Statement on Recommendations to Improve the Status and Well Being of Migrant Workers in Singapore

On Labour Day, May 1st 2020, a webinar was held on Migrant Workers and the Pandemic in Singapore. The forum was structured in discussing the issues that migrant workers faced in this pandemic and what needs to be addressed for the present, in the mid-term as Circuit Breaker’s (CB’s) restrictive measures are eased out in phases and what needs to be done for the long term of between 1 and 3 years.

There are 999,000 migrant workers with work permits and 200,000 with ‘S’ pass holders in Singapore, more than a quarter of the workforce (26 per cent). A number of issues were raised in the webinar. The recommendations, based on the webinar, experiences and research, are made on the current issues pertaining to the pandemic, on the status of migrant workers and structural mechanisms pertaining to migrant workers, the Singapore economic model and our national compliance to the fundamental principles of Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Singapore is a First World country. Our policies and practices need to change so that our standards on how we treat migrant workers are comparable to those in Japan, countries in Europe and Canada

It is acknowledged that much work is, currently, being carried out for migrant workers as part of the containment efforts on Covid-19 infections. Here are the recommendations and signposts, that we share:

1. Singapore has 3,318 cases per 1 million as being Covid-19 positive as of 5th May 2020. There are 19,410 cases; [https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/?utm_campaign=homeAdUOA?si](https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/?utm_campaign=homeAdUOA?si)
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A. Present:

1. Health Concerns

   a. On-site Covid-Testing for all migrant workers who have had close contacts with other persons who had been infected or are employed as caregivers in residential homes or as domestic workers or are in the service industry

   b. Health screening and on-site Covid-testing focus on migrant workers living in non-dormitories as many are also overcrowded

   c. Health screening and Covid-testing for foreign domestic workers who have come into contact with residents in the domestic homes they work in or through other contacts, outside of their workplace.

   d. Ramping up the administration of Covid-19 tests to arrest the severity of infections and limit spread amongst migrant workers as currently the Covid-19 test rates are numbered at 24,600 per 1 million of the population

   e. Health costs for preventive and protective measures should not be borne by the migrant workers.

   f. Treatment programmes continue to be borne by the State, as has been stipulated

   g. Provision of soaps, sanitisers, face masks and easy access to water to wash hands to be provided by employers and where needed, through donations

   h. Translation services are needed to share information, during medical consultations and to counsel workers, worried over losing wages, losing their lives, anxieties over not fulfilling their breadwinner role and not clearing the debts to agencies and money-lenders


6 Close Contact: a) being within approximately 6 feet (2 meters) of a COVID-19 case for a prolonged period of time; close contact can occur while caring for, living with, visiting, or sharing a healthcare waiting area or room with a COVID-19 case – or – b) having direct contact with infectious secretions of a COVID-19 case (e.g., being coughed on); on https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/clinical-criteria.html ... accessed on May 3rd, 2020

7 https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/?utm_campaign=homeAdUOA?Si
i. Scientists say Covid-19 will be here for 2 years or more. Migrant workers need to be included in the next phase of the healthcare plans on Covid-19 as is done for Singaporeans.

j. Health remains the priority at this time, presiding over any form of detention or deportation in the cases of undocumented workers, those with lapsed work permits or those whose work permits had been revoked over non-compliance to CB orders.

2. Safe Living Spaces:
   a. Isolation facilities or treatment in hospitals for infected workers
   b. The uninfected who shared common contact space with the infected, to be quarantined effectively
   c. The uninfected and not in contact spaces are shielded and to live in places with ensured physical distancing and living space for themselves
   d. Reviewing all living spaces of migrant spaces to check on the suitability of their living quarters for appropriate measures to be put in place, ensuring no overcrowding in the dormitories and the non-dormitories
   e. Retrofitting the current living spaces to prepare for the return of workers with much reduced ratios of workers to a room, better ventilation, lighting, more toilets, showers and dining areas, all with the physical distancing of 1 to 2 metres apart for each migrant worker
   f. Constant cleansing schemes for all spaces used by migrant workers such as toilets, shower areas, wash basins, laundry areas, kitchens and costs to be borne by employers with no deductions from worker’s wages
   g. On-site medical clinic facilities to run for migrant workers under CB and in the next phase

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8 https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/COVID19Guidance.aspx; May 5th, 2020
3. Shelters and support
   a. In this pandemic, more shelter spaces are needed for abused foreign domestic workers as the current shelters are at full capacity
   b. The support services from trained support staff in migrant worker groups ought to be identified as ‘essential services’ in the CB, so that these staff members and volunteers can work with the migrant workers to give support for them to seek protection and recourse. This is important so that all resources in helping migrant workers are fully utilised.

