

Dear Fellows, Colleagues, and Friends,



In the past several months, as the COVID-19 pandemic has touched all our lives, the work of our Equity Fellows has become more important than ever. Many Fellows are on the front lines of delivering medical care for COVID-19 patients or formulating health and social policies in response to the pandemic. Others are working to ensure that the survival needs of marginalized groups are recognized and addressed during this period of crisis. Still others are engaged in the important work of communicating reliable information to prevent the spread of the virus. We are sharing in

this newsletter some examples of how our Fellows are responding to the coronavirus.

The Equity Fellows are part of an initiative that was launched in 2016 – an ambitious, 20-year program funded by CMB and the Atlantic Philanthropies. Our goal has been to develop a generation of leaders committed to advancing health equity in Southeast Asia and China. Our strategy has been to invest in talented young professionals; connect them with equally dedicated peers from a range of sectors; and expose them to new concepts and innovative practices in leadership, health, and equity. Pursuing this path, we hope to build momentum for health equity in a region where disparities in income, education, social access, and opportunity have direct effects on people’s health and quality of life.

As illustrated by the stories below, it is deeply rewarding to see the ways in which our Fellows view their work – in professions related to governance, policymaking, health promotion, raising public awareness, social services, advocacy, media, the arts, and more – as an opportunity to advance health equity in concrete ways during a period of unprecedented crisis. We salute them and their peers for their commitment to justice in health.

Lincoln C. Chen
President, CMB

Visit our website for more information on The Equity Initiative

COVID-19: THROUGH THE LENS OF HEALTH EQUITY

Philippines: Quarantine as a Privilege

Gideon Lasco (2019) describes “quarantine as a privilege” in a [thought-provoking article](#) he wrote for [Inquirer.net](#) (Philippines). While all are affected by the pandemic, he wrote, those who are poor lack the privilege of maintaining a safe distance from each other, or staying home from work, or accessing reliable health care. “In the event of severe illness,” he wrote, “will those who can afford quality health care have the same chance of survival as those who can’t even go to our hospitals? Add the economic, physical, social, and cultural barriers to health care to the above disparities, and the only possible conclusion is that pandemics divide more than they equalize.” Gideon calls on governments and citizens to recognize their responsibility to help those in greatest



need during the current crisis and in setting future policies.

Singapore: Delivering Emergency Care



[Natarajan Rajamaran](#) (2019) wrote (on March 31) that “due to a convergence of fortuitous factors and prudent government decisions, Singapore has been relatively spared from the massive spike in Covid-19 disease and deaths.” Yet health inequity is very much on his mind as he works in the emergency department of a Singapore public hospital. He describes himself as “extravagantly supplied with personal protective equipment and laboratory support,” but he recognizes that “many friends who are healthcare workers in other settings are laboring with much higher risk and are materially constrained in treating patients.” Many of his patients face dispiriting prospects for financial security, with no clear end in sight. Raj also sees the impact of disparities in other countries, and writes he is “grieved by stories emerging from the abrupt lockdown in India, which has created extreme hardship particularly for the poor.”

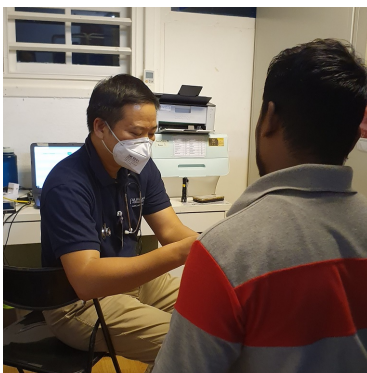
Malaysia: A Call for Collective Action

“Malaysians are rightly proud of their healthcare system,” [Tharani Logoanathan](#) (2017) wrote in an opinion piece in [Malay Mail](#), but “that being said, several recent events have thrown us off tangent in the Covid-19 pandemic.” An unpredicted change in government in mid-February, for example, left the country without a cabinet for nearly 2 weeks. The Ministry of Health was swift in containing positive cases related to travel from China, but international travel was initially left unchecked. The Movement Control Order was announced on March 16, but “poor messaging led to the possible furthering of viral transmission by causing a mass exodus of people back to their hometowns.” Collective action is crucial now, Tharani says, particularly in helping public hospitals. She calls for private hospitals to work with the public sector to manage patients who would otherwise be unable to afford private healthcare services. She adds that crowd sourcing can be a means for individuals to help public hospitals secure the personal protective equipment and ventilators they need.



