is artificially inflated by the inclusion of non-fiscal and quasi-fiscal measures like loan moratoriums and Employees Provident Fund (EPF) withdrawals. Data suggest that only about RM83 billion of the RM530 billion involved any federal government spending (Figure 15).[14] Focusing solely on fiscal measures, our back-of-the-envelope estimates[15] indicate that Malaysia's fiscal response is in fact among the smallest in Asean.[16] Greater use of fiscal stimulus in the early stages of the pandemic would have diminished the long-term "scarring" impacts of the crisis[17] and helped to realise a more inclusive recovery.[18]

Timeliness: Malaysia's Covid-19 economic response over the last two years was driven by discretionary fiscal policy decided on an as-needed basis. Consequently, there were often significant time lags between the deterioration of economic activity and when policy action was taken. For instance, in May 2021, policymakers imposed a nationwide "total lockdown". Yet, new stimulus measures were only announced at the end of June, and it took another two months before lower-income households received their Bantuan Khas payments. Throughout the pandemic, this piecemeal approach to fiscal policy and policy lags have continually exacerbated the long-term socioeconomic impacts of Covid-19.

Coverage: Worker groups like non-standard, self-employed and/or informal sector workers were not covered by existing pre-pandemic Employment Insurance Scheme (EIS) contributory benefits – nor were they sufficiently covered by the new stimulus measures (e.g. employment retention programme and wage subsidy programme) enacted as part of the Prihatin stimulus package. Overall, there has been little effort to extend comprehensive labour market protections to non-standard workers. This has led to greater employment and income shocks for the most vulnerable worker groups. In contrast, the CARES Act in the United States and the United Kingdom's Self Employment Income Support Scheme extended publicly funded benefits to the self-employed.[19]

FIGURE 15. Covid-19 stimulus packages tend to focus on non-fiscal measures
Economic stimulus packages 2020–2021 (RM billions)
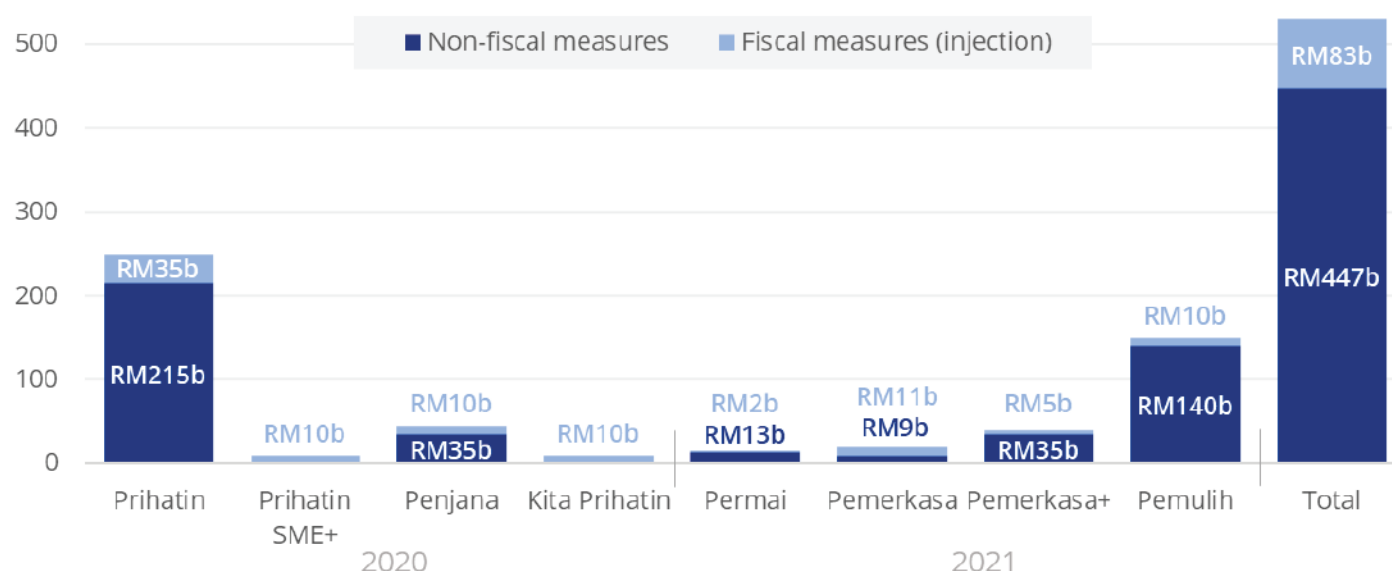
Source: DOSM, author's estimates
Note: Non-fiscal includes quasi-fiscal measures; Prihatin includes the economic stimulus measures announced in February 2020

Policies for future crises

Considering the wide-ranging and unequal impacts of the Covid-19 crisis across workers and families, policy action should now be centred on two objectives: building crisis resilience and broadening protection; and reducing inequality and equalising outcomes.

Building crisis resilience and social protection

Policymakers should work to build resilience now to prepare Malaysia to weather the uncertainties that any future crisis brings. This can be achieved through broadening existing protections, improving social assistance administration, and making our social protection more responsive to economic shocks.

- **Broaden protections:** Recent efforts (including the new temporary measures by Perkeso)[20] to extend protections to non-standard workers[21] are a good start. The next step would be to close the gaps in protection for non-standard work and move towards a comprehensive compulsory scheme for these workers.[22] The areas to consider are: (1) extending employment services and benefits[23] beyond injury protection to self-employed and non-standard workers;[24] (2) loosening eligibility criteria for the receipt of benefits/protection; and (3) moving from an insurance-based contributory system towards one with a greater mix of public funding. These efforts to extend coverage to non-standard workers could be coupled with a national social protection floor.[25] Protecting a broader subset of workers would promote more equitable outcomes as well as greater macroeconomic stabilisation during crises.
- **Improve social assistance administration:** Establishing a one-stop shop for social assistance and social protection programmes will make it easier for individuals to access the assistance. This would alleviate long-standing issues in Malaysia related to the fragmentation of social assistance while reducing information asymmetries and administrative burden related to application and eligibility testing. Similarly, there is also room to improve the targeting mechanisms of social programmes to reduce both design and targeting exclusion errors. These exclusion errors can be extensive, undermining programme impacts and wasting resources.[26]

- **Make social protection more responsive:** Legislating rules-based fiscal stimulus that allow specific emergency programmes to be triggered automatically during economic crises will reduce uncertainty, cushion shocks and reduce policy lags.[27] For example, the temporary cash transfers as part of the Bantuan Prihatin Nasional and Bantuan Khas Covid-19 could be legislated to kick in as soon as the national unemployment rate rises above a pre-specified threshold.[28] This can be completed with similar triggers for emergency employment programmes like those under Perkeso – including the wage subsidy, employment retention and the new EIS EMP+ programme.[29]

Reversing long-term inequality and increasing social mobility

The socioeconomic impacts of the Covid-19 crisis have been deeply unequal, creating long-term impacts on inequality and social mobility. Policymakers need to combat this shift towards greater inequality and make reducing the multi-dimensional aspects of inequality an explicit policy priority. In this section, we focus on the role of productive employment in reducing inequality.

- **Create more jobs:** This could include accelerating job growth through increasing government expenditure on enabling infrastructure; stimulating foreign and domestic investment; encouraging business formation through stronger safety nets;[30] and shortening work hours.[31] Faster job creation and higher aggregate demand will tighten labour markets and benefit youth, women and lesser-educated workers, whose employment is typically more cyclically sensitive.[32] Research suggests that a large part of rising inequality comes from higher youth unemployment. As such, maintaining aggregate demand at levels conducive to macroeconomic full employment will reduce inequality.[33]

- **Create better jobs:** Beyond job quantity, job quality matters too. Creating "better" jobs that offer security and "living" wages should be a key policy objective.[34] This would entail encouraging businesses to create "high-road" employment[35] through direct means (tax incentives, sectoral partnerships) and, more importantly, through indirect means (increasing labour standards and labour market institutions).[36] Policymakers should increase enforcement of labour regulations and strengthen collective-bargaining mechanisms to encourage firms to invest in innovation and worker training, and generate productive jobs – while improving the bargaining power of marginalised workers.[37]

- **Make opportunity accessible:** Creating more and better jobs should be coupled with supply-side efforts to allow more workers to access these opportunities. This should comprise removing barriers to work, as well as enhancing workforce skills development. Removing barriers would involve making it easier for groups like young women to enter productive work through enacting legal protections against discrimination and improving existing childcare systems.[38] On skills development, efforts should include increasing spending on publicly funded early childhood, primary and secondary education – along with improving non-degree vocational pathways to decent work.[39] These, together with expanding existing active labour market programmes to benefit a larger pool of non-contributor workers, would make opportunity more accessible to a wider subset of Malaysians.

These policy measures represent a stepping stone towards building greater crisis resilience and promoting equal opportunities. In the longer term, moving towards greater tax-related measures, including wealth and capital taxation – coupled with real efforts to harness innovation for local economic prosperity – will bring about a more equal, prosperous and productive future for Malaysia in the decades to come.

Long after a macroeconomic recovery is celebrated, Covid-19's imprints on poverty and inequality will persist. Even as GDP recovers to pre-pandemic levels and labour demand is restored, Malaysia will have yet to recover from Covid-19. Ultimately, a truly inclusive recovery should not be measured by GDP alone – it will require restoring the welfare and opportunities of Malaysian families and workers throughout the nation.

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Endnotes

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POORER PUPILS PAY PRICE OF PANDEMIC WITH E-LEARNING SHORTCOMINGS

SOFEA AZAHAR

The shutdown of schools because of the pandemic has disrupted education worldwide, affecting more than 1.7 billion children, youth and their families.[1] Worse, at least 463 million pupils and university learners around the world have abandoned their learning or gone "off the grid", becoming completely uncontactable – likely due to a range of compounding factors, such as difficult socioeconomic conditions and geographical and physical inaccessibility.[2]

Malaysia's students have not been spared and the learning crisis that was already in place before the pandemic has been exacerbated. Some of the reasons for this include the digital divide, reduced effectiveness of interaction between teachers and students, and limited parental support. At the same time, educators also experienced difficulties adapting to new pedagogies brought upon by the shift to remote learning.

> **Despite the government's Covid-19 policy responses, there are growing concerns on widening educational inequality in the country that could lead to long-term repercussions in human capital development and economic growth.**

This article highlights how Covid-19 has impacted Malaysia's education and charts a course for the country to be more resilient in the future.

Impacts of Covid-19 on education

Pupils of different ages and income groups have experienced setbacks in learning due to lockdown measures and school closures. This was especially apparent for vulnerable families who have limited access to resources, causing them to face severe consequences in terms of educational access. Specifically, they suffered (1) learning losses, (2) digital learning disruption and (3) ineffective teaching quality and delivery.

Extensive learning losses

Pupils across the world have suffered profound learning losses because of school closures. International evidence reveals that these closures lead to poor educational performance. For instance, the share of pupils in Mexico unable to understand simple texts rose by 15 to 25 percentage points.[3] Moreover, in South Africa, weaker reading performance of grade 2 and grade 4 pupils indicated learning losses ranging between 57% and 81% of their schooling year.[4]

Malaysian pupils have suffered similar losses. Studies show that they lost between 5.4 and 11.4 months of schooling because of the crisis.[5] This makes Malaysia among the worst in the region in terms of time lost on learning (Figure 1). Engagements with parents revealed that school closures caused young children to be unable to grasp the basic 3Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic).[6]

FIGURE 1. Learning losses, by country in SEA
Number of months lost, based on 3 scenarios
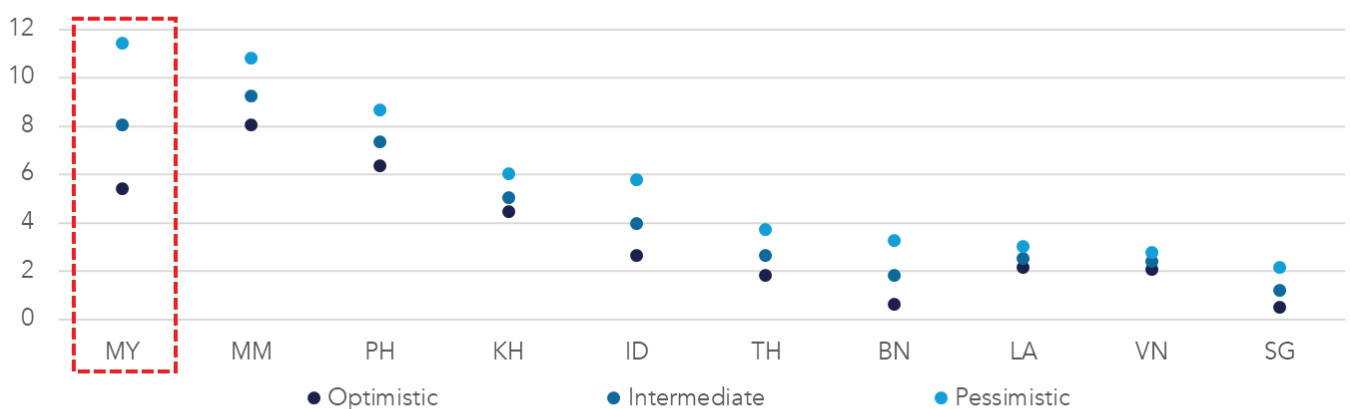
Source: ADB
Note: MY=Malaysia, MM=Myanmar, PH=Philippines, KH=Cambodia, ID=Indonesia, TH=Thailand, BN=Brunei, LA=Lao PDR, VN=Vietnam, SG=Singapore

There are numerous factors that have contributed to this issue, including difficulties for students in accessing stable internet and digital devices, ineffective interaction between pupils and teachers, fatigue from online learning, a lack of a conducive educational environment and poor economic conditions. As a result, some of these factors have led to an alarming total of 21,316 Malaysian pupils dropping out of school before completing their education between the period of March 2020 to July 2021.[7]

The learning gap and digital divide

Since the start of remote learning, there have been unequal impacts across pupils of different socioeconomic backgrounds and geographical locations in Malaysia.

Low-income households, residents of rural areas and the urban poor face learning difficulties because of limited access to online tools and infrastructure – compounded by their worsening socioeconomic circumstances.

This is a development that has been reproduced across many countries. In the United Kingdom for example, children in low-income households have spent much fewer hours on educational activities, such as online classes, private tutoring and other schoolwork, relative to better-off families.[8] In the United States, there was also a considerable disparity in access to computers among privileged and underprivileged 15-year-old students.[9]

In Malaysia, this gap in educational access has become more evident because of geographical location. For example, online learning was particularly challenging for pupils in Sabah due to poor internet coverage, which made online assessments or lectures difficult to follow.[10] This can be attributed to the stark difference in broadband penetration rates between Malaysia's regions. As of the third quarter of 2021, fixed-broadband penetration rate in cities like Kuala Lumpur stood at 57.4% while in lesser-developed states, such as Sabah, it was only about 20% (Figure 2).[11]

FIGURE 2. Fixed-broadband penetration rate
(%), by state
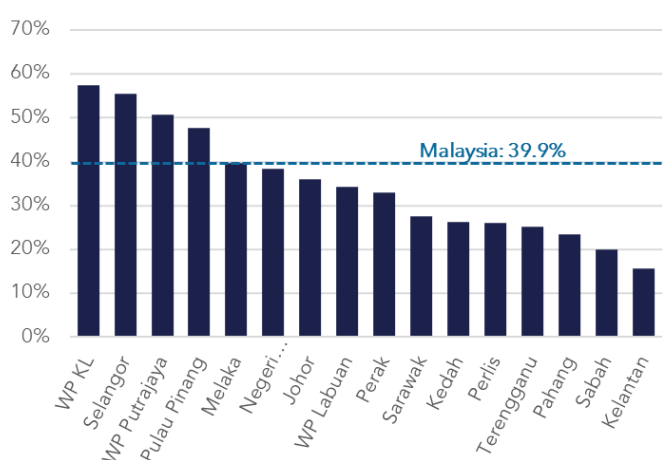
Source: MCMC

FIGURE 3. Share of household with computer access
(%), by state
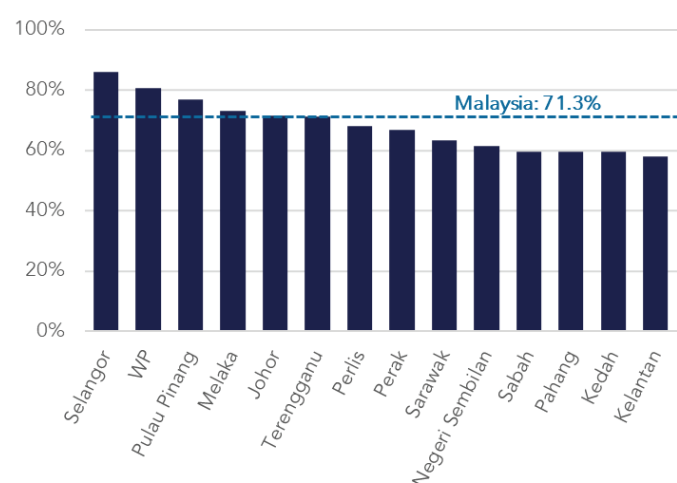
Source: MCMC

Besides poor internet connectivity, access to electronic devices has also been a major concern among students, particularly for those in rural areas (Figure 3).[12] A survey by the Ministry of Education (MoE) suggests that about 36.9% of students in Malaysia did not possess digital devices to support them in online learning. Notably, in Sabah, 52% reported not having access to any digital device, including smartphones.[13]

The implementation of remote learning has also revealed other pressing issues, such as the need for sufficient and suitable digital devices in a single household. Some pupils have had to share gadgets with their siblings or depend on their parents' mobile phones to keep up with school.[14] For parents who do not have the luxury of working from home, leaving children without a means to attend online classes is another further cause of learning disruption.[15]

Ineffective teaching and training

Another factor that has further widened educational inequality since the crisis was the quality of teaching. Although classes can still be conducted online during lockdowns, this might not be the case for all educational institutions, especially for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). While some educators may excel in remote teaching, more needs to be done to provide other educators with guidance.

