

Undocumented Workers during Malaysia's Movement Control Order (MCO)

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Abstract

Malaysia has a significant population of migrant labour force. Out of the 5.5 million migrant workers in the country, more than half are reported to be undocumented, with the state of Sabah being home to the highest population of undocumented migrant workers majority from the Philippines and Indonesia. Since the 1970s the scale of migration increased drastically with the arrival of large number of Muslim refugees from the war-torn southern Philippines, and economic migrants from rural areas of Indonesia, in hopes of achieving better economic and food security. This steady flow of foreign labour also coincided with the state's economic development plan which saw labour intensive sectors such as constructions, plantation and timber boom. However, when the Covid-19 pandemic began to spread in Malaysia, job opportunities drastically reduced as the government pulled the brakes on almost all economic sectors and closed off the borders. The Movement Controlled Order (MCO) announced nationwide beginning 18 March 2020 thus increased the vulnerability of the undocumented irregular migrants, as the economic threat in the form of loss of wages and movement restrictions decreased the food security of this group. This paper looks at the ways in which three undocumented labourers and their families originating from Basilan, Philippines, survived during Malaysia's MCO period as they were deserted by their employers. Abandoned at their work sites, and receiving no pay for the duration of the three months MCO, this article looks at the vulnerable position of these undocumented labourers during the Covid-19 pandemic as they dealt with the issue of food security.

Keywords: *Undocumented; food insecurity; Movement Controlled Order (MCO)*

Introduction

On 12 March 2020, Sabah reported its first positive case in Tawau district. By 14 March Sabah was reported to have the third most infected state in Malaysia (after Selangor and Kuala Lumpur) with 82 cases. The first death in the state was reported in Tawau involving a 58 year old man who had been a participant in a religious gathering in Kuala Lumpur (Kasmir,2020). The Health Ministry cautioned the public as the surge in infections in Malaysia may be an indication the virus has spread into the community as nearly all cases detected a month afterwards were traced back to the gathering.

In order to isolate, identify and minimise the spread of the disease, the Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin announced the implementation of the "Movement Control Order" (MCO) under the Control and Prevention of Infectious Diseases Act of 1988 and the Police Act of 1967 (Andika, 2020:2). Under the MCO, there was restriction on movement and assembly

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nationwide, and government and private premises were closed except, for those providing essential services. Initially announced as a two weeks restriction, the MCO was extended every two weeks due to high infection cases before ultimately ending on 2 June 2020. There were only ten sectors identified as essential services allowed to operate throughout the MCO period which was Food; Water; Energy; Communications and the Internet; Security and Defence; Solid Waste and Public Cleansing Management and Sewerage; Healthcare and Medical; Banking and Finance; E-Commerce and Logistics (Andika, 2020; 3). The government announced several stimulus packages targeted at the lower income groups. In total the government committed a total of RM315 billion in four separate packages (Poo & Lee, 2020). One of the most important packages was the PRIHATIN package which was intended to cushion the impact of the economic fallout from the pandemic for the working class and below. The bulk of the government direct injections were directed towards providing cash transfers and preventing loss of employment.

However, one section living within the Malaysian population that was not planned for was the large number of foreign labourers in the country, especially undocumented foreign labourers. Amongst all the states in Malaysia, Sabah has the highest number of undocumented immigrants (Miwil, 2020). With 3.9 million population in Sabah, 1.2 million are foreign nationals with Tawau having the highest number at 180,000 people, followed by Sandakan and Kota Kinabalu. Sabah relies heavily on cheap migrant workers from neighbouring countries for unskilled labour found mostly in the rubber, palm oil and construction sectors. Most are believed to be in the country illegally, having entered either without proper documents or remained after their documents have expired (Wan Shawaluddin, 2010: 117).

Undocumented migrants are most at risk not only for contracting diseases but also starving because of the crisis created by the pandemic (Tan et al., 2020). The most susceptible to the adverse economic effects of the pandemic was those undocumented migrants working in constructions sites in the city. These are the ones with the lowest paying jobs and fewest financial resources. This paper looks at the ways in which three undocumented labourers and their families originating from Basilan, Philippines, survived during Malaysia's MCO period as they were deserted by their employers. Abandoned at their work sites, and receiving no salary for the duration of the three months MCO, this article looks at the vulnerable position of these undocumented labourers during the Covid-19 pandemic as they dealt with the issue of food security.