THE IMPACT ON LESS VISIBLE POPULATIONS

Singapore: Shortage of Personnel to Serve Migrant Workers



Due to COVID-19, doctors working in Singapore’s public institutions cannot cross from one healthcare institution to another, in order to avoid cross-infection. That creates a shortage of personnel for [HealthServe](#), the NGO that [Jeremy Lim](#) (2016) co-founded to provide medical care, social assistance, and other services to migrant workers in Singapore. HealthServe relies upon volunteers to provide medical care in its clinics, and with so many of them on duty at their home institutions, HealthServe has had to close 2 of its clinics. A third clinic is seeing extremely high demand. As Jeremy explains in [a feature story published on Mothership](#), a Singaporean media platform, public health measures have tangible human consequences to consider, including the impact on migrant workers and

other less visible groups.

Viet Nam: News Programming for the Deaf

[Nguyen Thi Lan Anh](#) (2017) and [Hoang Tu Anh](#) (2018) and are bringing their knowledge of the needs of people with disabilities to their collaboration with [Nguyen Thu Ha](#) (2016), who has done extensive programming on social issues and health for Viet Nam Television. VTV has been providing information to

viewers about how to protect themselves from the coronavirus, how to recognize its symptoms, and where to turn for further information or assistance. The collaboration among the 3 Fellows is helping to bring this news to deaf people, through the addition of sign language interpretation to VTV Today News.



Philippines: Helping Children and Youth with Special Needs



As the founder of the [Independent Living Learning Centre](#) (ILLC), [Abelardo Apollo \(Archie\) Ilagan David, Jr.](#) (2018) has developed programs to help youth with developmental conditions learn practical life skills to help them gain greater independence. He is therefore mindful of the pandemic's impact on children and youth with autism and other special needs, who have difficulty adapting to disrupted routines. Archie and a team of 86 Filipino teachers from Manila, Cebu, and Davao are using online platforms to help restore a sense of normalcy to about 700 displaced students of diverse abilities. They rolled out contextualized educational and therapeutic activities that would help parents make creative use of space and resources in their homes in order to engage their special needs children. Apart from academics, these activities help students practice independent living skills like grooming and hygiene, food preparation, housekeeping, pet care, and clothing management.

Indonesia: Community Leadership and Help for the Elderly

As commissioner for the Yogyakarta Hospital Supervisory Board, [Rennta Chrisdiana](#) (2019) is keenly focused on hospital needs and logistics and how government and people can work together to meet patients' needs. "If the surge capacity happens, how we handle it?" she asks. "There are few hospitals, beds, ventilators, even masks, let alone health professionals and other resources." As a community leader, she also is aware of potential health, economic, and social impacts on the elderly and other vulnerable populations. In response, she and others have created an online community, [SONJO](#), to collaborate in helping vulnerable groups in Yogyakarta during the pandemic. She also has been working with volunteers through the Rumpun Nurani Foundation, where she serves as chairwoman, to set up a program to distribute sanitizing supplies, healthy food, vitamins, and educational posters to the elderly and other vulnerable groups.