Converting physical learning to e-learning can be difficult for certain programmes due to the infrequent use of distance learning before the crisis. For instance, TVET students who focus on hands-on training and practical skills require laboratory equipment to perform their tasks.[16] The specific needs of TVET students are unlike those enrolled in academic-based programmes, which are easier to teach online.[17]

Globally, the disruptions in TVET have been due to several issues, such as shortfalls in remote-learning platforms and internet infrastructure, a lack of skilled teaching staff, resistance to change, interruptions in apprenticeship programmes and limited finances.[18]

Similarly, in Malaysia, the proficiency of TVET instructors and educators in ICT has been one of the key issues affecting learning continuity during the MCO.[19] As most were used to conventional teaching methods particularly among older instructors with lower ICT skills,[20] their capabilities in integrating digital technologies into classrooms could be diminished. They also lacked awareness of how to utilise these technologies effectively, possibly due to insufficient training.[21]

Generally, a lack of training and preparation time has affected the quality of teaching in almost all education sectors. Studies show that the pandemic has led to increased hours, workload and expenses for the educators at higher learning institutions and schools. The demands of the remote learning system have increased the workload of educators, requiring them to undertake more tasks than they had before the pandemic, such as preparing online teaching materials, monitoring pupils' involvement in classes and learning how to integrate ICT into teaching. Limited support from parents with lower levels of education also added more teaching responsibilities for the educators.

As such, these conditions have contributed to stress, exhaustion, anxiety and other health issues among teachers, further impacting the quality of distance learning.

Long-term consequences of disruption to education

Education plays an important role in human capital development, so any form of disruption can severely affect the stock of knowledge and skills that people need to be more productive. Historically, across Asia, human capital has been an important driver of economic growth, capital accumulation and technological progress. This resonates with endogenous growth theory, which posits that economic growth is driven by internal forces, including human capital.

Research in OECD countries suggests that an extra year of education could lead to an increase in GDP per capita by 6%, in addition to further indirect positive impacts through creating a higher-skilled and more productive pool of labour.

Similarly for Malaysia, education is one of the key drivers of the country's short- and long-run economic growth. Previous findings have shown that greater investment in education and a highly educated labour force would strongly benefit Malaysia's economic development.

> **As such, pandemic-induced disruptions are likely to cause a substantial loss in human capital due to prolonged disconnection from education and training.**

Widening educational inequality would negatively impact the human capital accumulation needed to enhance national productivity and economic growth. In turn, income inequality would also worsen.

For instance, a loss of about one-third of schooling years as a result of the pandemic is projected to cost income losses of 3% for students in the United States as well as a loss in cognitive skills, equivalent of a 1.5% decline in GDP.[22]

In Malaysia, estimates show that shutdown of schools could cost the nation about RM80 billion annually.[23] This is through the potential decline in productivity following Covid-19 induced learning losses, which directly affects the quality of human capital (i.e. skills in the labour force). These learning losses also exacerbate income inequality, with disadvantaged pupils facing the greatest impacts. The same study shows that in terms of earnings, school closures will result in average income losses of between RM464.26 and RM1,121.95.[24] This shows how severe the impact would be for potential labour market entrants in the long run if structural issues that caused learning losses are not addressed promptly.

Call to action

Reopening of schools is about making up for the losses faced by pupils. But remote learning is likely to continue as we now need to live with the pandemic while adhering to standard operating procedures (SOP). This paper highlights three areas for policy action to narrow educational inequality and equip Malaysia for future crises.

1. **Enhance the quality of online teaching and educational platforms.** The government has launched several education-based channels, such as DidikTV, Kelas@Rumah and PerkasaKU to bridge the learning divide and support vulnerable pupils during the crisis. Yet, based on the feedback from parents and educators, there is a need to improve teachers' proficiency and programme content. For instance, several programmes were deemed "uninteresting, not holistic and untimely". The quality of delivery may also be affected by language proficiency of educators. As such, more academically qualified teachers should be provided with training on effective methods for online learning. Regular evaluation of the educational platforms can also weed out ineffective and questionable programmes.

    Training must go beyond the teachers involved in education-based channels. This can be in the form of training on the availability and use of digital resources for pedagogical practices and also on ways to create an enthusiastic and motivating environment for pupils.

2. **Address exclusion through tailored assistance for the vulnerable.** As remote learning continues, there is an urgent need to focus on the limiting exclusion. Pupils from vulnerable groups are disproportionately at risk of falling through the cracks, causing them to face severe learning losses. For instance, as mentioned earlier, limited access to adequate digital devices directly limits the learning time for each student at home. Therefore, more effort should be directed towards addressing this problem.

    More than 131,000 laptops were distributed to underprivileged pupils under the Tabung Cerdik initiative.[25] However, this amount still falls short of the Budget 2021 target of providing 150,000 laptops.[26] Furthermore, a survey conducted by the Education Ministry in 2020 showed that more than 300,000 pupils do not own electronic devices for e-learning.[27] This indicates that the issue of a lack of access to devices is worse than expected. As such, increasing the provision of internet-enabled digital devices distributed to students could help bridge this gap. Additionally, policymakers should also carefully consider the specific needs of each household when deciding the type and number of devices provided to each household.

Concurrently, for younger children, a safe digital environment is another crucial aspect for learning. While exposure to digital tools may promote cognitive benefits, children may be exposed to content risks as well. On this front, parents and teachers play essential roles in supervision and educating children to exercise their digital rights diligently.

3. **Establish a centralised digital TVET learning platform.** The national agenda to upgrade TVET to be on par with traditional academic pathways must be met with greater effort including measures towards converting practical training to virtual learning in a coordinated way. The establishment of the Digital TVET Learning Platform (DTLP) by Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia is a good start in ensuring learning continuity for TVET students. Next steps can include establishing the platform as a one-stop centre for TVET providers to gather knowledge and skills for digital teaching and learning. Effective engagement with and cooperation between industry players and relevant TVET bodies such as TVET providers, the National Digital TVET Innovation Centre (NDTIC) and the Malaysia Research Institute for Vocational Education & Training (MyRIVET), is necessary to develop course content and strengthen effective teaching and learning methods.

Additionally, the level of awareness on digital TVET is low among both TVET educators and pupils. An online survey shows TVET pupils' satisfaction towards distance learning stands only at a moderate level, particularly for those living in rural areas.[28] As such, there is a need to develop a TVET ecosystem with sufficient and relevant knowledge and skills to thrive in the future as mentioned above, while expediting the development of proper education infrastructure for TVET. When it comes to infrastructure, high development costs can be one of the main concerns in adopting frontier technologies, such as Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR), in TVET remote teaching. As such, public-private partnerships should be encouraged to share the cost burden.[29]

Conclusion

The pandemic has significantly undermined children's access to education. School closures have cost them months of learning, and has been exacerbated by poor socioeconomic conditions, remote locations, ineffective interaction with educators and the requirements of virtual learning. More needs to be done to serve the needs of the underprivileged who have endured more losses than their peers in higher socioeconomic status. Besides pupils, teachers have also been affected by the shift to remote learning due to the lack of training on new pedagogy to suit online teaching. These setbacks will inevitably widen educational inequality, which could lead to long-term ramifications for Malaysia's human capital development and economic growth. The inadequacies in existing policy measures call for a re-evaluation and reimagining of education to adapt to the reality that remote learning is here to stay, and that action must be taken in the event of future crises.

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ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES IN UNISON

PUTERI NOR ARIANE YASMIN

Two years into the Covid-19 pandemic, it is clear that uncertainties and major changes to our lives have had a considerable impact on our mental health – both for those with mental health issues and for those without.

For those with existing mental health problems and mental illness, the pandemic has been fraught with challenges. Triggers would have been exacerbated by isolation, fear and additional stress, while sedentary behaviour and low levels of physical activity would have made it difficult to be proactive and manage coping mechanisms.

For those who have never experienced mental health problems before, continuous movement-control order (MCO) restrictions have given a glimpse of what those with mental health problems experience, often on a daily basis. Perhaps we no longer take stress, depression or anxiety lightly. Perhaps we are more mindful of the need to look after our mental health. In this sense, the pandemic has brought lessons and silver linings for the mental health community and beyond.

The pandemic has, to a certain extent, thrusted mental health problems out into the open. While this may seem bleak for a post-Covid-19 Malaysia, there are ways to address and manage mental health appropriately in our country. Most importantly, mental health problems can be addressed by all of us – those in positions of leadership and authority, as well as the wider community.

The path forward is not linear, nor is it constrained or limited to the government or mental health professionals alone. We are all stakeholders in mental health.

The challenges arising from the pandemic

Prior to Covid-19, mental health was at the forefront of policy debates in Malaysia with statistics indicating that one in three Malaysian adults struggle with mental health issues.[1] The 2017 National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) reported that 29% of Malaysians have depression and anxiety disorder compared to 12% in 2011.[2] The survey also reported that suicidal thoughts among teenagers aged 13 to 17 have increased from 7.9% in 2012 to 10% in 2017. The 2019 NHMS reported that 500,000 adults suffer from depression while 424,000 children in Malaysia suffer from mental health problems.[3]

Resources

Pre-existing challenges in mental health have been more pronounced in the pandemic. The lack of resources – from funding to manpower – have been apparent. In its budget for 2021, the government announced RM24 million for mental health, prevention of physical abuse and substance abuse under the Covid-19 fund, and RM313 million for psychiatry and mental health under the national health budget.

While the allocation should be applauded, RM313 million for mental health under the national health budget was only an increase of 0.13% – from 1% of the national health budget prior to the pandemic to 1.13% during the pandemic.[4] Some have also pointed to the decrease in funding for psychiatry and mental health, from RM344 million in 2020 to RM313 million in 2021.[5]

The allocation for mental health in 2022, at RM70 million, provided a better means for addressing the gap in resources. Malaysia's psychiatrist to population ratio is currently one tenth of the World Health Organisation's (WHO) ideal recommendation of one to every 10,000 of the population for countries to aim for.[6] Unlike the 2021 budget, the 2022 budget focuses more on advocacy, public awareness campaigns and funding towards mental health initiatives, which empowers non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to help drive mental health programmes in the country. The inclusion of NGOs into the budget underlines the need to have more counsellors and psychologists, better training of psychiatric nurses and social welfare officers, and better distribution of mental health specialists throughout the country.

Access to help

There has also been debate as to whether the pandemic has narrowed the awareness gap on mental health. This author is of the view that the gap has narrowed, albeit not quite enough. This is particularly apparent in the rural areas and among those at the lower end of the income bracket. The assumption is that these groups are simply preoccupied with surviving the pandemic. Bread and butter issues such as employment take centre stage.

This is not to dismiss the fact that 8.8% of the rural population and 9.2% of the B40 income group experience mental health problems.[7] For these groups, stress and anxiety are mostly related to the uncertainties of livelihoods, particularly with regards to those who are living hand to mouth.

These uncertainties can be generally split into the immediate, such as maintaining food and housing without earning, and the aspirational, such as the need to forego education to work in low prospect jobs to support their families. These analyses indicate that mental health is not yet seen as a bread and butter issue in the rural areas and among B40 households.

Moreover, stigma and prejudice remain as barriers that discourage help-seeking behaviour. This is also made worse by low mental health literacy, the lack of awareness on (and also access to) resources and the lack of data available across stakeholders. Instead, there has not been enough prevention and intervention programmes, and we do not have a clear depiction of the extent of mental health challenges in the country.

In terms of access to services specifically, mental health remains a costly service that lacks adequate insurance coverage.

The 2022 budget has acknowledged this by expanding tax relief for individual incomes to include expenses towards psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and counsellors.

Face-to-face intervention has also not been available given social distancing measures. While remote health, online sessions and tools present new options, the level of care is ultimately different to that given in-person (particularly for those who are newly experiencing mental health problems).

The impact of these challenges on accessibility to mental health services peaked in July 2021 with a rise in suicides and calls to helplines.[8] The spike in the number of suicides and the public means by which some of these were completed have shown that the approach of penalising those who attempt does not prevent people from attempting and, in some cases, succeeding in the act. Suicide attempts are a cry for help, and those who do so may need psychiatric help or psychosocial support. 90% of people who have died by suicide suffered from mental disorders.[9] In essence, we must increase the supply of psychosocial support in communities, given the rise in demand amid exhausted helplines and uncertainties as we learn to live with the coronavirus.

Collaboration as a way forward

Given these challenges, the Green Ribbon Group (GRG) is collaborating with the oldest mental health NGO in Malaysia, the Malaysian Mental Health Association (MMHA), on initiatives to strengthen community support. In 2021, GRG funded:

- 100 individuals over 10 cohorts to undertake Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training from July to October, which equips participants with skills to identify and respond to signs of mental illness and substance use.
- 250 individuals over 25 sessions of A Conversation on Suicide (ACS) from September to February 2022 – a suicide awareness and prevention training programme that was initially catered towards management associations of People's Housing Projects (Program Perumahan Rakyat, PPR) and Rukun Tetangga.
- 200 psychotherapy and counselling sessions from July to December for anyone in need with an unlimited quota per person. Unlike Talian Kasih or Befrienders, this was not a crisis helpline but one for therapy and/or counselling services. A few sessions were in-person therapy for those in distress.

Although small scale, these initiatives focused on some of the specific challenges mentioned above, namely the lack of effective prevention and intervention programmes, and the lack of resources and manpower. GRG aims to push for a community approach to mental health, based on the notion that as individuals, we ourselves are an untapped resource. In order to lighten the load or lift the burden off existing helplines and government agencies, the idea was to empower individuals to take charge and learn to support themselves and one another.

The collaboration is a merging of strengths – GRG as "aggregators" of the mental health community with advocacy being its forte, and MMHA as the implementing agency given its decades' worth of experience and professional talent pool. The collaboration has forged a new way forward in addressing mental health challenges today in Malaysia.

It has also resulted in a small data set that provides a snapshot of how Malaysians perceive mental health during the pandemic. The data shows that:

- There is more interest among females to be certified in MHFA, while there is more interest among men to learn about suicide prevention and awareness.[10]
- There is interest in mental health among the older generation given:
  - The higher accreditation rate for MHFA among those aged 26 and above.

- ○ 82% of participants being 26 and above in ACS, with 52% being 35 years old and above.[11]
  - ○ The oldest individual receiving psychotherapy being 57 years old, and the individual with the most number of calls being 41 years old.
- There is interest to learn about suicide prevention and awareness across multiple communities in Malaysia – Malay, Chinese and Indian. This indicates that initiatives should be conducted in multiple languages to cater for diverse communities.
- There is interest across the country on mental health, as only Perlis did not have any participants in both MHFA and ACS. While remote or online counselling may not be as effective as those done in person, prevention and intervention programmes can be conducted online to ensure a wider reach and to also save on resources.
- The public are receptive to receiving help if it is financially accessible and conducted in private.
- On average, individuals sought help 4.5 times per person. This indicates there is interest to get to the root cause of stressors, as opposed to merely calling at times of crisis.
- Females are more likely to seek help via psychotherapy and counselling.
- The majority of psychotherapy and counselling sessions were centred on anxiety-related issues, such as panic attacks and emotional distress.