Methodology and Background of Respondents

The respondents in this study were selected as a pilot study from a larger research study that began in January 2020 on the survival strategies of undocumented migrant families working in construction sites in the Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Three residential constructions areas located at 3 different districts were selected to as way of comparing survival strategies of these migrant families. These districts chosen were Putatan, Penampang and Sepanggar with three families selected in each district. These three districts were chosen because of its high numbers of foreign migrant workers involved in either highway or residential constructions. However, when MCO was announced researcher's movement to these areas were also restricted, thereby the data presented in this article was selected based on the restrictions of the MCO.



District Map: Sabah Land and Survey Department



Malaysia Map: Leinbeich et al.



Preliminary interviews were conducted with the workers back in February 2020 before the announcement of the MCO, and again later in early May when there was a relaxation of MCO. Preliminary interviews lasted between 60 to 90 minutes depending on when the workers would get time off, whereas post MCO interviews were shorter in duration, around 30 minutes. These interviews were carried out in the residential park where the workers were employed and also living with their families in wooden huts they had built from plywood provided by their employer.

In this study, the focus is on the three family-tied undocumented labourers – Helmi, Madan and Inul as well as their dependants living with them. The worksite chosen was a recently completed residential area located some 35 minutes from Kota Kinabalu, the capital city of Sabah. At the time of the interviews, there were still about 20 half completed terrace houses and about 20 foreign labourers working on site. Of the twenty workers, only four were undocumented and were willing to speak with researchers. These three workers were Helmi, Inul and Madan (not real names as they did not want their names to be taken). Helmi is Madan's fraternal uncle, while Inul is Madan's brother-in-law. All three are from the ethnic group Yakan, in Basilan and Zamboanga⁵ province which is part of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) located in southern Philippines. These areas are amongst the poorest are those located in Southern Philippines, where more than half of all poor Filipinos reside. Areas such as Isabela City, Lanao del Sur and Sulu, where the three respondents in the research are from, record fifty percent or more of its population as living in high poverty (Patena, 2019).

These three have been employed by the same contractor at the start of the building process of the residences some 8 years ago, though they did not travel to Sabah together. The oldest worker, Helmi left his hometown in Basilan and first made his way to Sandakan before he met up with by his brother to Kota Kinabalu in the early 1990s. The first wages he received as a cement mixer crew was RM18 a day. Thirty-five-year-old Madan travelled alone from Isabela City, Basilan, at the age of 16 years old, to Sandakan using money sent to him by an older brother already working in Sabah. Madan went straight to Kota Kinabalu where his brother brought him to a construction site in Sepanggar where he spent his first year just hanging around at the brother's shack because the local contractor who was supposed to hire him felt he was too young for the job. Because he came into the job with very low skills, Madan's first job sometime in 2005 was as the unloader carrying bricks, bags of cements, and others to various areas needed on the site. For this job he received RM15 per day. Like the two men before him, Inul left Zamboanga alone in 2006 using money sent to him by an older brother working in Kota Marudu. He later joined his brother at the construction site there as a bricklayer receiving about RM20 a day for 8-9 hours workday. These men were not employed directly by contractors of the construction sites, rather they were hired sub-contractors. It is usually through word of mouth or personal guarantees by relatives already employed at the work sites that fresh undocumented migrants are able to acquire jobs immediately upon their arrival in Sabah.

Madan only met up with his uncle about 6 years later when they coincidentally ended up in the same construction site in Sepanggar. It is also here that Madan met Inul. When their construction job was completed in Sepanggar, the three workers were later brought over by their employer to Penampang to start another residential construction there. After the completion of the residences, they were retained as the on-site maintenance crew who dealt with house owners complaints ranging from cracked tiles, faulty pipes, leaking roofs to malfunctioning electrical gates. As side incomes, sometimes they were hired by the residents to make renovations or extensions inside the existing houses. This side money earned was

⁵ Both islands were centres of the 1972 Muslim rebellion in Southern Mindanao which led to the many Filipinos fleeing to Sabah as refugees. Basilan also served as the centre for US military operations in the region during Bush's campaign of the war on terror in 2002. Both areas also have large communities living in poverty at about 34 percent in Zamboanga and Basilan at 35 percent (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2015).



necessary to care for the large families of Helmi and Inul, as well as for Madan to ensure there was enough money sent back for his daughters every month. Madan's household had an extra income as his wife worked as a domestic helper for a retired couple living in walking distance from their place.

