REVISITING COVID-19 IN MALAYSIA
Plight and Perseverance

Editors
Vilashini Somiah • Nur Dayana Mohamed Ariffin

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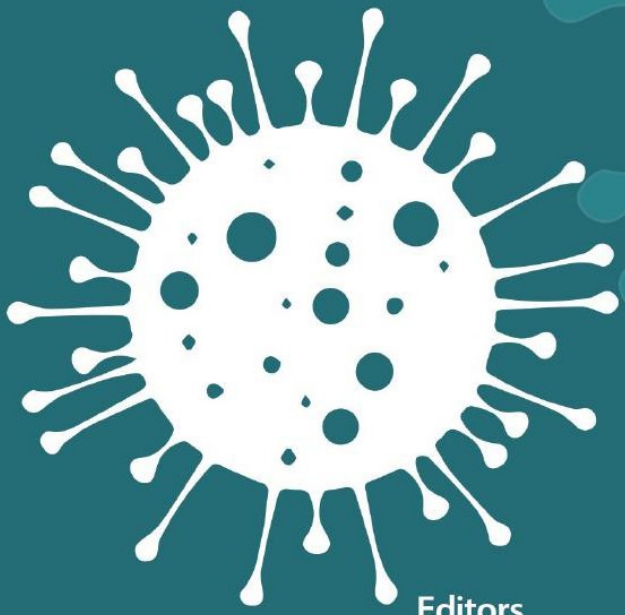

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The Social Sciences Matter
Configuring an Alternative COVID-19 Response[1]

Azmil Tayeb

Sustainable and people-centred health policies can save lives, and this is why the main thrust of this opening chapter is to emphasise the role of social scientists in Malaysia's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, specifically in the policy-making process. As we know, policies that look sound on paper might not be practical when implemented in society. The complexity of a society and its members may not be relevant to policies implemented from the top down, especially when there is hardly any engagement with stakeholders at the ground level. This is where social scientists can contribute by narrowing the gap between policymakers and society to ensure effective implementation of policies. Data compiled by social scientists through their extensive fieldwork and years of study can enrich policy-making discussions and ensure that policies reach their target demographics effectively. Therefore, the objective of this chapter is to discover the extent to which the Malaysian government includes social scientists in the policy-making process, by looking at areas of policy in which social scientists' contributions can be best channeled to resources available. The top-down nature of government policy-making means that the social scientists' role in shaping pandemic-related policies can

[1] Acknowledgement to "Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia for Fundamental Research Grant Scheme with Project Code: FRGS/1/2020/SS0/USM/02/15" and Universiti Sains Malaysia Short Term Grant, 304/PSOSIAL/6315357.

be clearly discerned by their proximity to the centres of power or their marginalisation by the policy-makers.

The chapter starts with a general discussion on including social sciences in pandemic responses. Some countries are more amenable to giving social scientists a substantive role in their public health policy-making while others rely on scientists and economists at the expense of social scientists. This section also highlights some areas of public health in which social sciences can make effective contributions. It is followed by a brief section on the formation of national-level councils that formulate and oversee Malaysia's Covid-19 response. The composition of these councils provides us with a clear snapshot of the limited role that social scientists have played in helping to shape Malaysia's pandemic-related policies. The chapter then continues with the methodology section that describes the approach used by this research to collect its data, including a list of informants and their contributions to key policy areas I believe can benefit the most from social sciences' input such as vaccination campaigns, correcting misinformation, mental health services, and outreach to marginalized communities such as indigenous people, migrant workers, refugees, and stateless people. This chapter poses five main questions relating to the role of social sciences in Malaysia's pandemic responses. Firstly, to what extent social scientists were included in scientific commissions/ad hoc advisory bodies. Next, to what extent has there been the emergence of research funding opportunities for social sciences? Thirdly, to discuss how research policy networking has taken place at the international, national and local levels in terms of planning, implementation and evaluation. Ampther question is, have there been researcher-led initiatives in support of Covid-19 responses; and how has this research on Covid-19 emerged in institutional and state agenda? Finally, there is a summary on the research findings on the varied ways social sciences have contributed to Malaysia's pandemic responses.