FIGURE 1. Accreditation data for participants in Mental Health First Aid

ACCREDITATION DATA

74% passed

COHORTS 1–5
18–25 YEARS OLD

84% passed

COHORTS 6–10
26 YEARS OLD AND ABOVE
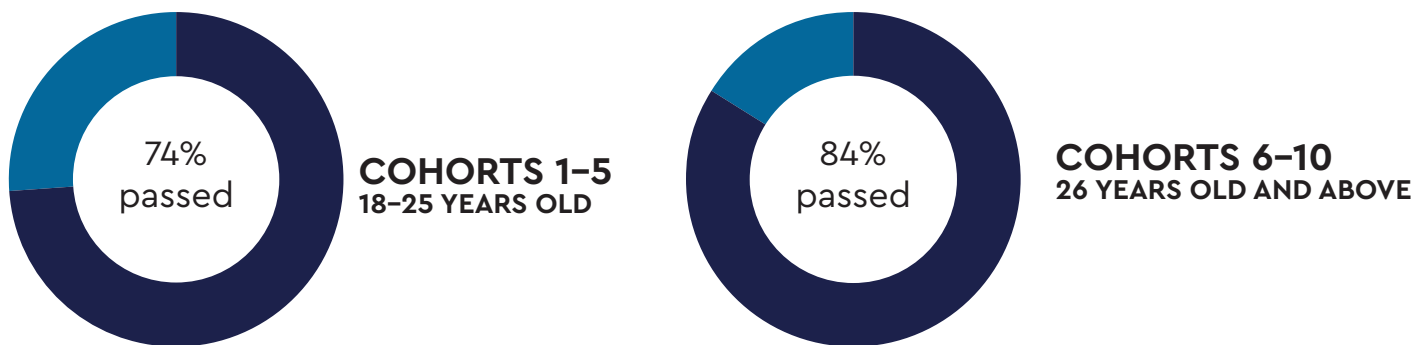
FIGURE 2. Gender of participants in Mental Health First Aid

GENDER

OUT OF 100 PARTICIPANTS

78 females

22 males

80% females

COHORTS 1–5
18–25 YEARS OLD

76% females

COHORTS 6–10
26 YEARS OLD AND ABOVE
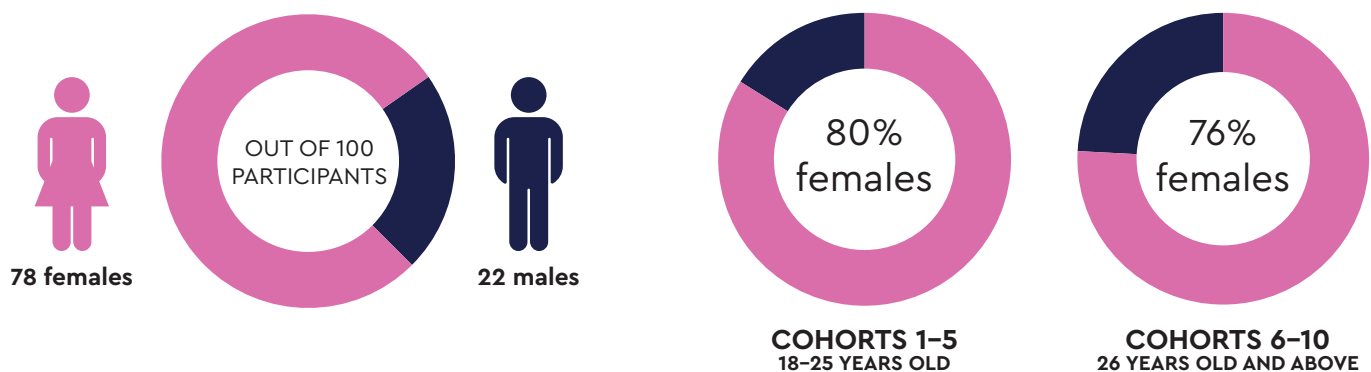
FIGURE 3. Locations of participants in Mental Health First Aid and A Conversation on Suicide

PARTICIPANTS' LOCATION

4% | 3%

3% | 3% 2%

4%

3% | 1%

3%

42% | 64%

7% | 2%

21% | 11%

4% | 1%

5% | 7%

4%

2% | 4%

MHFA | ACS
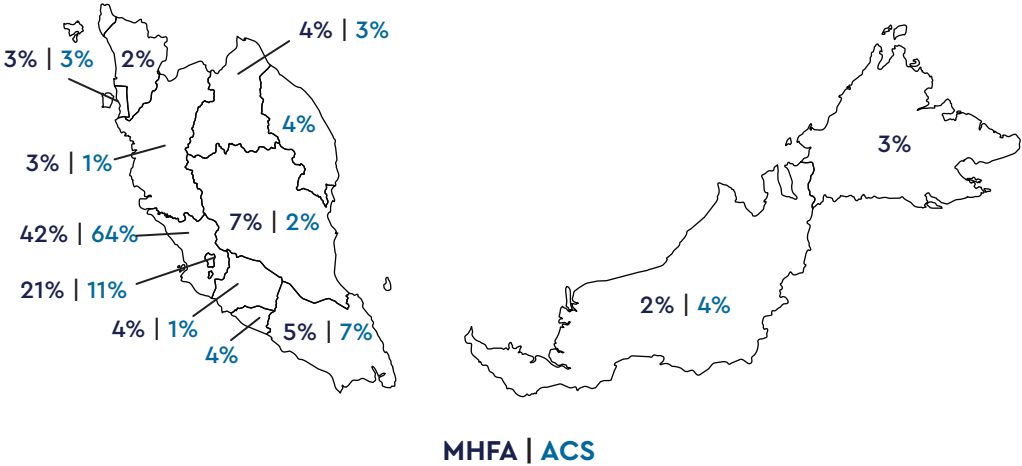
FIGURE 4. Age groups of participants in A Conversation on Suicide
(based on 15 sessions that were conducted from 20 September to 15 October 2021)

OUT OF 108
PEOPLE TRAINED,

64   44

AGE RANGE

55 AND ABOVE

46–55

46–45

26–35

18–25

0   10   20   30

NO OF. PARTICIPANTS
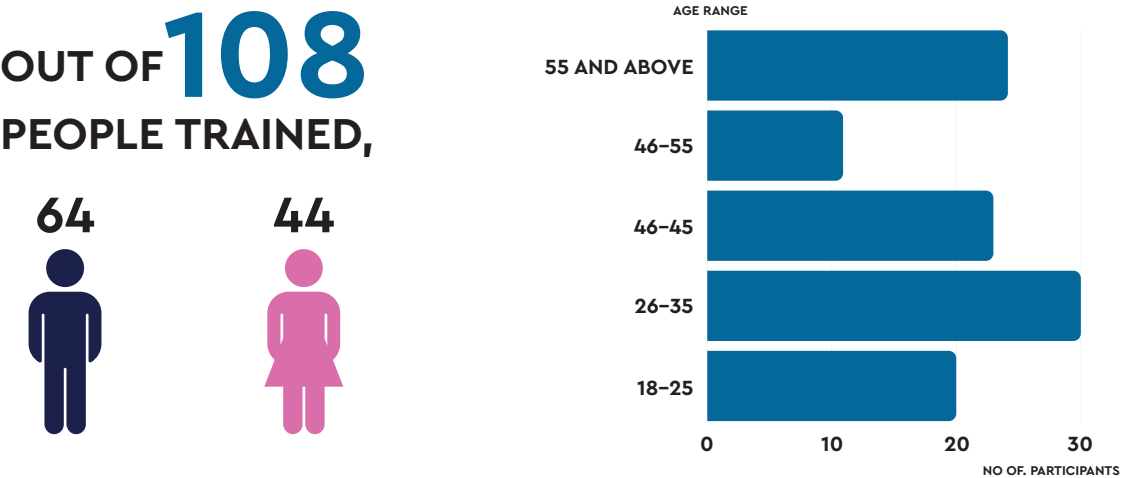
FIGURE 5. Languages of A Conversation on Suicide sessions

LANGUAGES
ACS WAS
CONDUCTED IN

20

15

10

5

0

BAHASA MELAYU ENGLISH MANDARIN TAMIL
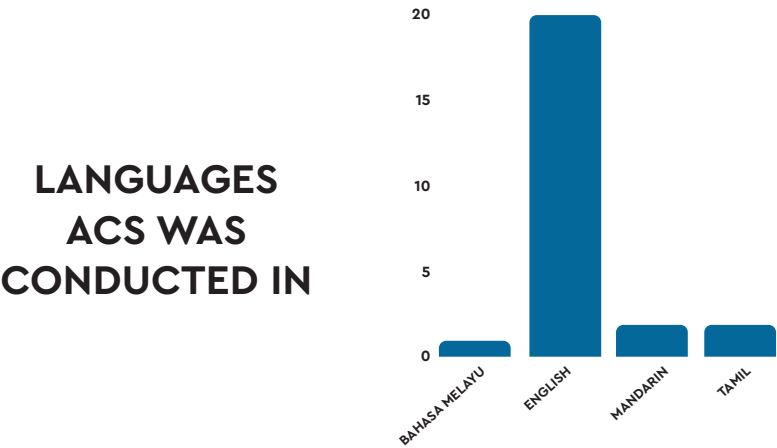
FIGURE 6. Gender of callers for psychotherapy / counselling

GENDER

10 OUT OF 44 CALLERS WERE MALES
44 CALLERS CALLED FOR A TOTAL OF 200 TIMES

FIGURE 7. Problems raised during psychotherapy / counselling

OTHER ISSUES
11.1%
(Trauma, burnout, stress-induced epilepsy,
coping with mental health)

MENTAL ILLNESS
11.1%
(Bipolar and Borderline
Personality Disorders)

FAMILY & RELATIONSHIPS
5.6%
(Negative relationships,
lack of support)

REASONS
FOR
CALLING

ANXIETY DISORDERS
46.3%
(Anxiety, panic attacks
and emotional distress)

DEPRESSION
25.9%
(Depression, Depression PTSD, Major Depressive Disorder)

FIGURE 8. Key facts of those who attended psychotherapy / counselling

KEY FACTS: CALLER DEMOGRAPHICS

OLDEST CALLER

57

MALE; INDIAN

YOUNGEST CALLER

16

2 FEMALES; 1 MALAYS, 1 INDIAN

MEDIAN AGE: 24

KEY FACTS: CALLER DEMOGRAPHICS

**MOST NUMBER
OF CALLS FROM
A PERSON**

19

SESSIONS

41 YEAR OLD MALAY FEMALE

ANXIETY
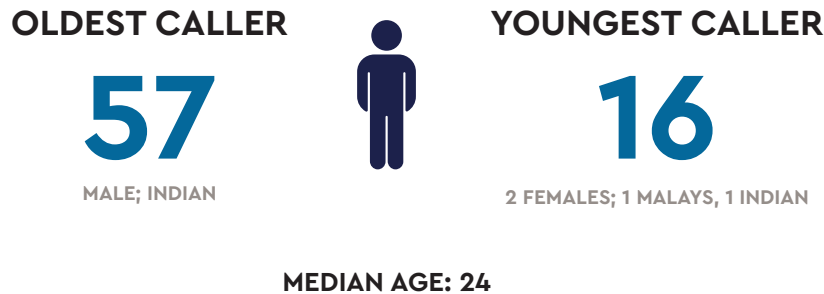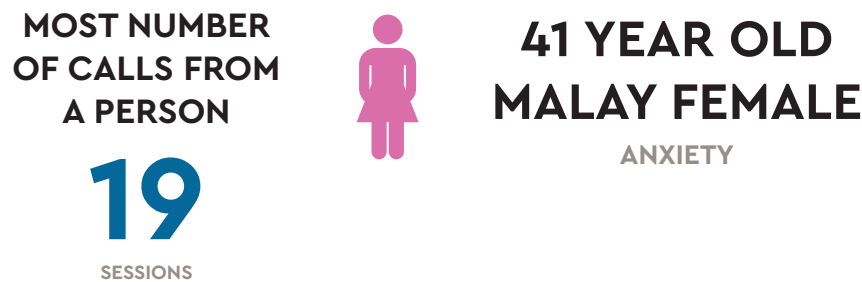
Mental health in a post-Covid-19 Malaysia

The bottom up

In terms of what these analyses mean for mental health in Malaysia, it is evident that raising awareness on mental health must come from the bottom up.

> **Addressing mental health challenges can no longer be constrained or limited to the government and mental health professionals alone. The approach has to be inclusive to ensure a wider audience and a larger impact.**

A community approach to mental health also goes beyond advocacy. Raising awareness must be accompanied by basic skills to not only support ourselves and our communities, but to also redirect those in distress to the appropriate services for help. This is the basis of the GRG-MMHA collaboration – one party focuses on aggregating and advocating, while the other focuses on enhancing literacy. Data on the collaboration also underlines the fact that there is interest among the public to participate in prevention and intervention programmes.

To involve individuals as a resource in mental healthcare is to effectively create a domino or a trickle-down effect, whereby the literacy that participants grasp in these initiatives can be transferred or shared among their networks. This would subsequently help to tackle stigma and prejudice, as misconceptions or myths on mental health would be corrected or debunked.

It is the NGOs who should lead in this bottom up, community approach to mental health. A positive development borne out of the pandemic is the emergence of new mental health groups, such as the National Coalition for Mental Wellbeing (NCMW) and Nyawa – Mental Health Aid Association, while Naluri and Thoughtfull provide digital solutions to mental health and wellbeing.

However, we must also consider the dangers of unmonitored and non-evidence-based intervention. This could lead to misdiagnoses of mental health problems and mental illness, enable non-professionals to mistreat patients, and further aggravate misconceptions on mental health or lead to disinformation on mental health altogether.

In order to provide some oversight and evaluation, the Health Ministry can play a coordinating role to ensure NGOs do not overlap with one another, and that they are specific in their means to support the ministry. Indeed, there are a number of mental health NGOs in Malaysia that already have their niche areas. GRG and MMHA aside, Relate Malaysia is a think-tank that is solely dedicated to mental health, Befrienders is a crisis helpline for those who are suicidal, and Mental Illness and Awareness Support Association (MIASA) is a peer-led organisation. The Health Ministry could oversee this function under the proposed National Centre of Excellence for Mental Health, announced in October 2021.

Decriminalising attempted suicide

However, where Malaysia can make the most impact is in the decriminalisation of attempted suicide. Efforts have been underway to seek the amendment of Section 309 of the Penal Code, with the issue raised in parliament in September 2021. But while that remains in motion, efforts can also be made at both the societal and policy levels to help boost awareness on suicide prevention.

> **At the societal level, we need to educate the public on the different stages of suicide – from ideation to attempt and to the act itself. Most importantly, the perception that talking about suicide encourages one to commit suicide must be eradicated completely; instead, what should be emphasised is the fact that suicide is preventable.**

Both of these are covered under ACS. A prevention and awareness programme like ACS could also be expanded to look into triggers of suicidal ideation and attempts.

This is in particular reference to our youth, as suicide rates and attempts have risen among young adults and adolescents.[12] This reflects the increased prevalence of mental health challenges faced by our youth today. Early intervention and prevention strategies need to be initiated to ensure resilience and wellbeing in this demographic. The GRG-MMHA collaboration has plans to develop "A Conversation: The Series" – different programmes that are targeted towards students, parents and teachers, and specifically catered to challenges in schools, such as bullying and self-harm.

At the policy level, this means re-developing a suicide registry (which is already in motion), recalibrating and obtaining data from relevant stakeholders such as the Royal Malaysia Police, and utilising the Mental Health Act 2001 over Section 309 in cases of suicide attempts. Current provisions under the Mental Health Act are sufficient to redirect those who attempt suicide to undergo a psychiatric evaluation before a decision is made on their "offence".[13]

Where necessary, the current legal framework may be utilised to deal with frivolous attempts, endangering the lives of others or causing damage to public property not caused by underlying psychological distress. The law must come down hard on individuals, groups or organisations provoking or encouraging others to attempt suicide.

Mental health in Malaysia today is a work in progress. The way forward in a post-Covid-19 Malaysia rests on mental health being addressed in unison across the board – from a community approach to those in positions of leadership and key stakeholders.

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11 Based on 108 participants across 15 ACS sessions that were conducted from 20 September to 15 October 2021 – 64 males and 44 females.
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WOMEN'S WOES: GENDERED IMPACT OF COVID-19

LEE MIN HUI

The effects of a crisis are rarely gender-neutral. Women and men experience markedly different outcomes during a crisis because of unequal foundations in society.[1] The Covid-19 pandemic is no exception – and the combined threat of a health and economic crisis interact with deeply entrenched gender inequalities, giving rise to disproportionate consequences for women.

Already, evidence of how the Covid-19 pandemic has been detrimental for women's economic outcomes has emerged, resulting in what many now term a "she-cession".[2] Globally, women experienced higher rates of job losses,[3] due in part to their concentration in sectors most vulnerable to the crisis, tendency to occupy jobs with low security and low income, and increase in their care burden as schools and childcare centres were shuttered.[4]

In Malaysia, women's labour outcomes mirrored these global trends. Early evidence indicates that women's employment has been more negatively impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. These are concerning developments given that women's labour force participation rate in Malaysia in 2020 stood at 55.4%, lagging regional peers, such as Singapore, Vietnam and Thailand.

However, this also comes as no surprise because of women's care burden in the home.

Women have cited "housework and family responsibilities" as the main reason for remaining outside the labour force long before the pandemic[5] – with large spikes recorded in 2020.

A small sample study conducted by Khazanah Research Institute prior to the pandemic suggests that Malaysian women spent 1.4 more hours on unpaid housework duties a day compared to men.[6]

As we pass the two-year mark of the pandemic, it has never been more urgent to ensure that measures to uplift society must be gender sensitive. Stemming the long-term consequences of the crisis is key – especially since workers who lose their jobs during a recession tend to suffer heightened job insecurity in later years.[7] Without swift policy action, the negative economic consequences for women risk being made permanent.

Intensified pandemic precarity

The Malaysians most vulnerable to the ravages of the Covid-19 pandemic are those from low-income groups with relatively low levels of educational qualifications, self-employed or unpaid family workers, and who work in rural locations.[8] Given women's unpaid care work obligations, a more nuanced understanding of their vulnerabilities is important to guide effective policymaking for the pandemic.

Women are disadvantaged by pre-existing levels of marginalisation. Pre-pandemic data indicate that the percentage of women employed in the informal sector saw a higher increase compared to men, moving up from 38.7% in 2017 to 43.7% in 2019.[9] Women were also more highly concentrated in the informal sectors most vulnerable to the Covid-19 pandemic.[10] In 2019, there were also three times more women unpaid family workers compared with men[11] – although this figure is likely to be undercounted.