At that time of the first few interviews in January, Helmi and Inul lived with their wife and children, while Madan lived with his wife and brother-in-law. Helmi has 11 children aged from 16 years to 2 years old, while Inul has 5 children aged 10 to 3 years old. None of their children could read or write, and all were born in Sabah. Madan and his wife have two daughters aged 10 and 8 years old enrolled in a public school and being cared for by his wife's parents back in Zamboanga. Their salary ranged from RM75 to RM90 ringgit per day, and they were paid on a daily basis. Their pay is also based on the clocking-in exactly 8 hours for 6 days a week. There is no off days or sick days, and there is no personal insurance or health panel available for them.

All three men had come Sabah for primarily economic reasons and also to escape the conflict occurring in southern Philippines (Kurus, 1998; Ramli et al, 2003; Wan Shawaluddin et al., 2010; Kanapathy, 2008). Poverty was high in their own villages and hearing of the abundance of job opportunities available in Sabah was enough reason for them to leave their populated and poverty ridden villages. All three also worked at huge constructions sites with employers who were willing to employ these undocumented men together with their documented labourers. Despite earning very low wages and working long hours, all three was able to remit money back home to their parents for the care of their younger siblings or ageing parents. These three men also met their respective wives in Sabah, those from within their own community. They learned to be welders and bricklayers while on the job and the three made sure they diversified their skills not just doing bricklaying or welding jobs, but others as well. Their tenacity helped them earn their current salary.⁶ Their current wage reflects their experience and skills, as they are now able to build a complete home (wooden or concrete) from the ground up, complete with fixings.

Undocumented migrants

Malaysia has experienced a rise in foreign labour inflows in response to steady economic expansion. The foreign workforce has been hovering around 15 percent of total labour force in the recent years. Foreign labour is mostly concentrated in low-skilled occupations who mainly come from Indonesia, Philippines and Bangladesh. However, the increasing numbers of undocumented workers is a cause for concern for the country. Wei.et.al (2019) attempted to present an estimate of undocumented workers in Malaysia based on remittances sent to the home country. Therefore, while the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) estimated the number of foreign workers in Malaysia ranged from 2.96 million to 3.26 million, Wei estimates the number of undocumented to be at 1.23 million to 1.46 million.

Migrant workers have played a great part on the development and growth of Sabah. While Malaysia has depended on foreign workers to sustain its economic growth, the recent influx of immigrant workers had raised serious issues and has significant implications for the nation. Sabah continues to be the favourite destination for migrants in Malaysia due to proximity to

⁶ This salary is relatively low, as according to Helmi, documented migrant workers working on their site receive a minimum of RM150 per day or RM1,200 per month not inclusive of overtime.

Indonesia and the Philippines, economic opportunities (particularly low skilled), historical and cultural affinity, presence of family and kin, and hardships back home. Heated discussions have taken place on the number of undocumented⁷ (also known as irregular) foreign workers in Malaysia as there is no definitive estimate of the number of irregular foreign workers. During a seminar in 2017, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) reported that four out of ten foreign workers are irregular, based on its enforcement and amnesty program operations, suggesting the number of irregular foreign workers be about 1.2 million and the total foreign worker population of about 3 million.

Research on undocumented migrant workers in Malaysia and specifically those in Sabah are numerous. Research that uncover the push and pull factors of Filipino migrants into the state conclude that conflict in the southern Philippines couple with high levels of poverty are important push factors for migrants. Whereas the pull factors into Sabah have been the shortage on manual labourers following Sabah's economic boom years (Azizah 2009: 3-5; Wan Shawaluddin 2010). In this light, the cause for their movement into the state was the for physical and economic security.

Other scholars that focus on the role foreign labour on economic development in agriculture, construction, plantations and other sectors (Kurus, 1998; Ramli & Kamarulnizam, 2015; Kanapathy, 2008; Syed, 2015). Syed (2015) for example highlight the reasons for the preference for foreign laborers over locals is because foreign laborers are more productive, reliable, less demanding and cheaper. These jobs being grabbed up by foreign labourers are also jobs that are being shunned by local youths because it is deemed dirty, dangerous and difficult (3D) (Salmie, 2005; Wan Shawaluddin et al., 2010; Azizah, 2009). The Malaysian government has also attempted to regularize the irregular migrants as a 'third-way' to balance both politics and economic aspects. Malaysia (particularly Sabah) has consistently ranked as the destination of the largest population of Filipino migrants in an irregular situation. As of 2013, there were 448 450 Filipino migrants in an irregular situation in Malaysia (CFO, 2016:46)

Helmi, Madan and Inul were part of this flow of undocumented foreign workers who came into the country because the state needed cheap manpower.