Social Sciences and Pandemic Responses in General

The main reason for incorporating social sciences in pandemic response is to provide policymakers with a ground-up perspective to threats posed by the pandemic which, in turn, allow the government to tailor its responses according to the different needs of various groups and to balance the interests of individuals with collective interests. Socio-economic

inequalities become more glaring amidst the hardship imposed by the pandemic, which was exacerbated by highly-centralised, one-size-fits-all policies that overlook the needs of certain demographic groups. Social sciences can also provide a way for the government to form an effective means of communication to disseminate vital information to the society at-large. This, in turn, can assuage the jittery public and stem the tide of misinformation and false claims that tend to thrive during times of uncertainty.[2]

There are three steps that the local and federal government can take to make policy-making climate more conducive toward social sciences' contribution. They could strengthen core social science response capacities, identify a social science agenda and potential for multi-disciplinary collaborations; and maintain a supportive social science ecosystem.[3] The first step entails, among others, investment in the human resources for a better response and create datasets to operationalise research findings and data. The second step involves identifying core competencies of social sciences, a well-defined agenda and potential of collaborations with other disciplines. Finally, the government should strengthen the network within which social sciences would be able to collaborate with others. Only by establishing a clearly defined context in which the social sciences can play a substantive role can the social sciences be able to contribute to managing public health crises such as the pandemic.

A multi-disciplinary pandemic response that includes the social sciences has at its centre the human factor, which tends to get overlooked in the policy-making process, which tends to be reliant on number crunching and lab results. Ethnographers working closely with epidemiologists can provide what Clifford Geertz terms "thick description", that not only illustrates the minute details of how a pandemic affects various groups in a society but also interpretations of the meanings and symbols behind these detailed descriptions.[4] "Thick description" of numerous vignettes can be channeled into the healthcare system to produce more effective and responsive policies especially when it concerns communities that have long been marginalized and misunderstood.[5] Findings from the social

[2] Bavel et al., 2020, 461.

[3] Wellcome Trust, 2020.

[4] Geertz, 1973.

[5] Leslie et al., 2020; see also Chapter 5 by Vilashini Somiah et al. and Chapter 6 by Lai Suat Yan and Sarah Ali for elaboration on minorities.

sciences can also help the government to formulate policies to prepare for a future pandemic, namely by providing insights into how human beings react under stressful, uncertain conditions, which can sometimes lead to inexplicably irrational behaviours such as vaccine refusal or hesitancy, wilful acceptance of conspiracy theories, among others.[6] As such, social scientists are much better positioned than their science counterparts when it comes to comprehending and engaging with the complexities of human behaviour.

Formation of ad hoc policy-making councils on pandemic response in Malaysia

At the onset of the COVID19 pandemic in mid-March 2020, the Malaysian government placed the responsibility of formulating and coordinating the country's responses under the National Security Council (*Majlis Keselamatan Negara*, MKN).[7] MKN is chaired by the Prime Minister and comprises cabinet ministers and heads of critical agencies. Since the pandemic is primarily a global health crisis, the first response was from those in the medical and science fields such as doctors and epidemiologists, followed by economists who assessed the impact of economic fallout particularly during lockdowns. It is the same uneasy dynamic we see in most countries when it comes to formulating their pandemic policies: protecting public health or saving the economy.

While the MKN remains to this day the top body overseeing pandemic responses, the Malaysian government also established the National Recovery Council (*Majlis Pemulihan Negara*, MPN) on 16 July 2021, which is tasked to ensure the effectiveness of the National Recovery Plan (*Pelan Pemulihan Negara*, PPN).[8] The Prime Minister announced PPN on 15 June 2021, more than two weeks after the imposition of a national lockdown, mainly to assure the jittery general public that there is a clear way out of this public health crisis. What is interesting about MPN is its makeup. For once, an authoritative body responsible for guiding Malaysia out of the pandemic includes two members with a social science background, both women. The first member is Dr. Habibah Abdul

6 Kellogg and Reyna, 2021.
7 Rafidah and Ahmad, 2020.
8 Malaysia Now, 2021..

Rahim, who is an expert on education and used to serve as a high-ranking official in the Ministry of Education. The second member is Dr. Hartini Zainuddin, a long-time advocate for children issues. Both of them are also well-known for their critical views on government policies, so their inclusion in MPN is a welcomed surprise.[9] Other members of MPN, besides selected cabinet ministers, include prominent businessmen, doctors, and a media practitioner.