Working mothers with young children are also more likely to take up part-time or irregular work[12] because this allows them to balance care obligations. The sacrifice comes at the cost of career progression and income, making them more vulnerable to layoffs and furloughs during the pandemic.[13] In Malaysia, there is a higher percentage of women working less than 30 hours a week – with significant increases recorded in the first quarter of 2020 when the pandemic hit.[14]

Family circumstances easily compound this issue. In a study of low-income communities living in low-cost public housing, it was found that 18% out of 21% of single-parent households were headed by single mothers.[15] Among female-headed households, the unemployment rate was about three times higher than the national average and remained above pre-crisis levels at the time the report was published.[16] These respondents were also likely to have limited access to social protection systems, such as employment-based social security.[17]

So, how did the precarious conditions prior to the pandemic play out for women?

At the height of the movement-control order (MCO) in 2020, women below 35 years faced employment losses and labour force exits about 4.4 times higher and 115 times higher than the labour force average along with higher rates of skill-related underemployment.[18]

Since then, there have been encouraging signs of a labour market recovery in the fourth quarter of 2021 for younger women in the 25–34 age group,[19] partly because of the reopening of childcare centres and schools in many states. However, for women under 25, employment and labour force figures have worsened relative to pre-pandemic levels.[20] Further, while men's labour force participation rates rebounded to pre-crisis levels in 2019, women's remain dampened by the pandemic (Figure 1).[21]

FIGURE 1. Labour force participation rates of women relative to men, 2019–2021
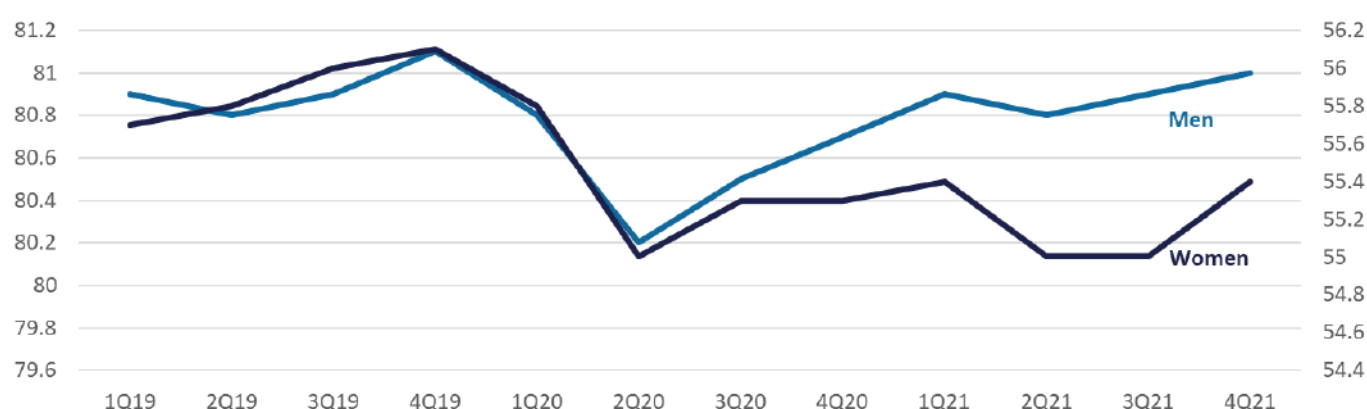
These outcomes are a reminder that the economic penalties women are experiencing will not recede as the country moves into the endemic phase. Women will continue to be disadvantaged in the long term with negative implications on their workforce participation, income, pensions and savings.[22]

Gender-sensitive policy solutions

Given the disproportionate economic outcomes for women, Malaysia cannot afford to proceed with a gender-blind or a one-size-fits-all policy approach. We consider a range of gender-sensitive policies that could help equalise outcomes for women in the short and long term.

Affordable, accessible and quality early childcare and education (ECCE) system

Alleviating women's burden of unpaid care work and redistributing it to the formal care system must be at the centre of any policy approach to improve women's economic outcomes. Malaysia's public ECCE system across the TASKA and TADIKA level[23] is governed by different ministries and cater to the care and early education needs of low-income groups. The rest is served by the private sector, or those run by civil groups or religious bodies.

One of the key issues that Malaysia's ECCE system contends with is criticisms of low quality due to the proliferation of unregistered ECCE centres, and a largely unqualified workforce subjected to poor work conditions and low remuneration.[24] Accessibility remains an issue as ECCE centres at the pre-school level that serve children 4–6 years old do not operate throughout normal working hours or are located inconveniently. In terms of affordability, there are high costs associated with sending children to private ECCE centres with estimates indicating that households in Kuala Lumpur spend on average at least 15% of monthly income on this.[25]

The policy approach to improving ECCE provision to facilitate women's labour force participation must take on a multifaceted approach across the public and private sector. This should include:

- **Quality improvements:** This could involve tying financial incentives to registration and periodic regulation for ECCEs to ensure uptake and monitoring. During the pandemic, the PENJANA fiscal stimulus provided a grant to registered ECCEs as a means of aiding the industry. This could be extended over a longer period of time to address the health and safety concerns that come with unregistered operations and ensure quality regulation.

- **Improving workforce qualifications and working conditions:** Effective implementation of professional qualification mandates at the TASKA and TADIKA level, along with subsidies to cover the cost would be a major incentive for ECCE personnel – besides improving pedagogical outcomes for children. To

address the poor working conditions, both the government and private employers must improve monthly remuneration and job benefits while providing options for professional development and training to retain the workforce.

- **Enhancing accessibility and affordability:** Extending the hours of public ECCE centres to include a day-care option, especially for 4–6-year-olds in preschool to cover a working day, is necessary to provide working parents a one-stop solution for care. When it comes to affordability, more effective targeting and long-term benefits are necessary to address the ECCE needs of urban poor families unable to access public ECCE.

- **Addressing the need for workplace ECCE centres:** Successive budgets have explicitly encouraged the private sector to establish office childcare centres. The next step for the government would be to play a more conducive role for private sector uptake by providing technical and financial support along with trained ECCE personnel.

- **Recognising and supporting the ECCE industry:** The ECCE industry suffered major blows during the pandemic as a result of protracted closures during the MCO, resulting in reports of severe cuts to the salaries of ECCE teachers.[26] Looking ahead, Malaysia must further prioritise ECCE as an essential service and recognise its importance in line with higher levels of education, and provide technical and coordination support in line with standard operating procedures for adaptation to the endemic phase.

Family-friendly workplace policies

Redistributing care should begin in the home. Research shows that even with parents working from home, women undertook the majority of care obligations – with men comparatively taking on less hours and less intensive care work.[27] Both employers and the government need to be cognisant of the constraints of care on worker productivity and employment and implement policies beyond maternity leave[28] that promote equitable distribution of care work in the home.

- **Flexible work and paid parental leave:** Encouraging and incentivising the widespread implementation of flexible work arrangements as well as non-transferable paid parental leave that applies to both parents to promote equal distribution among men and women.

- **Paternity leave:** Mandatory paid paternity leave can help close the care-induced gaps between men and women in the home.[29] Recently approved amendments to the Malaysia Employment Act have pushed for private sector employees to enjoy seven days of paternity leave, in line with public sector employees.[30] While this is a step in the right direction, uptake of paternity leave tends to be low.[31] The government and employers need to raise awareness, address pervasive gender norms and improve implementation by including "risk pooling through social insurance or public funds" as recommended by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to prevent employer discrimination towards men with familial obligations.[32]

Expand social protection for informal workers with care responsibilities

More pre-emptive measures, such as expanding the provision of unemployment benefits or introducing paid sick leave[33] can help reduce income losses and incentivise workers to adhere to quarantine regulations when sick or infected. However, a gender-sensitive approach is also necessary here. This should include:

- **Cash transfers targeted at women in the informal sector with children:** These transfers ensure vulnerable women are the beneficiaries and offer major support for unpaid caregivers during the pandemic.[34] There is space to build on existing government support, such as those aimed at single mothers[35] or housewives.[36] However, these measures must move beyond relatively small one-off payments and loosen eligibility requirements, improve coverage, and remove administrative barriers to ease registration and application, especially for informal workers.

These policy recommendations only touch the surface of what a gender-sensitive response should look like in the context of Malaysian society and the pandemic. While these steps require immense levels of government spending and coordination – they represent long-term investments with benefits that accrue in terms of higher worker productivity and economic growth as more women enter and stay in the labour force, and higher human capital development when children receive quality early education and care.

Beyond alleviating women's care burden, Malaysia also needs to take a more holistic approach to empowering women, including fielding and electing more women representatives and tackling issues that have grown in magnitude during the pandemic, such as domestic violence. If decisive action is not taken today, Malaysia risks undermining – or worse, reversing – what progress the country has made to meaningfully empower women.

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Endnotes

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ACCELERATING DIGITALISATION, DIGITAL RIGHTS IN COVID ERA

FARLINA SAID

Born out of the ashes of the pandemic is a deeper government commitment towards the technological adoption and digitalisation agenda. Since 2020, a number of policies have been introduced, including the Malaysia Cyber Security Strategy 2020–2024 and Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint. The recovery plans under Penjana were aimed at easing the burden of digitalisation for micro, small and medium enterprises, helping 45,000 get onboard e-commerce platforms while assisting more than 200,000 to adopt digitalisation solutions.[1] Meanwhile, Pelan Jalinan Digital Negara (Jendela) aims to build quality access to the internet, whether it is by 4G coverage or fixed broadband services.

There are a few trends that emerged as significant for Malaysia's adoption of technologies during the pandemic.

The first is the accelerated integration of technology in people's lives, which can be illustrated by the rise of the platform economy fulfilling various needs. Platforms, such as Ebay, Lazada, Shopee and Grab, offer solutions from logistics to food delivery, thus serving as technologically enabled interlocutors to fulfil the needs of the new normal. During the crisis, e-commerce income reached RM896.4 billion in 2020, an increase of 32.7% compared with 2019.[2]

Google, Temasek and Bain & Company's annual Southeast Asia e-economy 2021 report[3] stated that Malaysia recorded three million new digital consumers since the start of the pandemic. At the conclusion of the report, 94% of the new consumers surveyed intend to use digital services at present, with 98% adopting for good digital services moving forward.[4] Malaysia's information and communications technology (ICT) industry contributed 22.6% to GDP, where the manufacturing sector was the largest contributor to the gross value added to e-commerce, which increased e-commerce market growth in Malaysia.[5]

The second is the modernisation and adoption of technologies by the government to improve the delivery of governance and services. This is best exemplified by MySejahtera, Malaysia's contact-tracing super app that began as a tool to trace movements of infected individuals to its later iteration to highlight hot spots, ratify vaccination status with a digital certificate and facilitate vaccine appointments, among others.

MySejahtera's growth was slow. The application was launched at the end of the first quarter in 2020, but there were only 2.5 million downloads by mid-June[6] or an estimated 7% of the population. However, policies such as those making it compulsory for all visitors to check-in on MySejahtera prior to entering premises combined with RM50 e-wallet credit encouraged more downloads.[7] According to a State of Mobile 2022 report, MySejahtera has the highest install penetrations and open rates among other international Covid-19 apps installed on Android. The Health Ministry's primary app was downloaded by 85% of active Android devices in Malaysia with 92% opening the app after installation.[8]

Under the Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint and open-data initiatives, government adoption of data and analytical tools would increase. During the pandemic, Mimos developed AI-based text analytics system with other data analysis technologies to identify areas of concern for Malaysians.[9] The tool is meant to improve governance and policymaking where social media listening is said to improve decision-making.[10]

Further, as the MyDigital initiative aims to propagate big data, efforts such as the Statistics Department's big data analysis job market insights and My Job Profile improved the efficiency of the labour market[11] as Mampu and the National Water Research Institute of Malaysia aim to use data to forecast climate change patterns up to 100 years.[12] The government also utilised various communication channels to deliver information, inclusive of social networking sites.

With the digital economy and e-government developments, the technology adoption makes internet connection a necessity.

The internet users survey by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) stated that 88.7% of the population used the internet in 2020,[13] an increase from 87.4% in 2018. Of the 2,401 users surveyed, 42% spend more than nine hours a day online. Those spending fewer than four hours dropped to 26% from the 48.8% in 2018 figures. The increase in internet usage is also reflected in the increase of technological adoptions, such as video and voice calls, financial activity and cloud storage. These figures are on the rise, despite lower figures of those using the internet for work-related activities or to buy and sell online.

The structure of access via devices has also shifted. Individual access via computers and mobile phones increased slightly from 72.1% to 80% and mobile phone access from 97.9% to 98.2% between 2018 and 2020. This is a shift from the 6.3% increase of computer-facilitated access per household compared with 2018 figures.[14]

These figures indicate that Malaysians are spending a longer time online, with the need of personal devices for such connectivity. The growth of digital consumers and adoption of digital services raise concerns for safety in digital spaces. MyCERT's[15] statistics indicate that cybersecurity incidences have been on the rise in the last five years with fraud, intrusions and malicious codes registering the highest cases each year. This raises the argument for the need to build awareness and capacities for digital rights, which would protect and enable Malaysians to have safe experiences online.

What are digital rights?

On 28 September 2021, the communications and multimedia minister said internet access will be viewed as a human right to ensure that no community is left behind.[16] Closing the gaps and ensuring access to the internet is necessary, especially as government services, economic opportunities and further social mobility move online. These are the future trajectories of Malaysia enshrined in the MyDigital initiative and the 12th Malaysia Plan, hinging on the

development of digital for the future. The challenge of access was tested during the pandemic when pupils had to trek distances for connectivity[17] while freedom of movement could be denied to individuals without access to MySejahtera[18] or experiencing glitches with the app.[19]

Digital rights, however, extend beyond connectivity-related factors. The application of human rights in cyberspace can be articulated in two ways.

The first is the view of cyber and technologies as a medium. Thus, further discourse on human rights and cyber would view how the former is affected, distorted and limited by the adoption of technologies. Considerations, such as the protection of children, protection of human rights by older persons, online violence against women and girls, extreme poverty and online spaces as well as the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the midst of other cyber-enabled nefarious acts, such as terrorism, are paramount. Malaysia ranked second in Asia in 2020 for cyberbullying,[20] and between 2020 and July 2021, MCMC received 6,598 complaints of online harassments.[21] However, the technological environment, which has content and data ownership cutting across different jurisdictions and platforms, makes it difficult to address issues swiftly. For instance, compromising images and information can be shared easily between platforms, which can challenge government and non-governmental organisations attempting to take down such content. Platforms, balancing between freedom of expression, privacy and user rights, grapple with approaches to moderate their space from misuse.

The second would identify areas of human rights needed with further adoption of technologies. For instance, artificial intelligence, algorithms and the development of new technologies depend on data collection, whether such information is personally identifiable or anonymous. Data is touted as the oil of the digital economy and, during the pandemic, data breaches occurred, such as the alleged leak of information of four million individuals connected to the National Registration Department due to an exploited API on the Inland Revenue Board's website[22] while errors such as the technical issue from RHB Bank Group, which allowed bank statements of other individuals to be opened with one's own password,[23] compromise personal details or lead to data abuse.

Behavioural and relatively identifiable data are the engines of growth for the digital economy. While the general information about a person retails for less than a dollar,[24] the perceived value for the loss of privacy is estimated to be closer to US$36[25] though figures have escalated to an estimated US$66 million annually for specific demographics (data of American men of Middle Eastern descent fetch the highest price).[26] In addition to the leakage of data impacting on personal lives, processing of data could be used to skew decision-making. Examples include Cambridge Analytica and elections where data obtained legally or illegally was utilised.[27]

While in Malaysia the monetary value of personal data is not explicitly available, it would be interesting to note that the most mature data analytical usage is in the media and entertainment verticals, including news sites and websites.[28] In Malaysia, data analytics can be used to analyse sentiments or shape political impact.[29] In more malicious forms, the use of personal information against an individual can result in cyberbullying or doxing – which if paired with infringements of freedom of expression would be used against journalists and activists. This means that protections from data-related harm have to consider the volume of data collected, purposes of data collection, notifications of data transfers and accountability measures.

The controversy over MySejahtera's management and ownership of data[30] exemplifies the entire lifecycle of data that has to be considered, particularly on the aspect of data transfers and notification to users.

Such mechanisms are necessary for the government and the private sector, especially if the future digital economy collects and processes data to deliver services.

Governance of a digital nation

However, a digital nation where the tides of technology production and usage can shift rapidly poses challenges in governance. For one, the government would face an asymmetry of power, where the production and regulation of technologies are either in the hands of the private sector or located outside of Malaysia. In such situations, the public may find it difficult to seek solutions for the protection of rights in cyberspace, especially if the laws for data usage or content-related harms differ across borders and ownership.