4. Food
   a. Food packages need to be well-balanced meals that arrive, within a window of 30 minutes, of the allotted meal times
   b. Ramadan is observed and breaking of fast time need to be observed by caterers
   c. Continued governance over the quality of food, the hygiene standards in the preparation, the timeliness on delivery standards and on the cost structures
   d. Receiving food that is catered to the migrant workers’ cultures, and which is palatable and nutritious should be treated as a basic food right rather than as a luxury, now and for always.

5. Mental Health
   a. More trained counsellors are needed to handle distress calls, to act on emergencies, to share information and to give support if they, their relatives, their friends are infected or if they have lost their relative or friend to Covid-19
   b. Migrant workers also have home-based family matters that they try to resolve from here and counselling support, would be useful.

6. Salary Payments
   a. Increased governance that all migrant workers are being paid their wages at present as the government has helped employers by removing levy payments and in giving employers a boost from the stimulus package
   b. Migrant workers are still subjected to premature terminations based on a number of reasons that often are not fully investigated. With CB, migrant workers
worry over delayed payments, non-payments and losing their jobs whilst ‘S’-pass holders have mostly lost their daily paid work or the part-time jobs. Procedures to secure the monthly wages for migrant workers must continue and with greater rapidity to build them their confidence on financial matters. Assistance is needed for those who have lost their jobs. Particularly, employers of domestic workers need to be told that salaries need to be paid in full and on time, and domestic workers need to be informed that they should be getting their full salaries in a timely manner. Domestic workers must be assured that MOM will strictly enforce regulations relating to the payment of salaries, including the payment of rest day compensation for any work done on rest days. Overall, there is a need for more officers to work through wage payments under the CB.

c. There must be deeper monitoring efforts on any delays in salary payments to migrant workers as the Ministry of Manpower has helped in offsetting the levy payments of $750 per worker for 62,000 employers who will benefit close to $675 million in this first wave of levy rebate pay outs.

7. Knowledge Management and Communication

a. Migrant workers are human beings. No worker – citizen or migrant worker – ought to be threatened, harassed, verbally abused (especially with a plethora of local expletives) or undermined because of their culture, language and/or religion. Abusive practices cannot be tolerated or condoned. But migrant workers will not file complaints as they fear that their work permits will be cancelled or that they are penalised in some form or another – no overtime wages, be targeted further or be ridiculed further. So in this CB or at any time, any form of abusive behaviour or blaming migrant workers by intermediaries or employers is unacceptable.

b. Information needs to be in the language they use often so that there is greater reassurance. More use of graphics and podcasts – in the migrant worker’s dominant language – will help.

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c. It is time for a workforce of multi-lingual officers to be employed by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) to function across many platforms in relation to migrant worker issues as it happens in other First World countries that rely on migrant workers.

d. Internet access is needed for social communications to carry on social relations with families, friends and for entertainment

e. The mainstream media too needs to focus, consistently, on fair and responsible reporting when discussing vulnerable groups. The role of the media is important in this crisis to ensure accurate, critical and transparent reporting

f. Racism and Xenophobia need to be addressed immediately as delays reinforce the prejudice expressed by some Singaporeans. The UN in its directive on Covid-19 has also called for timely interventions by country leaders.10

g. Migrant workers cannot just be representative voices in dealing with their views as they are workers, they have a voice on their stake, they have a voice to state their living conditions, their salary deductions and on their well-being. The current fear over losing their jobs and employer control cannot be the way that workers live. We need to respect them, not be reductive or turn them into token representations in consultations.

8. Government, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs/NGOs), Trade Unions and the Media

a. The government needs to become more inclusive in its approach to not pre-select which CSO/NGO it wishes to consult or use as a reference point. CSOs/NGOs contribute to society and are recognised entities under the Registry of Societies, functioning on their mandates. They are a bridge. With a vibrant social media much of what happens in society will be captured. A good relationship with all CSOs/NGOs means that each can offer a constructive role, even when at times, on points of the matter, views can be diverse and adversarial, and yet the mutual respect for the work that each body does, prevails. This is an advantage in any

society and needs to be harnessed more deeply as each is a cog in a wheel. In emergencies, NGOs play an extremely crucial role as they, in almost all circumstances, become the first community off the block as affected communities would reach out to them.

Migrant workers need to be able to give honest feedback and talk about their lived experiences without fear of repercussions. The government needs to take this feedback in its stride, and not be quick to accuse NGOs and other actors of perpetuating fake news, as this creates an environment of fear where realities stay hidden and are not made known for critical analysis and improvements. Importantly, the NGOs’ capabilities and compliance to their standard operating procedures on checking the narratives they receive, ought not be ridiculed by the government, trade union, media as critiques and queries can, rightly, be put forward.