Methodology

For this research, I choose areas in the policy-making process where I believe social scientists can play a meaningful role. These areas are vaccination campaigns, combating misinformation, provision of mental health services, and outreach to marginalized communities such as indigenous people, refugees, migrant workers, stateless people, among others. The choice of these areas of focus was also informed by interviews conducted with several academics and think tank analysts who have been directly or indirectly involved in the government's Covid-19 response.

In addition to unearthing official documents found on government websites and news reports, I also interviewed six informants who are academics at public universities and senior analysts at major think tanks. There were attempts to interview other informants but unfortunately they did not pan out. The informants interviewed for this research are as follow:

1) Dr. Suzana Awang Bono, Psychologist, Universiti Sains Malaysia
2) Dr. Vilashini Somiah, Anthropologist, Universiti Malaya
3) Dr. Rusaslina Idrus, Anthropologist, Universiti Malaya
4) Yeong Pey Jung, Senior Analyst, Penang Institute
5) Harris Zainul, Senior Analyst, Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS)
6) Wan Ya Shin, Acting Research Director, Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS)

[9] Malaysia Dateline, 2021..

The incorporation of social scientists in scientific commissions/ ad hoc advisory bodies

Steps towards including social scientists in high-level policy-making bodies came in later in the pandemic. I scanned government websites and the media but could not find clear evidence that social scientists were included in high-level ad hoc advisory bodies or scientific commissions. These bodies and commissions typically consist of cabinet ministers, deputy ministers, high-ranking ministry officials, business leaders, and public health experts. One high-level government advisory body that noticeably counts social scientists as its members is the Thinkers' Panel for Unity (*Panel Ahli Pemikir Perpaduan*), established by the Ministry of National Unity (MNU). The panel includes several prominent senior social scientists based in public universities, who have long enjoyed a close relationship with the federal government.[10] It is uncertain that these social scientists had much impact, due to the scarcity of information, for their role was explicitly stated to advise the MNU on its policies and implementation.

There is an undeniable gap of participation between researchers with science background and non-science background in high-level advisory bodies but this does not mean that the government completely sideline social scientists' inputs at both federal and state level. As exemplified by the *Panel Ahli Pemikir Perpaduan* mentioned above, social scientists can still contribute to policy-making but the proximity of a social scientist to those at centres of power illustrates how influence and connections help get non-science participants in policy-making.

Besides the ones who are politically-connected, social scientists who are based in government-sponsored think tanks also enjoy direct access to policymakers. Harris Zainul, a senior analyst with the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), a federal government-sponsored think tank, shares his experience of working closely with policymakers during the pandemic, particularly public misinformation during the pandemic (also known as the infodemic). Harris and officials from MOSTI and the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) keep an active communication channel between them. The government solicits ISIS for its latest findings on numerous pandemic-related issues – the the infodemic in Harris' case – while ISIS analysts regularly feed the federal government with policy briefs

[10] Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2020.

as a way to share their findings and analyses.[11] This relationship is more intertwined during the pandemic due to the urgency of the situation. This comes as no surprise as ISIS receives nearly half of its budget from federal allocation. Again, it is hard to quantify the extent of its influence on the policies since the federal government also solicits inputs from other stakeholders.[12]

Similarly, state-based think tanks enjoy access to policymakers in the state government though in the context of Covid-19 the policies are limited in nature due to public health matters being under the sole purview of the federal government. Yeong Pey Jung, a senior analyst with Penang Institute, a think tank funded by the Penang state government, relates that the way that Penang Institute can contribute on the policy-making front is to provide research findings and recommendations on the impacts that the pandemic has on the state of Penang. Since last year, Penang Institute has produced a series of Covid-19-related policy papers on issues such as tourism economy, unemployment, small and medium enterprises (SMEs), manufacturing industry, food security, health, domestic violence and many others with Penang as the case study.[13] According to Pey Jung, Penang Institute's analysts are often invited to sit on various Covid-19 task forces and committees formed by the state government, mainly the ones that focus on welfare and economic recovery. State government officials also regularly request Penang Institute's analysts to conduct research on specific topics that are relevant to Penang. It is worth noting that research done by Penang Institute for the state government need to be in applicable form, namely they can be immediately translated into actionable policies due to the urgency demanded by the pandemic.[14]

Think tanks that are not funded by the federal and state government can also play an active role if they have a track record working with the government. Wan Ya Shin, the then acting director of IDEAS, a private think tank based in Petaling Jaya on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, informed me that the federal government does engage with IDEAS for

[11] See ISIS's Policy Papers and Briefs on COVID19, https://www.isis.org.my/covid-19/.