Philippines: When Service Centers Close



Fellow [Amina Swanepoel](#) (2020) has had to temporarily close her NGO, [Roots of Health](#), which provides sexual and reproductive health services in Palawan province in the Philippines. "It was absolutely the right decision in the fight to stop the spread of the coronavirus," she wrote in an article published in *Palawan News Online*. Still, she added, "As a reproductive health advocate, I can't help but think of all the women and young people who normally access our services and now cannot." In her article, ["Love, Sex, and Violence in the Time of COVID,"](#) she raised issues for policymakers to consider as the community quarantine continues: unplanned pregnancies, reduced access to prenatal care, domestic violence, online sexual exploitation, and the rise of sex work in the aftermath.

THE RESPONSE OF HEALTH SYSTEMS

China: Documenting and Sharing Lessons

[Xiao Long](#) (2019), who serves on the faculty of Peking Union Medical College Hospital (PUMCH), is a co-author of the [PUMCH Prevention and Control Manual of COVID-19](#).

The manual (in Chinese and English) provides advice to the public on steps that can limit transmission of the virus. It also urges people to maintain practices for good health (e.g., balanced diet, sufficient rest), so as to avoid the need for treatment of other medical conditions during the period of the coronavirus emergency. The manual can be a source of guidance for public health professionals who want to learn from the Chinese experience. The manual has been viewed online more than 2.7 million times – a testament to the hunger for information on preventing further spread of the coronavirus.



Myanmar: “Team Zero” in Chin State



At the request of the Director General of Myanmar’s Ministry of Health and Sports, [Bawi Mang Lian](#) (2018), a medical officer at the ministry, and 4 other volunteers traveled to Tedim township, a remote area in Chin state and the location of Myanmar’s first hospitalized COVID-19 patient. “Team Zero,” as Bawi and his colleagues named their group, is helping to ensure the containment of Kaptel village and strengthen active fever surveillance in Tedim township; control and prevent local transmission; and monitor the treatment and safety of confirmed COVID-19 patients. The team is providing both health

expertise and practical services at the front lines of the pandemic – including delivering medical and basic food supplies; setting up an app for collection of data on active cases and fever surveillance and for contact tracing; and preparing schools and municipal guest houses to serve as quarantine facilities. Sensitive to local culture, the team also negotiated with the village head and the religious leader to halt Sunday worship services during the lockdown period.

Thailand: Making Systems Thinking Part of the Response

[Borwornsom \(Ack\) Leerapan](#)

(2018) has been a strong advocate for bringing systems thinking to health policy. It’s an approach he is now employing in his collaboration with Thailand’s Department of Disease Control to stand up a COVID-19 Integrated Systems Simulation Lab. This lab will link the department’s modeling, designed to predict the course of the virus, with other types of models, in order to generate more effective interventions. For example, linking epidemiology models to public transportation models could make social distancing more effective, as decision makers could see the immediate benefit of adding more trains to reduce crowding. Ack also has been speaking about system thinking on TV. Adopting a systems approach, in Ack’s view, can provide a framework for diverse stakeholders to share expertise and data and to think broadly and deeply about long-term solutions.



Philippines: Persuading Everyone to Do Their Part



[Beverly \(Bev\) Lorraine Ho](#) (2017), who serves as special assistant to Health Secretary Francisco Duque, has been on the front lines of public communication about COVID-19. In press conferences and on appearances on national television and CNN Philippines, she has been delivering information about testing procedures, who does the testing, and steps being taken to expand testing (which is particularly challenging in a country of thousands of islands and many remote

communities). Her messaging combines data-sharing with a call to action. “COVID needs to stop at your doorstep,” she said in English and Tagalog in one TV appearance. “There are 2 fronts in this war, your homes in the community and the hospitals. We have more than 1,000 hospitals in the country but 20 million households. We will have a better chance of

COMMUNICATION AND SOLIDARITY

Viet Nam: Recognizing the Emotional Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a deep emotional impact as well as medical and economic effects, as [Do Thuy Duong](#) (2017) explained when she joined leaders from several different sectors on a popular Vietnamese television program. Using public narrative techniques from her EI training, Duong described the uncertainty she and others feel during this period of social distancing about how to relate to loved ones or how to give comfort to those who are experiencing loss. She encouraged people to recognize the emotional toll of the pandemic, to value the people in their lives, and to find ways to stay positive.