"I came to Sabah in the 70's because my brother told me there was a lot of work. No point I staying in the Philippines because it was hard to find food. Many killings also was happening. Not in my village but close...When the money is all gone used to pay the agent for travel fare there is no more left for documents."— Hemli (translated)

"My mother and father was in KK (Kota Kinabalu) when I want to leave Philippines. My grandmother was looking after me. My father told me to come because he was afraid I would be friends with the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front). There were two villagers who had followed the group. My grandmother gave me money and asked me to go to Sandakan. There were relatives who had documents there. — Inul (translated)

"I went to Sabah alone. My brother was already at Sepanggar at the time. The agent from Philippines arranged for my travel from Philippines right until KK. There was

⁷ Different terms have been used to describe undocumented migrants such as irregular, illegal, clandestine or unauthorized. But all connotes the same meaning in which these groups of migrants are those people how either enter countries without authorization or stay on without authorization, such as overstaying a visa.



not work in my village. You can plant if you have land. But planting needs money for fertiliser and more plants. If you do not have money how are you going to take care of the plants.” – Madan (translated)

The above was based on an interview done in January as researchers tried to uncover the motives for these migrants to leave their country. All three men felt their lives would be financially better and secure in Sabah as compared in Philippines, even if they were travelling illegally. They are aware of the dangers and the probability of being arrested and put in prison but they were willing to take the risk.

Other issues that are highlighted when researching on foreign migrants in Sabah is the security problems posed by the presence of this group particularly those who are undocumented (Ramli & Kamarulnizam, 2018; Hamzah et.al 2012; Ramli et.al, 2003; Kudo, 2013), and various human rights issues which should be accorded to undocumented workers (Lasimbang, et.al. 2016;). There are also numerous research examining state policies and its problems when it comes to foreign workers (Ford, 2006; Azizah, 2008 & 2009; Azizah & Ragayah, 2011; Sadiq, 2005). Azizah (2008) for example tried to account for the continued presence of the irregular immigrants despite various measures taken by the Malaysian authorities to stem their inflow and expansion. At best the above works seek to highlight the ongoing “bargaining” between economy and politics in Malaysia that has ultimately produced a rather erratic migration management for foreign workers (Devadason and Meng, 2014).

Though there has been various research on the human rights vis a vis exploitation of migrant workers in Malaysia, there have been limited focus on the food security aspect for migrant workers. For example, Amnesty International in 2010 reported on the mistreatment towards foreign workers by recruitment companies, which include exploitation, forced labour and even trafficking. Despite paying large sums of money to recruitment agents, workers are still cheated out of a legal or fair contract, abused by employers due to lack of effective enforcement in labour law protections and even face extortions from enforcement officers regardless of having legal work visa. Wong and Rashad (2015) shared similar views in terms of abused and exploitation with which workers have to endure from their employers. One paper that touches specifically on the exploitation of migrant workers in the construction sector in Sabah was carried out by Maizatul (2018). Factors such as daily wages paid based on work completed and cramped living conditions are amongst the aspects covered in her work.

Covid-19

On the day Malaysian Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin announced the imposition of a nation-wide 14-day Movement Control Order (MCO) on 18 March 2020, Malaysia had the highest total infections in Southeast Asia recording 553 positive cases. Malaysia first Covid-19 case was announced on 24 January 2020. Between that first case and March, the country recorded a relatively low infection cases, which when traced, was mainly detected amongst Chinese tourists already in the country. Even when the World Trade Organisation (WHO) declared Covid-19 as a pandemic on March 11, cases in Malaysia were relatively under control.

Then came the first Covid-19 death on 17 March 2020 which was linked to an international religious gathering of 16,000 missionary “Jemaah Tabligh” activists. For almost a month afterwards, nearly all cases recorded in the nation could be tracked back to this three-day gathering was held in Kuala Lumpur in late February 2020. Malaysia then went through six

phases of MCO, adhering to all the strict actions recommended by the WHO to effectively contain the COVID-19 outbreak.