[12] Harris did mention that the federal government did take up one recommendation proposed by ISIS: the federal govermment implemented the phase-based system to signify the country's progress towards normalcy. Interview via Microsoft Teams with Harris Zainul, July 23, 2021.

[13] See Penang Institute's COVID19 publications, https://penanginstitute.org/publications/covid-19-crisis-assessments/

[14] Interview via email with Yeong Pey Jung, July 22, 2021.

policy ideas despite it not being federally-funded like the aforementioned ISIS. However, according to Wan Ya Shin, the receptiveness toward IDEAS is not uniform among government ministries and agencies. She said that only ministers, ministries and agencies that have had a long-standing and close relationship with the federal and state government would solicit policy input from IDEAS. [15] In other words, a proven track record allows IDEAS the opportunity to participate in the policy-making process to a certain degree despite its "outsider" status.[16]

Social scientists who do not have close proximity with people in power can still influence policy-making in other ways. One way is to use established relationships with officials in the government to disseminate research findings without any solicitation. This is how Dr. Suzana Awang Bono, a psychologist at the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), relayed her research findings to relevant government officials. She passed on her research findings on mental health and vaccine hesitancy to MOH officials, with whom she has had prior working relationships even though these officials did not ask her for the findings. She said that the MOH officials were highly receptive to accepting her research findings and had promised to make full use of them. However, there is no quantifiable way to measure the impact of her findings on actual policy-making. Dr. Vilashini Somiah, an anthropologist at the University Malaya (UM), is originally from Sabah and has done extensive research on stateless and migrant communities there. She has discusssed with some officials in the Sabah state government the most effective ways to reach out to stateless and migrant communities during the pandemic as these people generally hold a high degree of distrust against the state government and tend to avoid authorities at all costs.[17]

Another way for social scientists to inform policy-making is to lead by deed and directly engage policy implementers at the society level. Dr. Rusaslina Idrus, an anthropologist based in Universiti Malaya (UM), is a long-time researcher of the Orang Asli (indigenous people) communities in Peninsular Malaysia. During the early days of the pandemic, she was worried about information from the federal government not trickling

[15] Examples of such collaborations are: Ya and Kan, 2020; and Halmie et al. 2020.

[16] Interview via Google Meet with Wan Ya Shin, 3 August 2021. IDEAS has published briefs on the impacts of the pandemic, particularly on education, SMEs and democracy, which can be found at https://www.ideas.org.my/publications/.

[17] Interview via Google Meet with Dr. Vilashini Somiah, July 28, 2021.

down to or being fully understood by the Orang Asli communities, and she saw no serious effort by the Department of Orang Asli Development (*Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli*, JAKOA) to address the communication barrier. She swiftly decided to work with a few grassroots NGOs to produce posters of government's pandemic SOP in various Orang Asli languages and contextualised to fit with the Orang Asli's way of life since government's SOP tends to be urban-centric. The posters caught the attention of JAKOA, which then helped to produce and distribute them to far-flung Orang Asli communities. Dr. Rusaslina worked with Hospital Orang Asli in Gombak (a district on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur), under the authority of the MOH, to help distribute the posters and current information on vaccination.[18]

The emergence of research funding opportunities for social sciences

At the onset of the pandemic, numerous research grants were announced by the government through the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MOSTI) and public universities specifically pertaining to Covid-19. The ever shifting nature of the pandemic means that there was a short window to apply for the grants and the duration of the grants tend to be limited to between six months and one year. The grants also heavily favour research projects that have practical value and are problem-solving in nature, as opposed to more theoretical and fundamental types of research projects, since the grants' main objective is to come up with solutions to myriad impacts the pandemic has or potentially has on the society.