China: The Effects of Prolonged School Closure



Fellows [Yunting \(Edwina\) Zhang](#) (2019) and [Fan Jiang](#) (2018) were 2 of the authors of a correspondence in *The Lancet*, "[Mitigate the effects of home confinement on children during the COVID-19 outbreak](#)," published on March 3. With schools closed in China, and an emergency home schooling plan activated, more than 220 million children and adolescents are now confined to home. The authors suggest that prolonged school closure and home confinement may have negative effects on children's physical and mental health. Potential risks to children's health include excessive

screen exposure, lack of physical activity, and insufficient in-person interaction, among others. The authors call for a community-wide response from parents, teachers, mental health professionals, social workers, and NGOs. Edwina and Fan launched a program to solicit qualified educational material, which will be integrated into an online platform of the Shanghai Education Committee, and asked other Fellows to share their appeal with those who have expertise in health education, communication and related areas.

Indonesia: Children as Educators

Public awareness about COVID-19 is still lacking in Indonesia, making it important to use all available channels and a range of interventions to limit its spread. [Nila Tanzil](#) (2016) and colleagues at her [Rainbow Reading Gardens](#) have created posters, cartoons, and paintings about ways to avoid transmission of COVID-19 and disseminated them to the schools where their libraries are located. This simple intervention helps teachers to educate students – who, in turn, can share information with their families. Rainbow Reading Gardens has established 131 libraries in Eastern Indonesia, which serve 32,500 children.



Global: An Ode to Joy in a Time of Crisis

Fellow [Trang Trinh](#) (2020), a concert pianist, was one of the organizers of a 24-hour global marathon of music, held on Facebook on April 2. "To musically express our wish for global cooperation," Trang wrote in her invitation to fellow musicians throughout the world, "we invite you to join us in playing the imperishable 'Ode to Joy' from Beethoven's



Ninth Symphony at 8-9 pm, in your time zone, in your home." Eight o'clock is the hour that concerts would normally begin, and the individual virtual concerts, Trang hoped, would renew a sense of solidarity and collaboration across the world: "Let's hug this suffering and confused planet with music."

A NOTE OF APPRECIATION

We express our appreciation to all of our Fellows for their dedication during this pandemic, including our 2019 Fellows, who recently completed their induction year, and our 2020 Fellows, who will begin their induction year when conditions allow. The response of our Fellows – now 5 cohorts strong – to COVID-19 and its impacts underscores the value of building a network of multisectoral actors who are committed to health equity in Southeast Asia and China.

Congratulations to Our 2019 Fellows...

The 23 members of our 2019 cohort marked the completion of their induction year at the 2020 Annual Forum, which took place January 26-29 in a retreat setting 3 hours north of Bangkok. It's been a year of deep learning, exposure to new ideas, and strong bonding. As [Rennta Chrisdiana](#) described it: "The 2019 EI Fellows induction year was a life-changing moment; it expanded my awareness about myself and also toward issues of health equity, justice and global community."

[Read more](#)



...and Welcome to Our New 2020 Fellows!

We welcome 26 outstanding professionals from Southeast Asia and China as our 2020 EI Fellows. Our new Fellows come from 12 countries, and bring expertise in medicine and public health; economics and entrepreneurship; concerns of the elderly, people living with disabilities, and marginalized people; the environment and land use; education and social policy; theater and music; and more. Their induction year would typically begin with an opening retreat in March, but we have postponed programming until the COVID-19 pandemic subsides and groups can safely gather.

[Read more](#)



WELCOME 2020 FELLOWS!



THE FIFTH COHORT OF THE EQUITY INITIATIVE PROGRAM



Send us your news!

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