

Hong Kong's COVID-19 response shows room for greater cultural sensitivity

When a group of more than 300 Hong Kong residents returned from Pakistan on a Government-chartered flight and entered Chun Yeung Estate for a 14-day quarantine in early May, little did they know that they would be served with ham sandwiches and cup noodles containing pork – until the Pakistan Consulate, the Incorporated Trustees of the Islamic Community Fund, community leaders, NGOs and others stepped in.

A considerable number of Pakistanis are Muslims, many of whom observe the practice of eating Halal food and refraining from pork.

To the further surprise of those who fast during daytime in the month of Ramadan (from 24 April to 23 May), for the first few days at the quarantine centre, breakfast was delivered after sunrise, while dinner came hours after sunset.

While the Hong Kong Government quickly rectified the missteps, the incident revealed a deeper issue that has existed even before the outbreak – our city's insensitivity towards the needs of ethnic minorities.

When the novel coronavirus first broke out, official information on health protection and quarantine measures were published in Chinese and English only. Information later became available in languages more commonly used by ethnic minority communities, such as Bahasa Indonesia, Bengali, Hindi, Nepali, Sinhalese, Tagalog, Thai, Urdu and Vietnamese, and yet the translation was often incomplete and, at times, inaccurate.

Information asymmetry means vulnerability. With limited knowledge of both English and digital technology, some ethnic minority elders felt confused during the initial stages of the outbreak as to why people were queuing up for surgical masks and hand sanitisers. By the time they realised how and why protective gear matters, supplies had run short and prices had rocketed.

In one of the more extreme episodes of communication breakdown, a Nepalese man was reportedly hospitalised by mistake when it was his son who had tested positive for the virus.

But the plight facing ethnic minorities went far beyond language barriers. Take foreign domestic workers as an example – whether it is the pressure of additional work demands,

the unease of staying with an employer under home quarantine, or the fear of getting dismissed after going out on a rest day, the pandemic has taken a toll on both their physical and psychological well-being.

The Labour Department has reminded employers of foreign domestic workers that they could violate the Employment Ordinance by compelling a worker to work on a rest day without her or his agreement, or by failing to grant rest days to a worker. The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) has also published an [FAQ](#) about the rights of foreign domestic workers and the obligations of their employers under the Disability Discrimination Ordinance, which states that any discriminatory act based on an infectious disease must be reasonably necessary for the purpose of protecting public health.

Still, the fact remains that the pandemic has ravaged industries with a substantial number of ethnic minority employees, including aviation, catering, construction, hospitality and others. Jobs have been axed, incomes slashed, and families left struggling to pay rent and other bills, let alone affording laptops and high-speed Internet for their children to get on board with online learning.

Leaders of a few ethnic minority communities have further expressed to the EOC that a celebration of values such as self-reliance, combined with stigma around recipients of social security assistance, may discourage some people from applying for financial support even in these difficult times. The Government therefore needs to work around these cultural deterrents in publicising its subsidy schemes and other special relief measures to ensure they benefit all those in need.

From advising Government departments to issue more guidance tailored for different communities to promoting inclusive workplace practices through a [charter for employers](#) and studying the feasibility of establishing an accreditation system for interpreters working with minority languages, the EOC has strived to knock down the long-standing language, cultural and socio-economic barriers confronting ethnic minorities, heightened recently by COVID-19.

Ultimately, however, there is a need for a fundamental shift in the mindset of policymakers, employers and the public alike. For one thing, ethnic minorities are an asset to the city – they contribute to the economy and fight the pandemic just as determinedly as every other member of society, if not harder. Their well-being, in other

words, is closely tied to the interests of the larger community, and an inclusive approach is key to resolving our crises, be it COVID-19 or the economic downturn.

And instead of rushing to defuse one problem after another as they come up, the Government should adopt a more holistic perspective – one that ensures every policy, every measure is designed with the needs and rights of ethnic minorities at its heart. Cultural sensitivity, in short, should be a priority, not an afterthought.

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