In early April 2020, MOHE opened the application for the Post-Covid-19 Special Research Grant Scheme (*Skim Geran Penyelidikan Khas Pasca COVID19*). The grant's scope broadly identifies 20 critical areas such as economy, public health, national security, education, environment, local government, food security and others. It is available to all researchers in public and private universities but the application window was only opened for two short weeks between 15 and 30 April 2020. The maximum amount a researcher can receive from the MOHE grant is RM25,000 (USD6,000) and the lowest is RM5,000 (USD1,200). The maximum

[18] Interview via phone call with Dr. Rusaslina Idrus, July 24, 2021.

duration for the grant is 6 months (1 June to 31 December 2020). There are three levels of assessment during the application process. First, interested researchers need to submit their application for faculty vetting. If approved, the application is forwarded to the university's research and innovation department for another round of vetting. Finally the university submits the proposal to the MOHE for final approval. Successful grant recipients need to receive research ethics approval from their respective universities before they can commence their research.[19] MOSTI grants, meanwhile, are exclusively directed towards science, technology and innovation, mainly in the area of research and development. There is no mention of social sciences in MOSTI's grant application guideline.[20]

In addition to the federal government's grants, many public universities also provide Covid-19 research grants from their financial reserves available to academics working at a university on a permanent or contract basis. The National University of Malaysia (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, UKM) through its Faculty of Medicine provides Geran Covid-19 Fakulti Perubatan UKM (GCovid-19). The scope of the grant is not just for the sciences as it also welcomes research in the social sciences, arts, applied arts, natural and cultural heritage, and communication. The maximum amount researchers can receive is RM50,000 (USD12,000) and the maximum period of the grant is two years.[21] The Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) provides a RM3.55 million (USD840,000) COVID19 grant for six areas it deems as critical: health and prosperity, social creativity and innovation, cyber technology, energy and environment, logistics and transportation, and industrial technology.[22] Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) offers two Covid-19-specific grants. First is the Innovation Grant Scheme – COVID19 Innovation (Skim Geran Inovasi – Inovasi COVID19). The period of this grant is between 6-12 months. Second is Research Grant COVID19 (Special Grant) or Geran Penyelidikan COVID19 (Geran Khas) that is either one or two years.[23] Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) has disbursed RM126,000 (US$30,000) to 10 researchers through its Skim Geran Penyelidikan UMK-COVID19 SPECIAL GRANT (UMK-

[19] Kementerian Pendidikan Tinggi, 2019. See also Saadiah, 2020.
[20] See eDana 2.0 Fund Management System, https://edana.mosti.gov.my/.
[21] GCOVID-19, 2020.
[22] Ahmad Suhael, 2020.
[23] Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 2020.

C19SG). These researchers cover topics such as economy, public health, tourism, food security, among others.[24] Lastly, Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) provides Research Quantum COVID19 (ResQ-COVID19) Grant that focuses on unemployment and food security issues. The grant has a ceiling of RM20,000 (US$4,700) and a four-month maximum duration.[25]

The funding mainly covers research production, typically manifested in the form of journal articles and policy papers. The research findings will be submitted to the ministry or the universities will share them with the federal government but there is no assurance that these findings will find their way into the policy-making process. Dr. Suzana Awang Bono, a psychologist based at the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), has been involved in national and international research teams that look at vaccine hesitancy behaviours among the population. She and her Malaysian team presented their findings to officials at the Ministry of Health (MOH), who in turn promised to use the findings to help policymakers fine-tune the efforts to vaccinate the population. However, there is no way of knowing for sure if the findings influence policy-making in a meaningful way. Dr. Suzana shared her findings with the MOH officials even though she did not receive any funding from the MOH. In her words, "Research-based evidence is important for policy-makers. They need our research findings."[26]

While there is a relatively wide availability of Covid-19-related grants for social scientists in Malaysia, particularly those based in public universities, many researchers are reluctant to apply to these grants. The first reason is the narrow application window, which is typically one-month or even two weeks for some grants. Many researchers do not find it worth their time to drop everything that they are doing and devote the time needed to complete the application. Many researchers also do not want to start new research on Covid-19, adding more to their already full research plate, or even make the effort to pivot their research to fit the Covid-19 focus of the grants. The narrow application periods tend to favor those who are already in position to easily recontextualise their existing research according to the requirements of the grants, thus saving

[24] Bernama, 2020..
[25] ResQ-COVID19, 2020. Malaysia.
[26] Interview via phone call with Dr. Suzana Awang Bono, July 16, 2021.