To provide assistance for companies and individuals affected by the restricted movement, the government launched a RM20 billion economic stimulus package (PRE 2020) to help industries that were directly hit by the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak, such as hotels and transport companies. As more businesses and individual were impacted with the extensions of the MCO, a second economic stimulus package was announced on March 27 called PRIHATIN, specifically targeted to address the challenges faced by the lower income and daily wage earners.

In normal days, low- to medium-skilled foreign workers in Southeast Asia often experience various forms of discrimination, let alone in times of COVID-19 pandemic. This is because they often undertake too many informal or off the record residency and working practices, which lead to various forms of abuse and restriction such as overtime work, unpaid wage, and the withholding of essential documents such as passports (Devadason and Meng 2014: 30).

Due to the MCO, living conditions have especially been tough on foreigners engaged in menial work. Documented and undocumented workers alike have no work and therefor limited financial means to buy food because their sectors are not considered essential services and therefore not allowed to operate. With no legal contract between the employer and the worker, the undocumented labourer is also uncertain of their employment status as employers do not respond to their texts.

In the case of Filipino migrants in Sabah, because there is no consular representation in the state, as with Indonesian consulate, many Filipinos are left stranded as the services provided by Philippine Embassy in Kuala Lumpur are also temporarily halted. Even prior to MCO in Malaysia, there have been complaints on the lack of consular missions in Sabah. Throughout 2019, there were only 10 consular missions undertaken lasting 5 days each trip. These missions are conducted to provide quicker access for Filipinos and their local employers however, only 120-150 applications can be processed in a day (Fabian, Jan 2020; Faiz, 2020). With the large Filipino population in the state, the ten trips would not be able to cater to the needs of even a quarter of the group.

Food Security & the Covid-19 Pandemic

In recent years, migration, food security, violence and climate change have been studied and identified as factors that drive people to leave their home countries. This is particularly true for regions in Central America and South Asia (IOM, 2017). Another report studying refugees and migrants in East Africa, West Africa, Asia and the Middle East by the World Food Programme also released in 2017 found that countries with the highest level of food insecurity and armed conflict also had the highest level of outward migration (World Food Program, 2017).

As defined by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), food insecurity refers to the social and economic problem of lack of food due to resource or other constraints. This situation is experienced when there is (a) uncertainty about food availability and access, (b) insufficiency in the amount and kind of food required for a healthy lifestyle, or (c) the need to use socially unacceptable ways to acquire food. This was the case for undocumented migrant workers and their families as they struggle to deal with the stress of living with uncertain access to food and going through some days without food to ensure there was food for the next day.



According to a report entitled *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World*, published by Food and Agriculture Organization (FOA) and the World Health Organization (WHO), an estimated 2 billion people worldwide suffer from moderate or severe food insecurity. The lack of access to adequate and nutritional food puts individuals at risk of malnourishment and poor health. Majority of the individuals who are facing this problem are those who live in less developed countries (FAO et al, 2019).

Food insecurity on the other hand refers to the situation whereby the individual does not have access to adequate nutrients needed for a healthy diet (World Bank, 2021). This occurs when food security is limited or otherwise not consistent. There are two forms of food insecurity; chronic and acute. Chronic food insecurity is described as a situation arising from overwhelming poverty which is indicated by a lack of assets or means of living (Thomson dan Metz 1996). Acute food insecurity on the other hand is a short-term situation by which the individual is unable to access food due to natural or manmade disasters. The Covid-19 pandemic can be categorised as causing acute food insecurity and undernutrition among the poor or marginalised.

A recent study by the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that 1.6 billion informal workers globally have lost 60 percent income since lockdown. This loss of job would inevitably lead to financial instability for the workers as it was difficult to predict the crisis duration. This was especially so for the undocumented workers who were paid on a daily basis. Several media reports highlighted the plight of migrants anxious for when their next meal will come from, hence a situation of food insecurity (Ambrose, 2020; Santos, 2020).

