

A time for empathy, not finger pointing

These are trying times to say the least. We have seen it bring out the best in people and the not-so-nice. What is amply clear through our experience this past year is that beating the virus is a collective effort. In more dramatic terms, this is humanity versus the virus, somewhat akin to the humans-versus-aliens story that we have seen played out on movie screens.

Nerves are frayed, fears are rife and fatigue is at an all-time high, making it a perfect climate for tolerance and empathy to be in short supply. However, at no other time have we needed them more. Given the helplessness we all feel against this invisible foe, it is easy to pick scapegoats to blame and focus our anger on. We have seen this on a global level with country heads playing the blame game against other countries, turning on people with every surge in cases. Back in Hong Kong, it has happened with mainland Chinese at the initial stages of COVID-19 to the recent targeting of the dance cluster members to foreign domestic workers and most recently the ethnic minority communities in the Yau Tsim Mong district.

I am sure most people will agree that our fellow citizens are in general being extremely vigilant and mindful of all the social distancing regulations that the government has put in place. Masks are worn, hands are sanitized, gatherings are limited, quarantine is observed and tests are carried out as instructed. Willful disregard of rules and practices are rare. It is this collective behaviour that has helped keep the case numbers relatively low in the city despite the current surge.

Given this, it is unfair to stigmatise and blame a whole segment of society or community based on the behavior or rather misfortune of a few people who may become part of a cluster as we have seen periodically happen. What is important to bear in mind is that they form a small group of people and to generalise and extrapolate to a larger group is not only incorrect, it is in fact dangerous misinformation that serves no constructive purpose except to create social chasms

and exacerbate divisions. When the generalisation is based on a lack of understanding of a certain community, it reflects bias and stereotyping.

From time to time, reports pick up on this narrative to further the notion of ethnic minority alienation. Racial bias, labelling, discrimination and hardship are common threads in most ethnic minority-related media stories that may garner audience attention. It is sad that stories which go against this narrative are less or seldom written about. There are many cases that we know of and even more that we do not know of where the majority and minority respect, value and help each other in a mutually supportive relationship.

In the same district two months ago, we saw evidence of this in the Yaumatei tragic fire that claimed the lives of eight members of our local Nepalese community and caused injuries to many more. Our heart goes out to all the bereaved families and others affected by the accident. When speaking with members of the Nepalese community, I was overwhelmed to hear of the support they had received from the people of Hong Kong, not just fellow ethnic minorities. The photograph that ran with related media stories showed Hong Kong people lighting candles and laying flowers at the scene of the fire. I am willing to bet that many of them did not know the victims personally but were there out of basic human decency and respect for human life. The compassion, solidarity and empathy that we saw during the aftermath of this tragedy was colour-blind.

I would like more such reports to be highlighted. We should all be talking about what we share in common rather than focus on the differences. We are all Hong Kong people with shared dreams and aspirations as well as expectations for this beautiful city we call home. This does not mean we discount what makes us diverse. Cultural differences must be acknowledged and celebrated as they add richness to society. But beware of cultural stereotyping and broad brushing.

More than ever, we need tolerance, empathy and solidarity. This is a time for us to come together as one human race. The virus makes no distinction; it would be a folly for us to.

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