The development of a strong research and development, commercialisation and innovation economy (R&D&C&I) must balance between developing technologies that can adhere to regulations and slamming the breaks on the development of new technologies or platforms. The approach to guide the development of new technologies imbued with values can be found in the European Commission's European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies' reports on values for the future that include innovating based on ethics and values.[31] Another example of the marriage between technology and values is Australia's international cyber engagements aimed at developing technologies that protect values, such as human rights online and advocates for diversity, gender equality and women's empowerment.[32]

> **Malaysia's approach to governing cyberspace needs to consider the values that would guide present and future technology development to safeguard and empower the present and future digital nation.**

In conversations with civil society, resources that could be useful to develop ideas include the Feminist Principles of the Internet[33] to uphold principles of access, movements, economy, expression and embodiment in cyber related to advancing, protecting and advocating women's rights. There are elements which might be applicable in Malaysia's cyber realm, such as:

- Access to the internet and devices
- Good governance and access to information
- Diffusing the power structures in the governance of the internet
- Preserving freedom of expression and means that facilitate the freedom of expression
- Building ethics and politics of consent into the culture, design, policies and terms of service of internet platforms
- Right to privacy
- Control over personal history and memory on the internet
- Safe cyber experience for children
- Protection against online harassment and technology related violence

Regulations that need to be updated can be mapped and assessed. One definite area is the Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA) 2010, which was already considering updates with the consultation paper circulated right before the pandemic hit a high in February 2020.[34] Such updates would have to consider mandatory data breach notifications, data portability laws, parameters of data collection and responsibilities in data processing. Also on the spectrum of discussions of privacy are government obligations in data usage. As the government digitises and becomes a data user and regulator, the government would need to consider the policy implications of data processing as well as data breaches to remain accountable to a population becoming more digitally adept, especially as technologies become more complex.

In crafting ways forward, Malaysia must ensure synergy between ministries and agencies while building on existing efforts identified in the Malaysia Cyber Security Strategy 2020–2024. The challenge is the dispersed roles and responsibility strewn throughout ministries, particularly to tackle harms that can originate from the usage of devices.

The National Cyber Security Agency is the main body responsible for developing policies on cybersecurity while the Royal Malaysia Police (RMP) are the enforcement arm for laws inclusive of cybercrime. As further processes to improve forensics and cybercrime coordination is discussed in the United Nations, the conversation to search for Malaysian values in governance of technologies can occur in ministries, such as the Ministry of Science and Technology and the Ministry of Multimedia and Communication.

The Ministry of Multimedia and Communication, especially, has the hefty task of building infrastructure while empowering various other facilities, mediums and environment in a digital ecosystem. The ministry houses several agencies, including Bernama, Finas, MCMC, Malaysia Development Economic Corporation (MDEC), MyNIC, Cybersecurity Malaysia and MyCreative Ventures. Thus, by extension, it has jurisdiction to galvanise processes over issues, such as data protection (under the Personal Data Protection Department that is an agency under MCMC), misinformation (through Sebenarnya.my), content regulation inclusive of those leading to hate speech, extremism or other forms of violence (under MCMC), freedom of information and expression (under MCMC and Finas) and cybersecurity (with technical expertise under Cybersecurity Malaysia), especially under the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998, PDPA 2010 and Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional Malaysia Act 1981.

Despite the jurisdiction, conversations to build the foundations of digital citizenship are not pervasive, especially on setting security-by-design standards for new technologies, anti-surveillance laws or principles as an approach to data overcollection, protection against online harms and approaches to negotiate with big technological firms on responsibilities.

Digital rights, digital nation and digital citizenship

A safe digital nation can only be developed with a whole-of-society approach, where digital citizenship means to engage positively in the digital environment.[35]

Cyberspace is a multi-stakeholder environment and empowering a digitally literate society to play a larger role to hold accountability would be needed to ensure processes for a stable cyberspace moves forward.

Malaysia may be lacking a robust civil society, whether in terms of people from the technical sector or those advocating cyber-based human rights, who could act as valid cross-jurisdictional constituents, especially where certain cyber issues are out of the jurisdiction for governments. According to Statista, in January 2022, Malaysia had the second most active social network penetration among the countries selected at 91.7%, above the worldwide average of 58.4%.[36] The high participation on platforms places Malaysians online as valid constituents for the platforms offering digital services. Therefore, building greater awareness on online harms could create greater accountability mechanisms from services that stem from abroad. Such organisations do exist in Malaysia, such as IO Foundation, Sinar Project and CybHER, to hold accountability for the management of data, transparency in governance and protection of women. As harms from cyber can trickle to personal experiences, a multi-stakeholder process with a greater role for civil society would be healthy for the stability of present and future cyberspace.

Malaysia was relatively well connected before the pandemic. However, as the pandemic accelerated digital adoption, the technological genie emerged from the bottle. During the pandemic, social media became the space for civic engagement where efforts, such as #KitaJagaKita and #BenderaPutih, utilised social-networking sites to galvanise efforts with the aim of delivering aid to those in need. Lazada and Shopee offered tickets for animal adoption in Zoo Negara[37] while Lazada offered farmers facing logistics challenges a platform to sell their produce directly to customers.[38] It was reported that about 70 tonnes of produce were salvaged and delivered to homes.[39] The maturity of Malaysia's cyberspace also coincides with a digital community mainly using cyber to communicate, engage in online

communities and seek information.[40] The digital space holds the potential to unlock new frontiers for politics, economic and societal development. However, to harness the good in a digital Malaysia, mechanisms must be developed that would protect present and future Malaysians from potential abuse and harms.

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BUILDING A MORE ROBUST AND RESILIENT INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

HARRIS ZAINUL

On 15 February 2020, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director-general of the World Health Organisation (WHO) said that "we're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic".[1] This much was true and remains so two years later. At any given time, much is talked about the novel coronavirus and the vaccines for it – some truthful, some less so, and some false.

Worryingly is how no one truly knows the extent of Covid-19 misinformation circulating online. Indications, however, can be drawn from the number of fact-checks published worldwide. For example, the International Fact Checking Network's (IFCN) Coronavirus Facts Alliance (CFA) has published more than 16,000 fact-checks from 86 countries since its formation in January 2020.[2] This means that on average, CFA published at least 640 fact-checks a month, 160 fact-checks a week, or 22 fact-checks a day since Covid-19 was detected. At home, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission's Sebenarnya.my fact-checking platform has published almost 600 Covid-19-related fact-checks and clarifications over the same period.

The consequences of which are concerning. One study claimed that in the first three months of 2020, nearly 6,000 people were hospitalised and 800 might have died because of coronavirus misinformation.[3] This, however, is debatable because a group of Iranians, who died from methanol poisoning, could have skewed the numbers. It remains unclear whether those who perished had done so to prevent or treat Covid-19 infection or were doing it for pleasure, mistaking it for ordinary alcohol.

Regardless of whether those deaths could be attributed to misinformation, health-related misinformation circulating since the start of the pandemic can have implications on health-related decisions and behaviours.

For example, it may lead to a reluctance to adhere to public safety advice, downplaying of the risks associated with Covid-19 and hesitancy to receive vaccination.

Loomba et al attempted to quantify the latter: the relationship between exposure to online misinformation on Covid-19 vaccines with intentions to vaccinate. His randomised controlled trial of 8,001 respondents (4,000 in the United Kingdom and 4,001 in the United States) shows that exposure to misinformation lowers the intent to accept a vaccine among people who would otherwise "definitely" accept the vaccine by 6.2% in the UK and 6.4% in the US, relative to the control group.[4]

The potential harm does not stop there. Any semblance of successful pandemic management requires the cooperation of the whole of society. This means that a minority's misinformed decision can have further implications for the rest of the community.

FIGURE 1. Number of Malaysians who consider fake news a problem

9 in 10 Malaysians consider fake news a problem

Yes, 92.30%   No, 4.40%

Source: MCMC Internet Users Survey 2020

Worryingly, 92.3% of respondents to MCMC's Internet Users Survey 2020, conducted during the first year of the pandemic, considered fake news a problem in Malaysia.

Efforts so far

In Malaysia, efforts to contain and limit the consequences of Covid-19 misinformation falls into three categories: (1) public service announcements to highlight, among others, the need to vaccinate, how it is safe to do so, and warnings about false information circulating online; (2) fact-checking initiatives led by Sebenarnya.my, the dedicated Quick Response Team under the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia, and complemented by various media and civil society fact-checkers; and (3) legislation, such as Section 505(b) of the Penal Code, Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998, and the now-repealed Emergency (Essential Powers) (No. 2) Ordinance.

As Malaysia proceeds towards the endemic phase of Covid-19, some lessons are worth remembering moving forward. This can be applicable for future pandemics, of which scientists are already warning of, and other related disasters, such as the impending climate crisis. In this article, I highlight three: (1) how the news media ecosystem needs to be economically and politically viable; (2) how a laissez-faire approach towards social media platforms is no longer tenable; and (3) the need to improve our legislation. These will act as the foundation to safeguard and build resilience of the information environment for the next infodemic.

News media must be economically viable

Amid the deluge of misinformation circulating during times of crisis, the role played by the news media – such as print, radio and television – as a trustworthy source of authoritative and credible information cannot be understated. Yet, the ability of the news media to play this role has been undermined by decreasing advertisement revenues over the past decade, primarily attributed to shifting consumption patterns from print to online.[5]

FIGURE 2. Share of global advertising expenditure by medium over time

Internet advertising made up more than 50% of global advertising expenditure in 2021
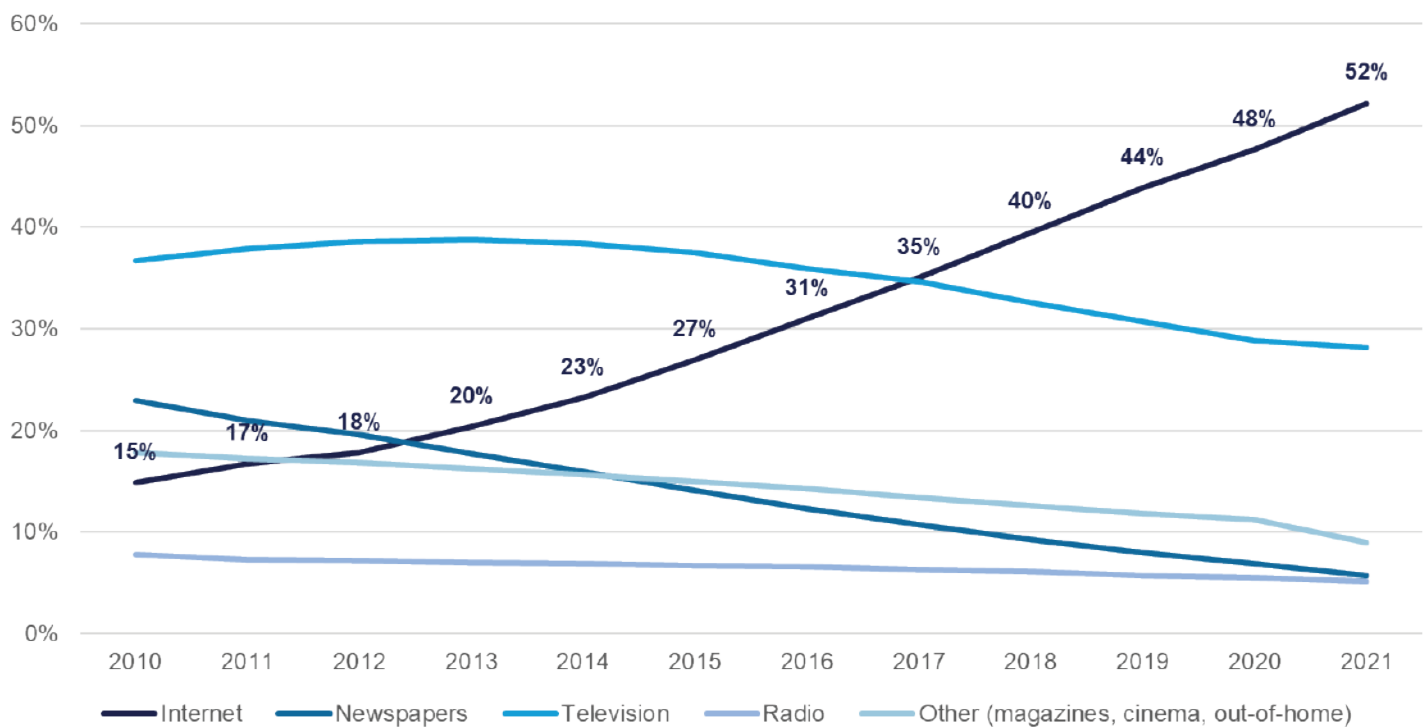
Source: UNESCO

FIGURE 3. Sources of news in Malaysia

Print as a source of news decreased by 46% over the past 5 years
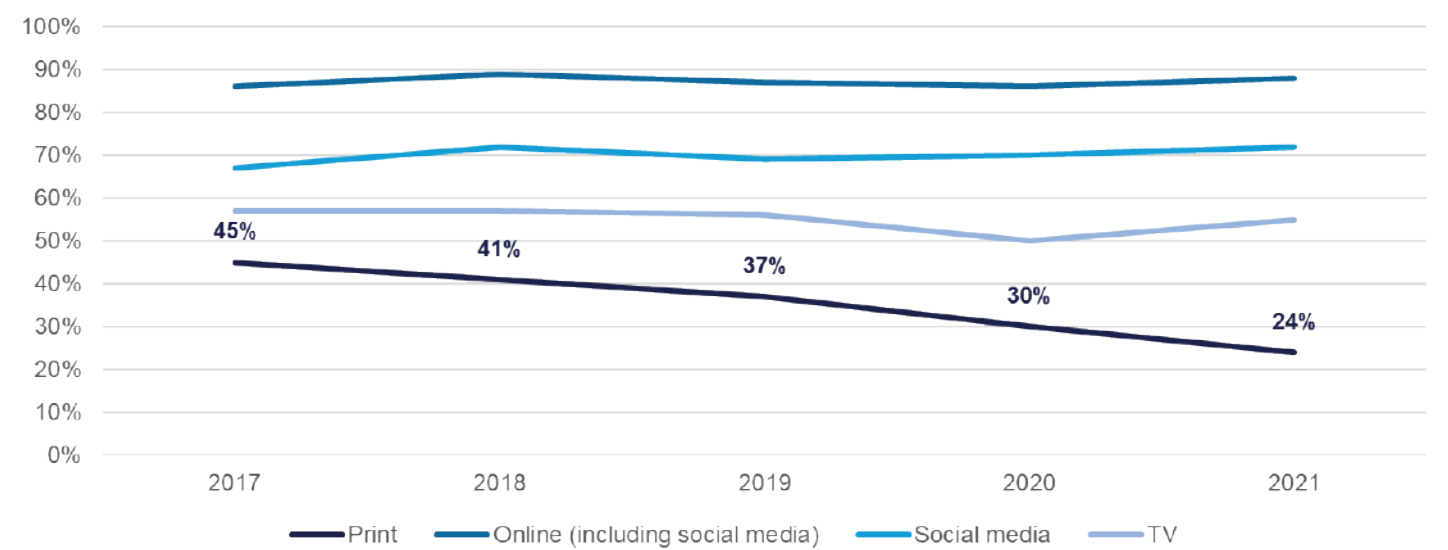
Source: Reuters Institute 2021

According to Premesh Chandran, former CEO of Malaysiakini, this change in news consumption pattern has resulted in almost 1,000 times lower advertisement revenues per day. This is attributed to tech giants, such as Google and Facebook (now Meta), offering advertising at much lower rates to larger audiences as opposed to media companies.[6]

FIGURE 4. Percentage of Malaysians paying for online news

Percentage of respondents paying for online news in Malaysia decreased
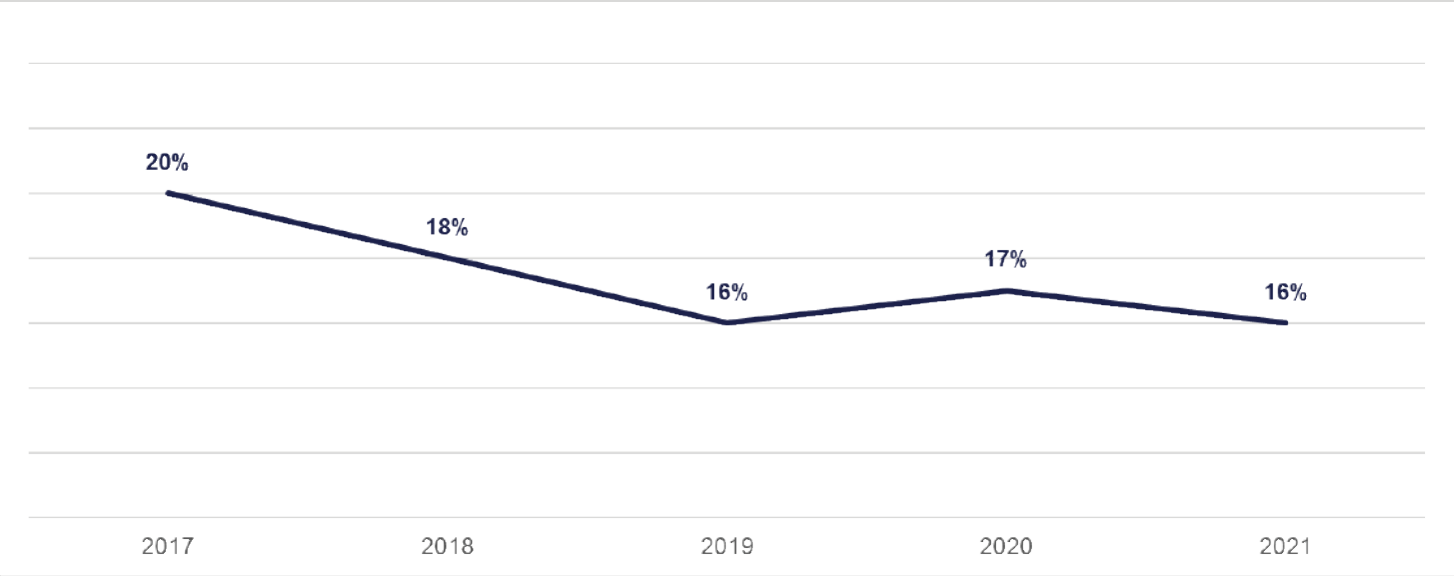
Source: Reuters Institute 2021

This is further exacerbated by how levels of paid news subscriptions remain incredibly low at 16%, according to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021.[7]

Taken together, these are not good signs for the news media's economic viability in Malaysia. Falling advertisement revenue and the lack of paid subscribers would limit the ability and capacity of newsrooms. This comes at a time when more is being demanded of newsrooms – to practise higher journalistic standards, which entail more time spent per news piece; to provide time- and resource-consuming fact-checks; and to create more engaging content. This is against the backdrop of journalists facing heightened risks while conducting their work during the pandemic.[8]

It is clear that there is need for a more equitable distribution of digital revenue. Australia's News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code is one example that can be considered.[9] The code, intended to ensure news media are fairly remunerated for the content they create, achieves this by addressing the bargaining power imbalance between digital platforms, such as Google and Meta, with local news businesses.[10] This follows a similar payout by Google to French publishers for news snippets used in search results.[11]

Consideration can also be given for a portion of the Malaysian service tax on digital services by foreign service providers to be earmarked for news purposes.[12] This would funnel funds from foreign digital service providers, including from digital advertising, back to Malaysian newsrooms and media companies.