As cases of Covid-19 infected person began to rise worldwide, countries began to lock-down their borders, halting all travel and visa services. While the lock-downs was a necessary action to limit the reach of the virus with national borders, it created a level of insecurity that adversely affected border crossings (Cohen & Sirkeci, 2020:5-6). During this lockdown most people, apart from those involved in emergency services, were directed strictly to remain inside their homes. As a result, the means to earn their daily livings were cut in most cases. The closure of open-air food markets and small food shops added more complexities to the overall situation. The overall situation made people more vulnerable to a state of acute food insecurity due to a sudden drop in supply or access to food. Migrants, documented or otherwise, were stuck in a state with no work, and were not able to return home. The uncertainty of not knowing how long they would be out of work, or be prevented from returning home has only added to the level of security.

When the movement control order (MCO) took effect in Sabah on March 18, many of the migrant workers had only the wages they received from the day before. That was to last for two weeks not just for workers but also their dependents as well. They had some little bit of savings but it was not enough to cover for the additional extensions that followed thereafter when the movement restrictions were extended for another two weeks and more. They workers were not eligible for government food aid because they were not Malaysian, and they could not return to the Philippines due to their lack of identification and travel documents. Nation-wide immigration-related raids embarked on April 1, caused migrant workers, particularly those without a valid passport and working pass, to go in hiding or cross borders through irregular and unsafe routes. Starting in April the immigration raid conducted during the MCO arrested over 2,000 undocumented workers by end of the month (Foshbein & Jaw, 2020).

The interaction between COVID-19 and the drop in economic activity will lead to increased food insecurity within and across countries (Smith & Wesselbaum, 2020: 1). The affects of the COVID-19 are particularly strong for people in the lower tail of the food security distribution. But while Smith & Wesselbaum (2020) attest that migration would occur, in Malaysia, these migrants wanted to move away but were unable to due to the travel restrictions by the nation. With no income for the duration of the lockdown and no government or even employer support, migrants are easily exploited as they have no means of returning back to their country yet forced to accept more risky work.

The MCO also prohibited the operation of informal markets such as farmers markets or night markets, both a source of income and affordable products for low-income households. They are highly dependent on these informal markets to access cheap foods and goods (fresh produce, household goods) despite living near large retail stores. Movements around the city are also severely restricted as temporary roadblocks camps are set up at certain areas to minimize travels into infected areas. During this movement order, roadblock operations were conducted by the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) with the assistance of army, along key point Across The Country To Monitor Travellers.

Coping Strategy Against Food Insecurity

When the households are hit by different domains of food insecurity (anxiety and uncertainty about the household food supply, inadequate quality and insufficient quantity of food intake), they plan strategically and consider a range of coping strategies to live and to thrive (Das et al., 2020).

Interviews with the three families found that their primary concern during the Covid-19 Pandemic has been food insecurity during the lockdown period. Other research have also found similar outcome among the migrant population in Switzerland, and in the Arab Region (Burton-Jeangros et al. 2020; UNHCR 2020). In these research respondents were worried about lack of sufficient food due to the COVID-19 pandemic-related control measures.

Seeking Assistance and Reducing food Consumed

The three families had also tried to request financial loans from the immediate social circle of friends or relatives, or even asking for support from one's employers or a public or non-governmental organization. Helmi, Madan and Inul felt abandoned by their employer because they had texted him many times during the first two weeks of the MCO to ask for loans or at least advances on pay so they would be able to buy food for their young kids. The usual reply from the employer was to be patient and his hands were tied because the MCO prevented him from going to bank to withdraw money or even to travel to their homes to deliver the money to them. The only assistance the employer could offer was not to collect rent for the duration that the MCO was enforced.

There was no government aid or NGO assistance offered to these three workers. They could not even seek assistance from their own Embassy in Kuala Lumpur as aid from the Philippine's government is only for legal workers in Sabah (Fabian, 2020; Vanar 2020). Due to the restrictions under the MCO, embassies were also prevented from carrying out missions to for nationals stranded or facing difficulties in the nation.