them a lot of time in preparing the grant proposals. The second reason is that many of these grants prefer multidisciplinary research projects. Most likely it means that researchers need to find collaborators in other disciplines to increase their chance for receiving the grants. Social scientists stand a better probability of being selected for the grants if they collaborate with their science counterparts. This means there may be privileges for researchers who are already engaging in multidisciplinary projects. The final reason is that the grim prospect of enduring tedious bureaucratic red tape discourages researchers from applying. According to Dr. Rusaslina Idrus, an anthropologist at the Universiti Malaya, grants can slow down efforts to engage with the affected community and thus it is better for researchers to do it on their own.[27] Examples of bureaucratic red tape include multiple assessments of the applications, the lengthy process of getting research ethics approval, cumbersome reporting, slow claims procedures, publication requirements, among others. There is also a well-founded worry that a short grant period (six months) means that research findings would be obsolete the longer the pandemic evolves, with the end being nowhere near in sight.

Multi-level networks and research policies

From the requirements laid out in the Malaysian government's grant application, the utmost priority is on applied research due to the dire situation and the need to respond quickly. The overarching objective of these government and university grants is to find solutions to various problems stemming from the pandemic that in turn can be translated to actionable policies. Yeong Pey Jung, the senior analyst from Penang Institute, mentions that state government officials require that all research during the pandemic addresses immediate issues that impact Penang and ways to resolve them. There is no room to for broader research that entails a longer time commitment and does not offer clear-cut solutions to the problems posed by the pandemic.[28] Harris Zainul, a senior analyst at ISIS, also faces similar pressure from policy-makers to come up with fast policy prescriptions to deal with immediate issues as the pandemic wears on. In his case, the officials at MOSTI and the Ministry of Communication and

[27] Interview via phone call with Dr. Rusaslina Idrus, July 24, 2021.
[28] Interview via email with Yeong Pey Jung, July 22, 2021.

Multimedia (MCM) actively ask for his inputs, including policy briefs, on the issue of public misinformation (the infodemic) as the government tries to convince the general public of the merits and urgency of pandemic SOPs and vaccination efforts while dealing with the torrent of fake news and half-truths flooding social media.[29] Another role that these official think tanks play is to assess policies formulated by the government – federal in the case of ISIS and state for Penang Institute. The federal and state governments would ask analysts at these think tanks to assess the soundness and viability of the policies drawn up by government officials and lawmakers. In all, social scientists in official think tanks act as the provider of research findings and recommendations to policy-makers and review the adequacy of their policies.

Dr. Vilashini Somiah, an anthropologist at UM, relates her experience engaging with the Sabah state government in trying to reach out to the stateless and migrant communities, particularly when it comes to delivering assistance and disseminating info on pandemic SOPs and vaccination programs. The information especially needs to be conveyed in the languages spoken by various indigenous tribes and migrant workers from Indonesia and the Philippines. The efforts by the state government to connect with these marginalised communities failed due to the communities' deep distrust against the state government. The state government has marginalized these communities countless times in the past and any display of goodwill by the state government would be viewed suspiciously. According to Dr. Vilashini, even government hospitals and schools, places conventionally known to be sanctuaries or safe havens, are having difficulties in reaching out to these communities as these institutions are perceived to be the repressive arm of the state, lumping them in the same group as the police and other coercive state authorities. In the end, the state government unburdens itself of the responsibility to help these communities and leaves NGO activists to carry out all social welfare work on the ground.[30]

COVID-19 has expedited federal- and state-funded think tanks sharing of research findings with their main funding source. This dynamic of the funder-think tank relationship does not change but there was increased pressure to provide swift and effective answers in line with the

[29] Interview via Microsoft Teams with Harris Zainul, July 23, 2021.
[30] Interview via Google Meet with Dr. Vilashini Somiah, July 28, 2021.

fast developing nature of the pandemic. Many recommendations were translated into implementable policies such as filtering the infodemic on social media and introducing lockdown phases. Most social scientists particularly those in academia do not appreciate the manner in which their research had to be presented to the government, mainly through proximity to those in centres of power and networking with relevant ministry officials. Some find policies implementations easier through grassroots engagement, such as Dr Rusaslina who found that officials the Orang Asli hospital more welcoming of collaborations. On the contrary, Dr Vilashini finds that engagement with government officials does not translate into efficient implementation of policies. Instead, she found that NGO activists provide more effective and productive as they have already been working with targeted communities.

