

The COVID-19 Crisis: The Homeless and the Poor. How Can We Help Those under Duress

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Global inequality and injustice have been heated topics and of deep social concern throughout human history.

In January 2020, OXFAM (Oxford Committee for Famine Relief), a reputable confederation of charitable organisations, declared in a widely circulated report “2,153 billionaires have more wealth than the 4.6 billion people who make up 60 percent of the planet’s population”.

Debates about the statistical tools utilized by OXFAM has been widely discussed and circulated, but many of these are moot when faced with the considerable truth and challenge that there is a widening gap and disconnect between the rich, the middle class, and the poor.

The globally shared struggle against the Covid-19 crisis is a humbling reminder to everyone that the challenges we face in the 21st century, affect these groups in strikingly different ways, and at different levels of severity.

The homeless and the poor

While the Movement Control Order (MCO) and city-wide lockdown have been issued in numerous countries, many on social media have been quick to denounce and openly criticize those who have not adhered to this order.

In various instances this has been well justified, with people going out of their localities with poor reasons to do so, further endangering the health of the general public for what can only be described as selfish and inconsiderate reasons, and apathies towards the severe impact of the crisis at large.

But what of those who do not feel they have a choice on the matter?

While the order to stay home and lounge about within the comforts of one’s abode seems like a non-issue for many, the sobering reality is the unsustainable ability to stay at home for an extended period of time without earning an income. This is an unsupportable luxury for the majority, a problem more acute the poorer the economy.

The most obvious group affected are those whose households are living hand to mouth, where their income is measured on a daily workload basis. This is a reality for many low wage earners in various countries now caught in a hard situation where they cannot go out to earn for their household, which must impact adversely on the well-being of their family

later down the line.

On this matter, Malaysia's government has pledged a significant sum of money to help these affected groups. However, in order to assure that everything is coordinated effectively in a just manner, politicking and posturing need to be put aside in the interest of ensuring the aid provided will alleviate the crisis. To do otherwise is not only disingenuous, but will further erode trust between the people and the government, a guaranteed powder keg that will inevitably result in chaotic civil disobedience.

It also must be noted in light of recent cases, that it is of no help to anyone when even the Civil Society Organizations are facing difficulties exercising their duties and mission to aid the poor and homeless due to the MCO.

Order must be maintained through trust.

Another group that has been equally disenfranchised are the many small and medium enterprises (SME) and their owners who are also seeking more financial assistance to lift them from the dire circumstances that have befallen them.

Wider impacts on the economy aside, as many have already eloquently pointed out *ad nauseam*, many business owners and the wage earners are tied together in a relationship that is adversely impacted by the pandemic.

Should business owners find themselves unable to keep their businesses afloat, then the employees will not only be facing unemployment, but they may face the difficult prospect of seeking employment again post-pandemic. Failed businesses are not easily redeemed.

Crime and the victims of violence

What is an equally disconcerting topic is how the present Covid-19 crisis has purportedly marked an increase in various crimes including violent ones.

Domestic abuse has especially seen a marked increase ever since the MCO was announced.

As an example, in Malaysia, as of 26 March 2020, the *Talian Kasih*, a hotline which was introduced to provide counselling and assistance for women and children experiencing abuse and mental health problems saw a drastic markup of over 1,800 calls to the helpline, recorded since the MCO began. This is a whopping 57 percent increase.

This problem was especially noted after the fact that the Women and Family Development Ministry (KPWKM) had been criticized by various NGO groups, for initially suspending the hotline during the Movement Control Order.

In the United Kingdom, similar instances in the surging of domestic abuse cases have also been recorded, with many groups appealing to the government for a "separate emergency fund for local authorities to ensure they are able to adequately house survivors of domestic abuse in appropriate locations".

Some have speculated that there might actually be a higher number of unreported cases as many would probably be far too fearful to reach out for help, as their abusers are now forced to stay within the household in close proximity to their victims.

This is a particular concern for watchdogs who are disturbed that many children are also in vulnerable circumstances during the period of the MCO.

In Australia, for example, Julia Inman Grant, Australia's e-Safety Commissioner, stated that there were 13,000 reports investigated last year alone and that she had already seen a significant spike in the past two weeks.

It is to the commendable credit of individuals, organizations, and law enforcement officials who constantly monitor and respond as best they can to these issues when they do arise, but as it stands many resources have been spread thin to cover the crisis in various areas.

The need to evolve social security

Each of the previously highlighted issues showcase some serious faults in the safety nets of our social security structures, out of the many other numerous issues.

But what more can we do immediately to help those under duress in this crisis?

To be frank, nothing truly meaningful.

Many of the challenges we are now recognizing are done so on hindsight and the MCO has effectively impaired many from extending a helping hand. Well-meaning intentions cannot effectively be actualized, because we need to adhere to the present order to combat the infection rates of Covid-19.

All of these unintended consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic may only be truly exposed later on, but they do offer a valuable insight to the many gaps that society needs to fix so that we may be better prepared for when another crisis hits, whether it be in the near or distant future.

We should emphasize on focusing nation-building towards securing more social systems that benefit the poor and marginalised communities, with protocols and procedures that ensure they are not only given the assistance to overcome the problem but to also lift them from poverty to further cushion the impact when another crisis hits.

Businesses, especially SMEs which function as the backbone of developing nations will need to be given a larger degree of protection in order to ensure the survival of the wider economy, and also protect every person whose proverbial rice bowl is dependent on such economic activities as well.

More funding should also be given and allocated towards civil-society groups and organizations that also provide various aspects of social security, especially those who directly deal with cases of domestic abuse and children's welfare.

For this to come to fruition, we must build a society and a governance system that recognize our many social security failings as arguably traceable back to two factors: public apathy and corruption.

This has long plagued the upper echelons of leadership in our political and social sectors and we are now seeing that the ineffectiveness of our present social security systems is due to these ailments.

We must focus on building and strengthening our shared social security for the sake of our communities, and if we put more effort into strengthening it, we will be more able to weather the next crisis that befalls us, with nobody left in the lurch.

And, with that, further heights of prosperity may be possible for everyone.

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