Lastly, there needs to be a gradual cultural shift among Malaysians towards paying for the news they consume. This would also allow newsrooms to be more independent and move away from the current model of relying on external funders, especially those with political connections which could affect real and perceived independence.

Social media transparency and regulation

Social media platforms have come under tremendous fire over the course of the pandemic, with perhaps US President Joe Biden's comment that they are "killing people" with misinformation among the harshest.[13] Regardless of whether one agrees with his assessment or not, it cannot be denied that social media platforms play a role – whether it is active, or passive is debatable – in the spread of false information during this pandemic.

Responses to Covid-19 misinformation by social media platforms[14]

	Facebook	Instagram	YouTube	Twitter	LinkedIn	Snapchat	Reddit	TikTok	Twitch	Messenger	WhatsApp
Prohibits Covid-19 misinformation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✕	✕	✕
Has a Covid-19 misinformation policy	✓	✓	✓	✓	✕	✕	✕	✕	✕	✕	✕

On one hand, credit should be given to the eight platforms that prohibit Covid-19 misinformation and the four that has introduced a specific Covid-19 misinformation policy. Further credit can be given for the platforms' diligent publications of transparency reports over the past 24 months. Yet on the other hand, questions remain over whether these policies

have been sufficiently and fairly applied not just in key markets in the West, but also in the developing world. Further questions remain on whether these are adequate, particularly in light of how misinformation remains a problem in these platforms.

From a policy response standpoint, the lack of granularity in the transparency reports means that what exactly is circulating in these platforms remain largely unknown – despite previous work to try to understand this better. (For example, my past work here and here.) This information gap is problematic as it limits policymakers' understanding of the specificity of the issue(s) at hand and blunts the accuracy of counter-messaging efforts.

Here are a few considerations for future references.

The first is to de-platform and defund accounts seeking to profit from Covid-19 misinformation, inclusive of those selling cures that go against the consensus of medical opinion. Defunding and de-platforming have been demonstrated to be a feasible approach towards problematic content, as seen during the Russo-Ukrainian war.[15]

The second is for Malaysian policymakers to follow US Surgeon-General Dr Vivek Murthy's request to social media companies to disclose the sources of Covid-19 misinformation, its extent and targeted audience.[16] This can allow Malaysian policymakers and policy communicators to be more targeted in counter-messaging efforts. On transparency, further calls need to be made for social media companies to disclose how exactly do their algorithms treat user-generated content – what type of content is prioritised, how this is determined, and what safeguards are in place to protect the integrity of online discourse.

Third, would be to begin discussions towards a standardised format for transparency reports – including scope of content. This will allow policymakers and researchers to better compare the content-moderation efforts across platforms and assess whether self-regulation is working as intended. Should this be found lacking, processes to identify local standards for content moderation must start now. This is to align the types of content permissible on social media to a Malaysian audience. This is by no means calling for cultural relativism when it comes to free speech rights, but rather a sober recognition of the downsides of a laissez faire approach adopted by the US, where these companies are often based, towards content moderation. It goes without saying that these local standards must be jointly identified by the government together with civil society, especially free-speech defenders to mitigate the risks of censorship.

Regulating free speech

The pandemic had exposed how ill-equipped our legislations are to address an imperfect information environment. For example, the Emergency (Essential Powers) (No. 2) Ordinance 2021 (EO2) introduced during the Emergency repeats the problems with previous legislations meant to address "fake news" – never mind that it was a copy of the repealed Anti-Fake News Act 2018.

Section 4 of EO2, together with the two other legislations used to address "fake news", Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) 1998 and Section 505(b) of the Penal Code, sets the bar incredibly low for content to be potentially infringing these legislations. Further, the same provision in EO2 and the Penal Code only requires the content to be "likely to cause" the low threshold of harm, making actual intent secondary.

This is problematic and concerning during the infodemic, where there is "an overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it".[17]

When coupled with the push factors of low digital literacy skills among the people and a constantly evolving science and muddled information environment, the desire to share "helpful" information among friends and families during the pandemic runs the magnified risk of falling afoul of these laws.

In moving forward, what is sorely needed is a paradigm shift from one seemingly focused on vaguely defined and broadly applicable legislations to ones specifically addressing the types of harm intended to be regulated. For example, if it is anti-vaccine information, then the legislation should guard against that. Ergo for other types of false information that causes harm, such as those affecting the integrity of democratic discourse (like deepfakes of politicians), and those resulting in racial and religious tensions.

With specific legislations, the public can then be better able to regulate their conduct appropriately. Here, it is worth remembering Blackstone's ratio that "it is better that 10 guilty persons escape than one innocent suffers". No innocent person should be exposed to the indignity of being accused to have committed a crime and having to go through the traumatising investigation and trial processes.

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As we step into the third year of Covid-19 and as we prepare for future crises that could see knock-on implications on our information environment, the policy investments must be made now. Only then will the information environment be more resilient in the face of future challenges. As with most experiences with Covid-19, it shed light on deficiencies in existing systems and ways of doing things, and the onus is now on policymakers to ensure that these lessons are learned before the next crisis hits.

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CLIMATE CHANGE COMES TO FOREFRONT IN COVID AGE

DARSHAN JOSHI & AHMAD AFANDI NOR AZMI

Efforts to address climate and environment remain nascent. From an economic perspective, achieving this entails accurately pricing the costs of greenhouse gas pollution and the resources or services provided by nature. At present, few nations achieve either; only nine countries price carbon at rates consistent with the achievement of the Paris Agreement targets,[1] while natural resources are often priced based on economic or political rationale,[2] usually to the detriment of climate and environment. For this reason, emissions continue to be oversupplied, causing climate change and natural resources to be extracted and exploited unsustainably, in turn leading to environmental degradation. While many countries are committing to increasingly ambitious climate targets,[3] these are long term – and remain, for the most part, insufficient. Nevertheless, the climate policy landscape of 2022 stands in stark contrast to the pre-Covid era. In an age of regular reminders of the extremities of climate-induced disaster, it is easy to overlook the important and almost momentous progress of the past two years.

Haze hazard

The year 2019 was in many ways a solemn one in the context of climate action. Weather-related disasters caused some US$40 billion in economic damages[4] and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports assessing the state of land and oceans issued further reminders on the need for urgent action to mitigate climate change.[5] Climate demonstrations peaked in frequency and voracity, culminating in a fourth "Global Climate Strike" just days prior to the 25th Conference of Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). These were driven by a growing sense that policymakers' efforts towards addressing climate change were insufficient and reflective of a disconnect between climate policy and science. COP25 itself did little to dispel these notions, regarded by many observers to have delivered underwhelming outcomes.[6]

In Malaysia, the effects of pollution were noticeable throughout July-September 2019. The effects of deforestation-driven smoke caused an estimated RM1.5 billion damages through productivity losses and healthcare costs in 2013.[7] While estimates are not readily available for damage incurred during the 2019 haze season, the effects of economic and population growth and inflation are likely to ensure similarly high damages.[8] Malaysia's Academy of Sciences, a statutory body, estimates annual haze costs of roughly RM1.3 billion.[9] Amid the haze, September saw Malaysians participate in a climate strike to coincide with the UN's 2019 Climate Action Summit, calling for greater action on the part of the government to address environmental issues and declare a climate "emergency".

At the time, net-zero targets and the use of carbon pricing instruments, for instance, were political non-starters. Malaysia's commitment to addressing climate change came largely in the form of its nationally determined contribution (NDC) to reduce the emissions intensity of GDP by 35% relative to 2005 levels, a target which does not entail reductions in absolute greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (and even serve to mask absolute emissions increases).[10] Little evidence pointed in the direction of increasing climate ambition.

Climate and environmental impacts of Covid-19

Then came the pandemic and, with it, an evolution in the global climate and environmental consciousness. In March 2020, Ensia, a leading climate journalism outfit based at the University of Minnesota, published a widely reprinted article[11] linking habitat and biodiversity loss with the spread of zoonotic disease. This complemented and added a contemporary flavour to studies finding that roughly 75% of all emerging infectious diseases (EIDs) originated in wildlife[12] with 31% of EIDs the result of biodiversity, ecosystem, and habitat loss and deforestation, including Ebola, Nipah and Zika.[13] Attention turned towards anthropogenic factors enabling and exacerbating cross-species pathogen transmission, and parallels were drawn between the pandemic, climate change and the loss of biodiversity in terms of these concrete links as well as a common need for concerted, coordinated policy action.[14]

Meanwhile, economic responses to Covid-19 were large in scale but risked diverting resources away from pressing, longer-term issues. Such risks were recognised when in April 2020 the UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for governments to "build back better" (BBB), outlining "six climate-related actions to shape the recovery and the work ahead" to ensure that stimulus packages and other recovery efforts were mindful, not only of Covid-led realities, but longer-term climate change-led concerns.[15] By June 2020, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published a guide to assist policymakers in enhancing sustainability and resilience in Covid recovery efforts.[16]

> **In Malaysia, the focus on BBB was initially less explicitly linked to climate change, instead calling for action towards issues, such as economic insecurity, insufficient social protections, job and wage growth, and the achievement, to a degree, of the SDGs.**[17]

These were the long-standing bread and butter issues brought into starker light by the pandemic and its socioeconomic impacts on (lower-income) households and (small- and medium-sized) businesses alike.[18] Yet some of the climate impacts of business-as-usual practices were evident during the early phases of the movement-control order (MCO) from March 2020.

Air quality improvements were the most visible manifestation through reductions in industrial and transport pollution while restrictions on movement also curtailed open burning practices. Water pollution reductions were also recorded with an additional 21 monitored rivers categorised as "clean" in 2021 compared with a year earlier. On a global scale, emissions fell by 6.4% between 2019 and 2020.[19] This, however, masks a resurgence in the latter half of the year as countries began to emerge from lockdowns and other economic restrictions. In Malaysia, the loosening of MCO

restrictions and the resumption of economic activity led to air and water quality reductions.[20] Such trends are broadly in line with outcomes of the 1998 and 2008 financial crises, during which emissions dipped with the onset of recession.[21] For all the talk of building back better and a "new normal", it seemed that the world was headed back to its pre-Covid climate tumult.

Indeed, the pandemic itself brought on further environmental and related issues. Waste, already a complex and increasingly significant issue nationally, faced the burden of increasing medical waste (up 18.1% between 2019 and 2020),[22] largely in the form of personal protective equipment and masks17 and plastic usage, driven by the rise in food takeout and delivery as service industries remained partially open. Globally, deforestation saw an uptick during the pandemic due to loosened environmental regulations and the effects of economic stimulus,[23] yet data from Global Forest Watch indicated a decrease in deforestation in Malaysia in 2020 relative to its 2016–19 average. The Department of Wildlife and National Parks recorded a 60% reduction in smuggling between 2020 and 2021 and recorded zero cases of poaching in 2021, with the MCO, border controls and effective enforcement playing key roles.[24] The reopening of Malaysia's economy and borders has reignited concerns among experts over the re-emergence of wildlife trading.[25]

Green concerns at forefront

But from a policy perspective, some things stuck. Key among this was the realisation that business-as-usual practices would not constitute the necessary shift towards sustainability. A significant juncture for Malaysia was the passing of Budget 2021 with former prime minister Muhyiddin Yassin acknowledging the "promising path of green recovery" to spur economic growth and societal wellbeing, and enhance climate resilience and the nation's low-carbon efforts.[26]

A sustainable focus was instituted in the budget, and along with it a host of climate-positive initiatives. These came in the form of supply chain and technology focused programmes designed to support the nation's environmental, social and governance (ESG) ecosystem; increased allocations towards achieving the SDGs; steps towards enhancing the green financing ecosystem; and the introduction of mechanisms to support biodiversity conservation and protection.[27]

Indeed, the ESG agenda has since developed into a significant source of focus in Malaysia in the Covid era, driven by actions at the firm level, statutory bodies, such as Bursa Malaysia and Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM), and industry and professional coalitions, such as Climate Governance Malaysia (CGM), the CEO Action Network (CAN), and the Joint Committee on Climate Change (JC3). Much of this increased emphasis occurred during 2021. In April, BNM launched the climate change and principle-based taxonomy,[28] designed to assist financial institutions in assessing and categorising economic activities based on their climate friendliness as well as indicators of resource efficiency and biodiversity and ecosystem conservation.

It also took steps towards standardising the classification and reporting of climate risk exposures to encourage climate financing. Bursa, meanwhile, launched "#financing4ESG" in November, an initiative designed to encourage ESG practices across listed companies to build on its previous efforts to enhance sustainability reporting and its support of the Taskforce on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD). Private sector-led climate efforts also flourished. CGM and CAN organised a series of roundtable sessions launched by the Environment and Water Ministry (KASA) with the aim of exploring industry- and sector-level low-carbon interventions, serving to propel climate considerations into mainstream thinking.

> **Climate policy has seen renewed interest, too, in part due to the efforts of statutory bodies and the involvement of more pro-climate interest groups, formed of corporate professionals and industry leaders, academics, researchers and civil society.**

The pandemic brought on a wave of commentary on sustainable recovery efforts and continued calls for the enhancement of climate measures to suit global business and investment pressures and even economic realities.[29] Indeed, Budget 2022 continued the previous year's emphasis on sustainability while the 12th Malaysia Plan (12MP), launched in September 2021, featured numerous initiatives catered towards low-carbon development, and proposed the deployment and enhancement of climate economic instruments, including carbon pricing, ecological fiscal transfers and payments for ecosystem services. The 12MP also coincided with the announcement of Malaysia's own net-zero target, following in an increasingly global trend and in the footsteps of a growing number of private sector entities, including Petronas, the state oil and gas company, and Tenaga Nasional Berhad, Malaysia's largest electricity utility.[30]

In late 2021, the long-delayed COP26 took place. With it, Malaysia marginally enhanced its NDC to the Paris Agreement, pledged to curtail deforestation and methane emissions by 2030, and committed to a halt in the construction of new coal-fired power plants. In line with the 12MP, it was reported that KASA would be developing a domestic emissions trading scheme (DETS); the Finance Ministry (MOF) a carbon tax; and Bursa Malaysia the Voluntary Carbon Market (VCM). Indeed, KASA is also in the process of reviewing and updating the National Policy on Climate Change (NPCC), first launched in 2009, as well as developing the NDC Roadmap and Long-Term Low Emissions Development Strategy (LT-LEDS) as part of its international climate obligations. These and other steps, such as the inclusion of biodiversity, climate change adaptation and mitigation, and water security concerns in structural development plans, such as the recently launched fourth National Physical Plan, constitute a significant shift in Malaysia's climate policy landscape.

Heeding clarion call

The links between Covid-19 and climate change and environmental degradation are complex, featuring many interrelationships and almost a blending of cause and effect. What was clear early on is that anthropogenic activities have contributed to the prevalence and growing threat of zoonotic disease, and recent experience has shown how pandemic response efforts can ameliorate and worsen climate and related outcomes. If the world wishes to eradicate itself of future reincarnations of Covid-19, more must be done to ensure environmental protections.

Clearer linkages can be drawn between climate policy and Covid-19: on the whole, the 2020s have coincided with an increasing climate consciousness and a burgeoning policy appetite for climate action. It can be argued strongly that this is in a big way a result of Covid-19.

> **From the early days of the pandemic, calls were made for sustainability to feature prominently in recovery efforts. Many governments listened and since then, record economic stimulus packages have come with stipulations towards boosting low-carbon development and growth.**

Malaysia was among this group, with the government's signals towards a green recovery first institutionalised in Budget 2021 and later iterated in the subsequent budget, as well as a litany of climate-focused policies and policy instruments in the processes of development and deployment. Attention must now turn to ensuring these policy directives deliver concrete and necessary change towards minimising Malaysia's adverse climate and environmental impacts while preparing for the consequences of climate change. While Malaysia's initial steps towards building back better are promising, much work remains.