Research initiatives in response to Covid-19

Many researchers prefer to work outside the constraints that government assistance often entails when it comes to putting their research and years of experience into battling the pandemic. Oftentimes it is more effective and quicker to work with NGO activists that are already on the ground helping various communities in need. Dr. Rusaslina, for instance, knows that the rigidly hierarchical and formal Department of Orang Asli Welfare (JAKOA) would significantly slow down any effort to get information and aid quickly to the indigenous communities. She found it was easier to get information on COVID-19 to the communities via posters in Orang Asli languages developed with community representatives and NGO activists.

Dr. Vilashini shares the story of the futile efforts by the Sabah state government to reach out to the migrant and stateless communities during the pandemic. The failure is solely due to the complete lack of trust and confidence of the communities that the state government is genuinely trying to help them. Stateless and migrant communities have long been ostracized in Sabah and were blamed for many of the state's problems. Trust needs to be developed over a long period of time and it is something that the state government does not have, which in turn hampers its efforts to engage with the stateless and migrant communities, so much so that it chooses not to do anything instead. NGO activists step into the breach to assist these communities that they have long worked with and thus have gained their trust. As such, the only way to engage these communities

effectively and meaningfully is through the NGO activists. Due to their politically and culturally marginalised status, these communities have never formed formal associations that can act as a liaison between them and the state government, unlike other "legal" communities in the state. In other words, these communities live in the shadows, well hidden from the long arms of the law.

According to Dr. Vilashini, only a handful of researchers were "experts" on these communities, including herself. This is because the state government forebade researchers from studying these communities, for reasons of public security. Now the state government must reckon with the serious problem of not having much data on these communities as it tries to engage them.[31]

Academics at public universities also helped contain the impacts of the pandemic. For instance, Social Work lecturers at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in Penang volunteered their expertise to counsel students and staff who are struggling with mental health issues due to the pandemic by setting up one-to-one counselling sessions via online meetings and WhatsApp. Psychologists at USM volunteered their expertise in a series of mental health-related webinars that are open to the public. Most public universities have also converted a section of their campuses into vaccination centres with university staff helping out as volunteers. There were also countless food and donation drives to help students and staff who are in need and also the community around campus.

Some think tanks also go beyond churning out policy briefs to help with the pandemic relief. The earlier referenced Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), carries out community service programs in collaboration with community NGOs. One such project is the Hospital Emergency Fund, a joint crowdfunding initiative with the NGO Projek #BangsaMalaysia to raise resources towards providing equipment to severely affected hospitals and frontliners.[32]

In short, some academics find it more productive to work with NGO activists at the grassroots level to assist with the pandemic relief effort. These are usually academics who are activists themselves, so they are already part of the NGO network, on the ground. The aid reaches the target communities faster and is fully transparent. The downside

[31] Interview via Google Meet with Dr. Vilashini Somiah, July 28, 2021.
[32] IDEAS, 2021..

is money; many NGOs operate with limited resources raised through crowdfunding.[33] Academics also contribute their expertise in other ways such as counselling services and public webinars that help to raise awareness about mental health issues and ways to cope with them.

Emerging research agenda

Researchers interviewed for this study agreed that the pandemic has reshaped their research agenda. Psychologist Dr Suzana Awang Bono explains she will continue to look at the long-term effect of the pandemic on mental health and assist the government to be better prepared for future pandemics through her findings on vaccine hesitancy.[34]

Dr. Rusaslina Idrus, the UM anthropologist, lists several emerging research projects stemming from the effects that the pandemic has on the Orang Asli community. One is the impact on Orang Asli children's education. Due to their remote locations, many Orang Asli kids did not have access to online learning and subsequently dropped out of school. Dr. Rusaslina was interested to find out whether these kids will go back to school again when the pandemic is over and what are the barriers that prevent them from doing so. She also plans to continue her work on food security and the traditional medicine of Orang Asli communities, which became more crucial during the pandemic as the communities were mostly cut off from the rest of the country. Finally, she says that one emerging research agenda is the long-term impacts of the pandemic on women, particularly when it comes to unemployment, domestic violence and career mobility, which she believes requires serious study.[35]

Harris Zainul says that he will continue with research on the ways that misinformation spread during the pandemic differs from misinformation spread in other situations such as during election season. The spread of public misinformation during the pandemic spans across the ideological gamut, unlike public misinformation found in politics. This non-partisan dynamic is certainly an area for future research.

[33] Tayeb and Por, 2021.