“Friends had told us of groups that may be able to deliver us food or ration. We have tried asking NGOs, but no one came. If it was not for Ruay and Madan occasionally sharing with us food and giving us small loans to buy essentials for the kids, we do not know how we would survive. There were days we fed the kids just plain rice, because that was all we had.” Helmi (translated)

“Compared to our other friends or relatives living in town areas, we are kind of better off because we live in the village. There are at least rivers for us to fish and wild plants in which we are able to have some meals with. Those (undocumented relatives/friends) living in the city centres cannot even come out of their houses because they would be fined by authorities or arrested by enforcement officers. At least we are away from the eyes of enforcers. But we still do not dare to venture out for we know there are roadblocks set up just before the nearest town.” – Inul (translated)

“Even if the borders were open, we do not have the money to bring everyone (back to the Philippines). It costs about RM1,500 just for one person to travel Kota Kinabalu, the port in Sandakan, and arrive at Zamboanga. Too much for us. And the pandemic situation at home is also bad.” – Madan (translated)

Throughout the MCO though, they were unable to ask assistance from relatives or friends because they too were in the same situation. These three workers then had to rely on nearby villagers to exchange labour for food or if they were lucky to be paid for some odd jobs done around the compound of the villagers.

By the second extension of the MCO, Helmi and Inul were desperate to find food for their kids. After three weeks with no pay, cash and food was running sparse in their homes. Left with little choice, the two sought the assistance from two elderly local neighbours and offered to do odd jobs for them. The three workers were offered some payments for doing odd jobs around the couple’s house such as fixing some leaked pipes and roofs, and cleaning out the drains around the house. The couple also shared with them the extra fruits and vegetables grown within their compound. They also gave them some monthly food aid such as dried and canned foods, baby formula, flour, rice, eggs, and other small essential items for the three families.

With the token payment they received from the retired couple, the three workers would purchase other household items at the nearest sundry shop. They make sure to only visit sundry shops owned by other foreign migrants (usually Pakistanis) as these shops are able to extend credit to the workers. Between the odd jobs done at the couple’s house and the credit taken out at the sundry shops, these three workers were able to survive the three months of the MCO. What little money they had they would ensure that their mobile phones would always be working. This is their life line not only to the family back home in the Philippines, but also to friends and relatives in Sabah. At the very least they would be informed of roadblocks or raids in their area.

Their network of documented relatives and countrymen living in Sabah also provided information on current news or possible visit by the members of the Philippine Embassy in Kuala Lumpur. It was their relatives that told them the Covid-19 aid offered by the Philippine Embassy to those migrants working or living in Sabah were only available for those with documents and registered with the embassy. Their social networks also passed on information regarding a couple of Filipino expatriate groups living in Kota Kinabalu who were distributing dried food and baby formula for undocumented migrants in the city and surrounding areas.

Unfortunately, due to miscommunication they were not able to meet up and receive the aid. Groups or individuals wanting to provide additional assistance to marginalised groups must comply with additional standard operating procedures to avoid exposure or spread of the virus.

Health and Access to care

It is not uncommon for undocumented population to forgo medical attention when income is limited. Majority of the respondents from the research conducted by Burton-Jeangros et al. (2020) had also avoided health care since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis due to uncertain financial situation. They were also extremely careful with their movements during the movement restrictions as they did not want to encounter any enforcement officers while seeking treatment.

Similarly, when they or their children fell ill, Helmi and Inul would not seek medical care at the private clinic nearby, instead they opted for medical or herbal plants. Prior to the MCO, all three were able to manage their earnings enough to care for their families with them, as well as provide some money for their families back in the Philippines. Money was usually sent back once every two or three months through members of the family via bank transfers. They had developed a reliable circle of family members and local friends at work to allow them to visit private clinics during illnesses or prenatal check-ups, buy groceries and other household essentials, and visit relatives during festive seasons. They refrain from roaming into the capital city as they know there are frequent road blocks made by the police, therefore they preferred to limit their travels to the nearest town.

Conclusion

The accumulated hardships faced by undocumented migrants during the Covid-19 period and their limited avenue for assistance highlights for more non-governmental support for these group. Undocumented migrants have thus far lived for years with the necessity to hide from authorities and refrain from seeking assistance from outside their familial network. The pandemic have forced these people to re-access their strategies as their food security is being challenged. The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly and unprecedentedly deteriorated household food security, sources of income and amount of income for undocumented migrants.

This pandemic was not like any other health security which the government had to handle. What was lacking in was a structured involvement and cooperation of private sectors as well as NGOs in reaching the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in the state. There is also a possible need for embassies with considerable number of undocumented migrants to set up an online registry linked to their website to allow for the embassy to keep track of the number of citizens present in a particular country. This way, the country of origin would at least have a more accurate estimate of total nationals overseas. And there after be able to anticipate the necessary assistance needed for their citizens in times of crisis.

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