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CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS DURING PANDEMIC

IZZAH IBRAHIM & REGINA WAN AHMAD

Introduction

The first cases of Covid-19 in Malaysia were detected on 25 January 2020, traced to three Chinese nationals travelling from Singapore. As part of the national response to mitigate the communal spread and pressure to the country's healthcare system, the movement-control order (MCO) was implemented on 18 March 2020. It restricted most non-essential activities outside, allowing for only necessities, such as household groceries and medical treatment.

To support the enforcement of the MCO, the Malaysian armed forces (MAF) were deployed on 22 March 2020. However, the designation of these new responsibilities raised questions over the extent of the MAF's supporting role. This included discussions over the existing understanding of civil-military relations in Malaysia and the evolving concept of national security interests. The ability to determine the state of such relations will be imperative for policymakers to adapt against similar threats in the future and inform the public accordingly.

Purpose of the armed forces

Determining the purpose of the armed forces requires an understanding of their culture and system of values, in addition to their respective country's own philosophy and ideals. Military organisations are distinct from their civilian counterparts as their career-long education system reinforces particular forms of system of values and culture.

Historically, then-Malaya's military was born out of the Malay rulers' awareness and insistence on the need for a native population to defend their homeland.[1] This expanded to the First Battalion of the Malay Regiment in 1938, which saw its

first conflict against the Japanese armies. Since the end of World War Two, the MAF evolved from conflict patterns brought by internal security[2] towards a new focus of modernising their conventional fighting force to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Compared to some military experiences, Malaysia did not encounter disagreements over the presumed role of the armed forces being subservient to a civilian government. Instead, much of Malaysian civil-military relations have been amiable since its infancy. This was primarily attributed to what Jalal et al. (2021) determined as the military's overall satisfaction with the civilian government and its leadership.[3] Even following the events of May 13, 1969, Tun Razak, then-chairman of the National Operations Council (Majlis Gerakan Negara, MAGERAN) viewed that a military takeover was unlikely due to this reason. This was similarly reciprocated on the side of the military as then-chief of the armed forces General Ibrahim Ismail declined to assume a greater leadership role in said council. Such relations endured when the military became involved to develop society across political, economic and social aspects in the defence and development concept (Keselamatan dan Pembangunan, KESBAN) of 1971. The success of KESBAN throughout the Emergency period encouraged the broadening of this concept into a comprehensive security strategy (Pertahanan Menyeluruh, HANRUH).[4] This approach, developed in the 1980s, expanded to include the private sector and society to defend the country alongside defence resources and government agencies.

The evolution towards addressing a broader concept of security shows how threats are not limited to those involving sovereignty and external aggressors.

Expanding them as they did since the 1980s granted some degree of flexibility to the MAF. This was notable in their secondary roles as overseas peacekeepers and domestic military assistance. While they play a major role in natural disaster responses, they remain separate from civilian duties under the purview of the royal Malaysian police.

Changes to function of the military since pandemic

Malaysia deployed the army as part of its Covid-19 response because of the need to address the overwhelmed medical facilities and services of civilian health agencies. The military could provide essential medical services to the public as they possess resources – medics, transportation, infrastructure and communications – that could ease the burden on the healthcare sector.

From the first MCO in March 2020, the military was called to build field hospitals and deliver vaccines to inaccessible locations.[5] Other assignments included the body management team assisting in managing the remains of Covid-19 patients, the rapid resupply team distributing critical medical equipment and the oxygen resupply team, which carried, refilled and resupplied oxygen tanks.[6]

The supporting role also included assisting police and relevant bodies to enforce MCO measures. Military personnel helped enforce roadblocks. Their actions categorised the military as "front-liner" personnel in the eyes of the public, thereby strengthening their positive image.[7]

The MCO measures were perceived as a necessity. However, enforcement was hindered by confusion and misunderstandings surrounding the virus. Azlan et al. (2020) assessed the knowledge, attitudes and practices towards Covid-19 to determine society's readiness to accept behavioural change. Their study found that the majority agreed with the first MCO's implementation and believed that the government's actions contained cases of infection.[8] However, while the study was not able to capture a demographic sufficiently representative of the country, the authors assumed that the high level of positive attitudes were attributed to the swiftness of the initial responses.

Thus, if there were a high proportion of positive sentiments towards Covid-19-related measures, it may be possible to

infer that there should also be largely positive attitudes towards the military from when they were first deployed to present.

FIGURE 1. English-speaking newspapers' framing of Covid-19 and civil-military relations
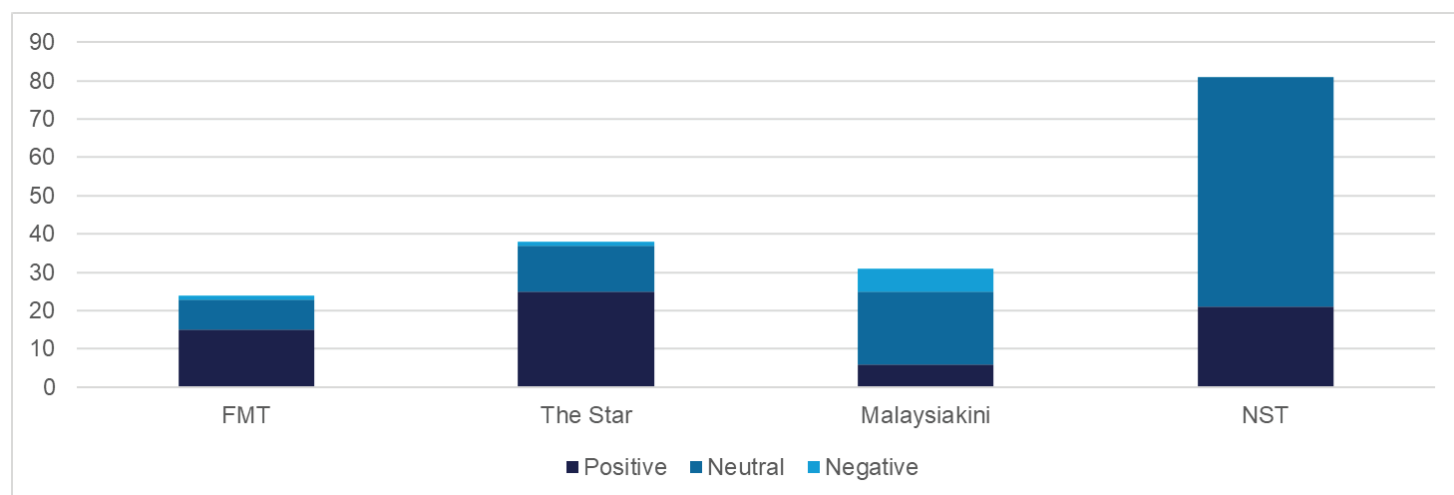
Source: Authors

A sentiment analysis was conducted on the military's role in the MCO across a sample of English-speaking newspapers.[9] It sought to distinguish the positive, neutral and negative sentiments from the announcement of the military's involvement on 20 March 2020 to the end of February 2022. The results found that coverage on the MAF was predominantly neutral.

Although a preliminary assessment, it reflected the general assumption that civilian opinion towards the military in the country has not changed significantly. Sentiments have been neutral, which can infer both an increasing acceptance of a tacit expansion of the military's role in domestic security and limited negative civil-military discourse in Malaysia.

Negative coverage came in mid-January 2021, when the Emergency (Essential Powers) Ordinance 2021 granted additional powers to the military. Section 7(1)[10] granted the military the ability to arrest civilians in violation of MCO measures.[11] The extension of such powers covered the duration of the Emergency from 12 January 2021 to 1 August 2021.[12]

The announcement created immediate backlash from several civil society groups expressing fears that the additional powers could lead to excessive use of force or infringement on civil liberties. Zaid Malek of Lawyers of Liberty noted that then-senior minister Ismail Sabri failed to justify the use of additional powers as the MAF were not equipped to carry out civilian arrests unlike police personnel.[13] This concern was echoed in the newspapers, utilising words such as "dangerous"[14] or "excessive use of force",[15] to paint an alarmist image of the military and their newly extended powers.

These instances reignited discussions over what constitutes elements of national security and the means taken to defend them. The pandemic demonstrated unforeseen disruptions to the social order, politics and economy. Existential threats are no longer the highest priority for security, rather it is how best to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and to chart a path to recovery. This, in turn, places pressure on civilian authorities and policymakers to decide who are to be included in this endeavour.

Nonetheless, backlash against the MAF during Covid-19, whether by the media or civil groups, remains an exception. This is often not the case in many countries, including the neighbouring states of Indonesia and the Philippines.

Comparison with other countries

Due to the widespread effects and transmissibility of Covid-19, many countries deployed their armed forces to help contain the spread of the virus. This ranged from enforcing Covid-19 lockdowns or quarantine measures to assisting with the healthcare sector. Similar to Malaysia, the greater inclusion of the military affected the state of civil-military relations.

In the Philippines, the armed forces of the Philippines (AFP) were authorised to support "all necessary measures to ensure peace and order in affected areas" in March 2020.[16] The deployment of the AFP during Covid-19 was a familiar one, reminiscent of their involvement in providing disaster relief, and cemented a high level of public trust.[17] However, the scope of the AFP's powers considerably widened to include security, policing and enforcement roles. Retired military personnel were also major players in the implementation of the National Action Plan and Covid-19 National Task Force.[18]

Such an expansion was criticised. The AFP were accused of participating in extrajudicial killings, arresting government critics and abusing detainees. There were concerns that this would be exacerbated should President Rodrigo Duterte impose a nationwide martial law.[19] Zachary Abuza, a professor from the National War College in Washington, DC, noted that it could lead to further censorship and assaults on free press with aid of the AFP.[20]

Another example of pandemic-related shifts in civil-military relations was between Indonesia and their tentera nasional Indonesia (TNI). Top positions, such as the chair of the Covid-19 handling task force and the Indonesian national board for disaster management, were given to high-ranking members of the military, such as Doni Monardo and Suharyanto.[21] The controversial former health minister Terawan Agus Putranto was a former general as well.

However, unlike the Philippine example, the army is not in charge of making any civilian policy, but critics worry about the TNI's growing proximity to the civilian government. President Joko Widodo is known for his close ties to the military, one that Abuza noted grants the space for the military to "claw back civilian power and Jokowi is either enabling them or not standing up to them".[22] Similarly, Wasisto Raharjo Jati, researcher at the Centre for Politics at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences, stressed that the greater involvement could affect Indonesia's quality of democracy.[23]

While there was a period where Malaysia expanded the powers of its military, the reactions against them were more muted. These could be attributed to the fact that the military were never used as a tool to consolidate regime change. On the other hand, the AFP were behind the 1989 coup d'état attempt against president Corazon Aquino. In Indonesia, former president Suharto ruled the country for three decades under a military-dominated government. Without any recent precedent of military encroachment, it might be difficult for Malaysians to imagine their military with such goals.

Furthermore, unlike in Indonesia, neither retired nor active senior military personnel have been appointed to leadership positions of any major Covid-19 task force.[24] To the Malaysian public, key personnel such as the health minister or director-general of health remained to be either technocrats or elected officials. While there were attempts to expand the powers of the prime minister during the pandemic, the military were not involved in such discussions.

Policy recommendations

With consideration of the ongoing pandemic and the steps towards recovery, there are several recommendations to improve both civil-military relations and prepare against future crises.

First, there needs to be formalised recognition of the expanded scope of the MAF's roles and duties. This entails a change in policies overseeing the function of the armed forces towards one able to account for the evolving security needs; namely, the recognition that security is no longer limited to external threats as it needs to address non-traditional concerns, such as health crises and human security, in a structured manner as opposed to ad hoc

arrangements. Changes to the armed force in terms of structure and goals should remain cognisant of existing strengths and limitations as opposed to making wholesale changes.

Second, multi-agency and cross-ministerial collaboration needs to be supported and enhanced. The pandemic demonstrated how multi-agency collaboration is not only a widely accepted element in managing disasters and public health emergencies, but also a necessity. It allows for accelerated responses and recovery times by utilising best-suited assets for the tasks regardless of the institutions and bodies involved. Such collaborative work should be institutionalised as part of future whole-of-government approaches to encourage a timely flow of information to state units, agencies and citizens. It will require functional relationships with clear roles, channels and methods as insufficient leadership and oversight can create significant challenges, such as bureaucratic red tape and duplication of efforts.

Third, the government and policymakers must issue consistent and explicit messaging. Consistent messaging was key to aid public knowledge and understanding when responding to the virus. The approach and commitment do need to extend across government assets, including the MAF. These can also aid the public's understanding of roles, such as the military's in maintaining security and internal order. This can serve the dual purpose of clearer messaging and supporting cross-ministerial collaboration.

Conclusion

The novelty of the virus and its effects in such a short duration made it both a difficult and critical task for health authorities to plan strategies alone. The MAF's subsequent role to support pandemic-relief measures presented a means for the armed forces to diversify their role and expertise towards non-conventional means of protecting the country.

> **Military assistance is not a novelty in the Malaysian context. While their capabilities made them an exemplary force through their deployment of assets and personnel, they were limited by their predominant focus and experiences on conventional warfare.**

Such an emphasis can go against the changing needs for security and stability, which raises concerns on future-proofing the MAF to meet these challenges and communicating such roles to both civilian leadership and the citizens.

Despite these developments throughout the pandemic, the state of civil-military relations remained relatively neutral and stable. They were able to operate alongside the civilian government and bodies in a supportive role, attracting no significant negative resistance from their involvement. Such a state does present potential opportunities to improve the MAF's relations and leveraging themselves for future threats.

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CHINA'S 'SOFT POWER' ON SHOW IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

ANGELINE TAN

The year 2021 was when most governments tried to find a new normal in an ever-changing Covid-world. For Southeast Asia, it meant launching national immunisation programmes and managing local economies while keeping a watchful eye on geopolitical developments. While the pandemic brought about a host of new challenges, foreign relations have not been impacted the way domestic issues were.

Rather, 2021 underscored the importance of maintaining external relations, as they are not only crucial to uphold regional stability but also receive Covid-19-related health assistance that has aided the region's ability to manage the pandemic and work towards recovery.

One country's assistance stands out from the rest. China's vaccine diplomacy, medical aid and increased trade engagement are unparalleled to any other country's assistance to Southeast Asia during these two years of Covid-19. While this speaks of the strong and enduring friendship between Beijing and Southeast Asia, the regional dynamic is not as simple.

China's engagement in Southeast Asia, its relations and cooperation with Malaysia will be used as a case study. This article seeks to examine three areas which have shaped Asean-China cooperation during the pandemic, namely Covid-19 health assistance, the South China Sea and economic relations.

Healthy bodies, healthy friendship

The Asean-China friendship was evident in the pandemic assistance. "Vaccine diplomacy" describes Beijing's Covid foreign policy, which aimed to portray China as an equal partner and a reliable friend. This strategy was particularly effective in contrast to the West's stockpiling of vaccines, which left developing countries waiting for scraps. Instead, Beijing designated Asean countries as priority recipients of its home-made vaccines.

By November 2021, China had distributed nearly 200 million doses to Southeast Asia and pledged to donate another 150 million doses. Due to its population size, Indonesia and the Philippines were the largest recipients of China's vaccine diplomacy. Malaysia stopped acquiring Sinovac vaccines after receiving 16 million doses in July 2021, of which half a million doses were donated by China.[1] Beijing pledged another three million doses of Sinovac to Malaysia.[2]

Beijing's vaccine diplomacy injected momentum into the national immunisation programmes of countries, such as Cambodia and Indonesia.[3] Alongside other medical donations, China's assistance helped enable the region to work towards a post-pandemic recovery.

Malaysia has a diverse vaccine portfolio comprising mainly of Pfizer, AstraZeneca and Sinovac. In February 2021, the country received the first batch of Sinovac in a grand ceremony a week after kicking off the national immunisation programme. Apart from receiving early shipments, procuring from China was also an affordable choice as the price of the Sinovac vaccine was cheaper since the fill-and-finish process could be carried out in Malaysia. Although the Malaysian government concluded its procurement of the Sinovac vaccines in July 2021, the Chinese vaccine remained a dominant feature in the national immunisation programme.[4]

The Malaysian public's perception of Sinovac has been mixed. On the one hand, Sinovac was the preferred choice for many who trusted in its traditional technology of an inactivated virus.[5] On the other, the lack of transparency of clinical trials and its halal status were called into question. Some also regarded Sinovac as inferior due to its lower efficacy rate, a perception further fuelled by the reported deaths of Indonesian doctors inoculated by Sinovac in July 2021. However, vaccine hesitancy in Malaysia was not limited to Sinovac and the Chinese-made vaccine was the second most used in Malaysia.[6]

Vaccine diplomacy defined China's relations with Southeast Asia in 2021 and this is true for Malaysia. The donations and priority access to vaccines generally improved the perception of bilateral relations in Malaysia. Vaccine diplomacy demonstrated the strong friendship in bilateral relations and moving forward, Malaysia, like the rest of Southeast Asia, anticipates greater cooperation with China.[7]

No less trouble in the South China Sea

Throughout the pandemic, tensions in the South China Sea did not simmer down. With the Code of Conduct delayed further, the issues in the South China Sea continue to pose a challenge between China and Southeast Asian claimant states. China continued to carry out activities in the disputed waters by establishing its administrative claims[8] and engaging in standoffs with Southeast Asian claimant states. Most notable was the March 2021 standoff with the Philippines when 200 Chinese vessels, some of which were maritime militia, showed up in the disputed waters of Whitsun Reef. Manila responded cautiously, lodging a diplomatic protest and warning the vessels to withdraw immediately. Careful to prevent an escalation of the situation, Manila's diplomatic response protected its bilateral relations with China as the Philippines continued to receive donations of Covid-19 vaccines and trade remained unaffected.