[34] Interview via phone call with Dr. Suzana Awang Bono, July 16, 2021.

[35] Interview via phone call with Dr. Rusaslina Idrus, July 24, 2021.

Researchers have also partake in more collaborative multidisciplinary research as many Covid-19 related issues cannot be comprehended fully through a single disciplinary or sub-disciplinary lens. According to Yeong Pey Jung, a senior analyst at the Penang Institute, "…the pandemic has shown that widespread cooperation is needed to tackle and battle its effects, particularly in generating more rigorous research that can lead to optimal outcomes and implementable policy responses."[36] Collaborative research efforts have taken place domestically and also internationally as in the case of Dr. Suzana Awang Bono and Dr. Rusaslina Idrus. For her vaccine hesitancy research, Dr. Suzana has been working with a Malaysian team that comprises nine members that in turn is also part of an international research project that involves Asian, European and African countries looking at similar topics. She believes that this collaboration, made convenient by online networking, will persist into the future since members are already working well with each other, along with myriad post-pandemic issues that can be studied and compared across the globe.[37] Meanwhile, Dr. Rusaslina is currently engaged in a research collaboration with fellow Southeast Asian scholars looking at how indigenous communities in the region respond to the pandemic and its aftermath, specifically its effects on food security, cultural preservation, and the practice of traditional medicine.[38] Finally, the author himself has been involved in several international research collaborations during the pandemic and one of the projects will continue well after the pandemic is over as it looks at lasting impacts of the pandemic on democracy, rule of law and the political status quo among various Asian countries.

In a nutshell, the chapter looks at that the top-down nature of governance and policy-making has primarily shaped the engagement mode of social scientists in the efforts to fight the Covid-19 pandemic in Malaysia. Direct access to policy-makers allows for their research findings to be heard and factored into the government's decision-making process. It also provides social scientists with funding opportunities to carry out their research though these government grants are mostly science-oriented and tediously encumbered with bureaucratic red tape. For social scientists who do not enjoy privileged access to policy-makers, they find their own

[36] Interview via email with Yeong Pey Jung, July 22, 2021.
[37] Interview via phone call with Dr. Suzana Awang Bono, July 16, 2021.
[38] Interview via phone call with Dr. Rusaslina Idrus, July 24, 2021.

ways of implementing their research findings, namely by working directly with NGO activists at the ground level, which to them is a more effective and faster way to reach out to the communities. The complete shift to online platforms means more accessibility for social scientists to explore other non-governmental avenues of participation by working across borders and time zones with other researchers, international organisations or even foreign governments.

Since the emergence of the pandemic, social scientists and humanities scholars are in the position to help mitigate between government and communities. This is especially so, considering the ways scholars have access to groups and discourses of the oppressed, allowing them to build an intellectual understanding of the nuances on the ground, which is important for the betterment of society at large. The government should seek advice from some of the social scientists on how best to execute policies from the top, especially since there still exists a deep mistrust and cynicism of the government by communities that feel they have been sidelined or penalised.

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Interviews

Dr. Suzana Awang Bono, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 16 July 2021.
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Dr. Rusaslina Idrus, Universiti Malaya, 24 July 2021.
Dr. Vilashini Somiah, Universiti Malaya, 28 July 2021.
Wan Ya Shin, Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), 3 August 2021.

While the Covid-19 pandemic begins to slowly glide past the horizon, it continues to remind us of its pervasive, enduring existence in our everyday lives in many other ways. Its long reach into the present and future of Malaysia has impacted education, governance, and vulnerable people in the country. In an original and reflective look back at what Malaysia has endured, this book compiles works from diverse scholars in the social sciences and humanities, in an attempt to articulate the many pandemic-related pressing matters that have yet to be addressed.

Through the lenses of social scientists and humanities scholars, the chapters of this book delve into underrepresented issues pertaining to Covid-19 that lie beyond the scope of medicine and public health, altogether unpacking, problematising and investigating the lived realities of other forgotten centres in Malaysia. This is a book that is recommended to scholars, students, and the curious public eager to learn more about the many lesser-known impacts of Covid-19, and how the social sciences and humanities can help us understand social issues that are consequential to security and healthcare.

In a series of insightful, bold, and at times heartbreaking discussions into life at the time of Corona, "Revisiting Covid-19 in Malaysia" offers new and important ways people and states react and adapt to life and what they must do to survive.

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