Similarly, Malaysia faced a diplomatic issue with Beijing when 16 military planes flew into Malaysian-claimed exclusive economic zone in tactical formation in May 2021. Putrajaya mounted a diplomatic protest against China's actions,

accusing the latter of breaching Malaysian airspace and sovereignty and summoned the Chinese ambassador. Foreign Minister Hishammuddin Hussein intended to raise the matter with his Chinese counterpart at the Asean-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting. However, during the meeting, both sides appeared eager to move on from the issue.[9] The incident demonstrated Malaysia's strong resolve to defend its sovereignty while careful not to let the incident drag on or spill over into other aspects of bilateral relations.

Although this incident was quickly resolved and did not affect other aspects of bilateral relations, it left an impression on the Malaysian public that Beijing could not be trusted and demonstrated that the various government agencies would not hesitate to take on a more strident approach when calling out infringements. The incident created some scepticism over the sincerity of Malaysia-China relations, as Beijing was portraying itself as a friendly partner via vaccine diplomacy but did not hesitate to infringe on Malaysia's sovereign territory during a volatile political time. This led the public to become more critical of China, undermining its efforts in vaccine diplomacy.

Trade reigns supreme

Despite pandemic conditions and a series of lockdown measures in both Southeast Asia and China, bilateral trade grew steadily. Asean became China's largest trading partner in 2020, overtaking the European Union, and in the first half of 2021, trade expanded at a 38.2% year-on-year growth.

For Malaysia, trade is the cornerstone of its relations with China. For 13 consecutive years, China has been Malaysia's largest trading partner, and Malaysia is China's second largest partner in Asean after Vietnam.

The Malaysia-China trade volume grew by 4.2% year-on-year in the pandemic's first year and by 34.5% in 2021.[10] This can be attributed to increased exports in electrical and electronic (E&E) goods, as well as a boost in online trading and shopping.

While these figures are impressive, given the Covid context, trade represents only one aspect of the economic relationship. An overview of economic relations would not be complete without assessing the progress of China's signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Since the outbreak of the pandemic, many critics have pointed to the slowdown of BRI investments and activities. Chinese-led projects, such as the high-speed railways in Indonesia and Thailand, have been delayed, while power plants in Cambodia and Myanmar were reportedly disrupted. Similarly in Malaysia, the Covid-19-induced lockdowns slowed progress and disrupted the property market of the reclaimed-island mega-project, Forest City. The Melaka Gateway project was also cancelled in November 2020 after years of inactivity. Despite the challenges, Beijing is determined that the BRI brand remains successful and claims that most projects remain uninterrupted.

Instead of dwelling on impeded infrastructure projects, Beijing is focusing on its new economic paradigm dubbed the Dual-Circulation Strategy, which provided momentum in BRI and directing growth towards public health, digital transformation and green development.[11] This not only addresses the immediate concerns of the pandemic, such as through vaccine diplomacy, the Dual Circulation strategy also offers a digital and green road map to the future.

Working towards post-pandemic cooperation, Malaysia and China have indicated interest in strengthening partnership on digital economy. The real opportunities that the Malaysian economy needs lie in digital transformation and green development, which China is ready to explore.

There is recognition that Malaysia's MyDIGITAL initiative aligns with the BRI's tech focus, yet there are no clear plans for its direction. China's Digital Silk Road can bridge the gaps in the Malaysian digital economy. The pandemic revealed challenges in digital adoption in Malaysia, especially among small-medium enterprises which represent the backbone of the economy. China can help address these challenges through assisting with financing digitalisation and collaborating on innovation programmes that can cultivate local digital talent.[12] There should be more emphasis on sustainability in developing Malaysia's digital economy and this can be done in collaboration with China's newly launched global development initiative.[13]

Conclusion

In times of crisis, true friendship is revealed. The pandemic posed many challenges and China stepped up to address the region's needs. If anything, Covid-19 has only enhanced China's role in Southeast Asia. While relations have grown steadily, the highlight of China's engagement in Southeast Asia in the past two years has been its vaccine diplomacy.

This soft-power strategy to win the hearts and minds of Southeast Asians may have been hindered by vaccine hesitancy but, as a whole, it boosted Beijing's image as a reliable partner. Vaccine diplomacy might have improved cooperation with Southeast Asian partners but soft power has its limits. The true test of the Asean-China relation lies in the South China Sea.

For Malaysia, vaccine cooperation and the ever-growing bilateral trade have only enhanced relations with China, but the relationship dynamics remain unchanged. China retains its position as an important partner to Malaysia and will continue to advance on areas of cooperation, but the South China Sea continues to be a thorn in the bilateral relationship.

Malaysia should pursue a strategic policy towards China. As the world shifts towards an endemic phase of Covid-19, vaccine cooperation will slowly lose its lustre as a foreign policy.

Nevertheless, Malaysia should continue to pursue health diplomacy with China beyond vaccine cooperation, such as collaborating in the healthcare industry, expanding medical tourism, mutual learning on healthcare policies and regulation, and building public health capacity.

On the economic front, as Malaysia ventures into the fourth industrial revolution, it is vital that it develops a strong digital economy. The Asean region is predicted to become the world's top five digital economies by 2025, and Malaysia should ensure that its digital economy is competitive. This article has highlighted that Malaysia should upscale its digital economy through seeking financing digitalisation and collaborating on innovation programmes that will cultivate local digital talent with China. This necessarily requires a clear and targeted plan that aligns Malaysia's MyDIGITAL with the Digital Silk Road.

In security, the prospects of the South China Sea remain as uncertain as ever. Malaysia should exercise leadership within Asean and urge for the finalisation of a Code of Conduct to manage maritime disputes. While this may not be an end-all to the security situation in the South China Sea, it will introduce mechanisms to manage maritime disputes and tensions.

The road ahead is still filled with challenges. The sincerity of China's partnership must be reflected in security challenges as much as it is expressed in diplomacy and economic relations.

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3   By September 2021, Cambodia was 8 months ahead of schedule for its national immunisation plan with 95% vaccinated with at least one shot of the Covid-19 vaccine. Cambodia dominantly relied on Chinese vaccines, which makes up over 27 million of the 30 million doses it has procured; see Barrett, C. (2021, September 7). Phnom Penh turned to China, now it's the "world's most vaccinated capital city". *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved from: https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/phnom-penh-turned-to-china-now-it-s-the-world-s-most-vaccinated-capital-city-20210906-p58pbk.html; Indonesia also dominantly used Chinese vaccines with 79% of its vaccinated population using Sinovac; Al Jazeera. (2022, February 7). *Can Sinovac protect Indonesia from the Omicron wave?*. Retrieved from: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/7/can-sinovac-protect-indonesia-from-the-omicron-wave

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ROOM TO GROW THE PUTRAJAYA-NEW DELHI PARTNERSHIP

YANITHA MEENA LOUIS

The early days of the pandemic in 2020 were also a time when Malaysia-India relations were at an all-time low. Former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad had angered India with remarks on Kashmir and India's Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) at the end of 2019[1] and New Delhi responded by asking palm oil refiners and traders to avoid buying Malaysian palm oil.

This diplomatic row even brought about trade-related repercussions. In January 2020, India's palm oil imports from Malaysia dropped to 46,876 tonnes, the lowest since 2011.[2] A thaw in relations came with Putrajaya's change in leadership. In March 2020, New Delhi took steps to reset ties with Putrajaya. Then Indian high commissioner Shri Mridul Kumar paid a call to former prime minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and former foreign minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein shortly after they took office. This "start-over" was crucial, considering how the next few months required that Malaysia and India work to address several pandemic-related issues.

> **It can be said that the pandemic necessitated a restoration of "normal" bilateral relations. Since the onset of the pandemic, relations are slowly but surely returning to normalcy with several top-level engagements and even a visit by the foreign minister to India on the cards.**

This article will attempt to capture (1) the state of Malaysia-India relations with an emphasis on how it evolved during the pandemic after the diplomatic row, (2) developments and shared challenges arising throughout the pandemic, and (3) the road ahead for the Putrajaya-New Delhi partnership.

Start of pandemic, end of row

The diplomatic row between Malaysia and India in 2019 and breakdown in trade relations resulted from a marked deviance in the "Malaysian way" of non-interference in the domestic affairs of its partners.[3] Dr Mahathir's criticism of New Delhi's domestic policies, particularly the CAA and the revocation of Article 370 did not go down well with the Modi government and this, in no time at all, turned into a full-blown diplomatic spat.

In January 2020, India imposed restrictions on imports of refined palm oil and palm olein but not crude palm oil.[4] As Malaysia is the main supplier of refined palm oil to India, this move was interpreted as a retaliation to the prime minister's criticism. In March 2020, when governments began to take stock of problems the novel coronavirus might bring, Malaysia underwent a change in government.

Putrajaya's change of leadership was an opportunity to reset Malaysia-India relations. New Delhi recognised this, and during Shri Mridul's meeting with Muhyiddin and Hishammuddin, he presented congratulatory letters from Prime Minister Narendra Modi[5] and Minister of External Affairs, S. Jaishankar. The Malaysian side reciprocated by expressing interest to enhance the strategic partnership between both nations and strengthen ties.

On 16 March 2020, Putrajaya announced the first movement-control order (MCO) for two weeks (18 March – 31 March). The MCO shut Malaysia's borders, restricting tourists and foreign visitors from entering the country. It was around the same time that the Indian government issued an order announcing restrictions on international travel as part of measures to combat the Covid-19 outbreak. Multiple scheduled flights between India and Malaysia were cancelled, stranding hundreds of Malaysian and Indian citizens in both countries.

After a period of tense relations, it was at this juncture that working relations intensified to address the issues of border control.[6] This cooperative effort continued throughout 2020 and 2021.

Malaysia was also among the first set of 12 countries included in the Vande Bharat Mission[7] (VBM), India's largest repatriation exercise launched during the initial months of the pandemic. The increased coordination and cooperation between several Malaysian and Indian government agencies and officials for this repatriation exercise was lauded as a step in the right direction towards restoring amicable relations.

Covid-19, shared challenges and cooperation

During the first year of the pandemic, cooperation between Putrajaya and New Delhi focused on the repatriation exercises. By the end of 2020, a total of 166 flights had operated from Malaysia to various destinations in India.[8] The passengers were not only Indian nationals travelling home, but also Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) card holders and Malaysians facing emergencies. The VBM flights also enabled many Malaysians in India to return.[9]

The two governments facilitated the operation of 42 flights on the Malaysian side to enable more than 4,700 Malaysians stranded in India to return home.[10] These repatriation exercises, however, had their own set of challenges. One was the challenge of repatriating Malaysian Tablighi Jamaat group members. As of July 2020, 189 members were stranded in India, and most were charged with flouting their social visa pass. Described as a "critical" situation, they were eventually brought home through a series of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions. Another challenge was India's devastating second Covid-19 wave that began in April 2021. In view of the rapidly rising cases, the government had to act fast to facilitate the return of Malaysians in India using specially charted flights.

However, the repatriation of migrant workers, including those from India, presented a different set of challenges. A number of the workers were undocumented and opted to participate in the repatriation recalibration programme. This allowed undocumented immigrants to volunteer to return to their respective home countries. Although the programme

was designed to account for migrant workers and provide them with safe options either to stay and legalise their employment status or return to their homeland, the process exposed the pitfalls in Malaysia's management of labour migration and the role sender countries play.

Besides repatriation exercises, India also sold hydroxychloroquine tablets to Malaysia. While an export ban was previously held for New Delhi to secure supplies for local consumption and donations to less-developed countries, the Indian authorities responded to Malaysia's request and approved a sale of 89,100 tablets in April 2020.[11] According to Putrajaya's treatment protocol in the first few months of the pandemic, hydroxychloroquine along with other drugs were to be administered for mild to severe Covid-19 cases (Putrajaya later dropped hydroxychloroquine as a treatment modality in June 2020, since it was ineffective against the coronavirus.)

Cooperation between Malaysia and India to tackle Covid-19 did not stop at the government level. At the peak of India's second wave, Unicef Malaysia launched an urgent appeal to aid India. Brickfields Asia College also worked with Unicef Malaysia and initiated the "Give BACk[12] for medical equipment, personal protective equipment, hygiene supplies and critical care to those in need in India.[13]

It must be stressed that while the many challenges of the pandemic remain, bilateral trade has been on a steady upwards trajectory since the events of 2019. India's exports to Malaysia in the first nine months of 2020 increased by 6.5% to US$4.6 billion compared to the corresponding period in 2019. India's imports from Malaysia during the same period reached US$5 billion. In 2021, bilateral trade between both countries expanded by 26% and overall trade reached US$17 billion.[14]

> ## For the Putrajaya-New Delhi partnership, the pandemic has not only been a challenge but also provided a solution to the breakdown in relations pre-Covid.

Cooperation between both countries ensured the safety and wellbeing of thousands of Malaysians and Indians alike and this is set to continue through future engagements and collaborations.

The road ahead

The Covid-19 pandemic has not only enriched our vocabulary with everyday words like "social distancing", "quarantine", "border control", "travel restrictions", "vaccine certificate" and "vaccine recognition" but has also created new baselines for countries to adapt to. In 2022, as countries start to open up and ease travel restrictions, bilateral cooperation and the movement of people are contingent upon the recognition of each other's vaccination status and quarantine requirements.

Malaysia and India have made great progress with Malaysia accepting travellers inoculated with India's indigenous Covid-19 vaccine, produced by Bharat Biotech.[15] In early February this year, Malaysia approved Bharat Biotech's[16] vaccine, making it the eighth Covid-19 vaccine authorised in Malaysia. India has, in fact, relaxed travel restrictions for Malaysian travellers with no mandatory quarantine or pre-flight RT-PCR test for the fully vaccinated entering India effective 14 February 2022.[17] Despite having no formal Covid-19 vaccine agreements, both governments recognise the vaccination certificates in practice.

Travel and tourism, however, is just one aspect of restored people-to-people connectivity. The pandemic has, more importantly, brought to light several structural and functional challenges with the current state of labour migration, with India and Malaysia as sender and recipient. This is an opportunity to address issues, such as unscrupulous recruitment agencies and middlemen, in both countries. This is also a chance to revisit and assess the standard operating procedure of worker entry and exit with input from Indian agencies. A joint task force can be set up for this purpose and to work

towards developing a contingency plan for migrant workers in case of future border restrictions.

The Overseas Indian Affairs Division of India's Ministry of External Affairs recently launched a #SafeandLegalMigration campaign in collaboration with popular Indian media personalities like actors Sivakarthikeyan, Akkineni Nagarjuna and Suresh Gopi. Wisma Putra and the Human Resources Ministry can consider collaborating within this initiative to set the record straight on what a migrant worker can expect in Malaysia. This will also reiterate Malaysia's commitment to providing safe working conditions for foreigners.

In mid-January this year, Plantation Industries and Commodities Minister Datuk Zuraida Kamaruddin announced that Malaysia is in talks with India[18] on bringing more foreign workers into the local plantation industry. Hence, this is the right time to increase high-level bilateral talks with agencies on both sides to address labour-related issues.

All said and done, Malaysia-India relations can and should improve. While the focus of this piece is on the bilateral relationship during the pandemic, it is worth mentioning that Putrajaya-New Delhi relations are still dynamic and volatile in nature, post the row in 2019. Besides trade and travel-related progress, there must be a mutual and conscious effort at trust-building.

The State of Southeast Asia: 2022 Survey Report published recently by the Asean Studies Centre at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute[19] revealed that 30.3% of Malaysian respondents do not consider India a responsible or reliable power, a significant increase from 16.5% in 2021. The survey also revealed that 7.9% Malaysian respondents felt that the country's political culture and worldview were incompatible with India's.

The fact that there is little trust in a partner that has shared a diplomatic relationship for more than six decades is perturbing. In fact, it questions the efficacy of standing agreements and the prospects of future ones. Despite a growing narrative that says otherwise, India is and will remain one of Malaysia's most important partners.

There must be greater political will to improve bilateral ties through high-level engagements and accelerate the provisions of the Malaysia-India enhanced strategic partnership.[20]

In the grand scheme of things, it must be internalised by both sides that while leaders, governments and political ideologies may come and go, people, businesses and economies stay connected and interlinked. It is for this reason only that Malaysia-India relations must be nurtured and elevated.

It can be said that the pandemic enhanced the Putrajaya-New Delhi partnership. Both countries cooperated to tackle several pandemic-related issues, mainly the repatriation of citizens to home countries. Fresh out of a diplomatic row at the end of 2019, bilateral relations improved to an extent, with increased opportunities to work together.

While Malaysia and India have achieved several pandemic-related baselines, such as restoring travel and recognition of vaccination certificates, there is scope to address other issues that came to light during the pandemic – such as labour migration. The year 2022 marks the 65th anniversary of bilateral relations, an important landmark year. Putrajaya and New Delhi must capitalise on this momentum and elevate ties further. Accelerating the provisions of the Malaysia-India enhanced strategic partnership is one way to do this.

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