B. In the Mid-Term to Long-term:

9. Health Concerns; Food; Salary Payments; Knowledge Management and Communications; Government-CSO-Union-Media relationships
   a. These will continue and be improved upon with clearer Standard Operating Procedures and stricter enforcements and governance
   b. Migrant Workers are seen as workers with expertise and are protected from abuse
   c. Migrant Workers are unionised
   d. CSOs/NGOs are treated as partners and governments are key essential partners to the work of CSOs/NGOs

10. Mental Health
   a. More trained counsellors across Singapore and a directory of such specialist staff to offer support services for all migrant workers in Singapore

11. Information and Communication
   a. Laws that govern Singaporeans on threats, harassments, abuse and bullying need to include protection for migrant workers with no loss in income or jobs, in filing their complaints
b. The much-discussed Witness Protection Law needs to be enacted and needs to include migrant workers

c. A national directory of multi-lingual pool of translators who are paid officers

d. Migrant workers’ voices and views are sought as their roles are incorporated in the structural reforms and they are unionised

12. Education

Ideal that a workgroup be formed with educationists, parents, students, migrant workers, Singapore citizens of diverse ethnicities and faiths and various actors from society – the arts and theatre practitioners, NGOs to review the current education modules on developing a culture amongst people in Singapore to live in a positive society of diversities - multi-cultures, multi-faiths, multi-sectors, multi-ideologies, multi-languages etc – yet which does not accept racism, xenophobia, sexism, separatism, ageism, as part of our fabric. This needs to start from within the home, in early childhood as children are dropped off by foreign domestic workers or grandparents and throughout their school years. This in-depth approach runs parallel to any legislation as this is our fabric of values that Singaporeans will continue to hold onto and embrace it as our culture

13. Structural Reforms

a. The work to restructure the living spaces for migrant workers needs to begin now. We are suggesting that a Workgroup for this purpose be formed comprising experts from architectural companies, academics in the field, migrant workers, NGOs, union, employers, social workers, psychologists, real estate executives, hotel bodies, employment agencies, lawyers, law academics, tertiary students and design-oriented students from any sector of our education system and multi-ministry government representatives to begin the process of discussions on assessing if current dormitories could be retro-fitted, how to build the landscape for the future living quarters, the type of living spaces for migrant workers, the
costings and a concurrent review of the current laws and guidelines as stipulated in FEDA, BCA, URA, Fire Safety Act, HDB, EA, EFMA\textsuperscript{11}, EAA.

b. Migrant workers are appreciated and valued by government leaders. Yet they remain caught in a structural framework that cripples them. Technically they are forking out between $1,000 and $8,000 (foreign domestic workers and migrant workers) to agents – licensed and unlicensed in both countries of origin and destination – for a job. For male migrant workers their wages – estimated in recruitment drives to be $1,200 to $1,500 are whittled down to $450 per month (or hourly rates of $15-$18 per day)\textsuperscript{12} as they pay for the accommodation, for the food, some even for the transport (most of this is outsourced to supply chain of companies as appointed by the employer) while employers save from the wages to pay for the levies imposed by the government, which earns, conservatively about $72 million a year\textsuperscript{13} on levies on employers of male migrant workers. On that wage – because of Singapore’s stronger currency – the migrant worker raises his family and also puts his share into the remittance basket for his country. The same applies to foreign domestic workers with different sums of money. We say we find this an untenable situation. Often the contracts and work are not in tandem on key areas of task lists, work hours (sometimes with any additional pay) and rest days. The valuing and appreciation of migrant workers needs to unhinge this system and to be First World, we need to reframe the structure. We suggest a Workgroup that delves deeply into this issue and suggest a range of experts be out together for a longer-term solution that structures our operational model. A workgroup comprising migrant workers, employers, employment agencies, academics from various fields, NGOs, union, civil service officers, legal academics, lawyers, country-focused representative from International Labour

\textsuperscript{11} FEDA – Foreign Employee Dormitories Act; BCA – Building Control Acts; URA – Urban Renewal Authority; HDB – Housing Development Board; EA – Employment Act; EFMA – Employment of Foreign Manpower Act; EAA – Employment Agencies Act

\textsuperscript{12} https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a12725612abdb9b9c737354/t/5a1fe5c6222d3c9706d3fc/151203989030/Report_Justice-Delayed-Justice-Denied.pdf

\textsuperscript{13} https://www.facebook.com/stephii.chok/posts/906695246448480
Organisation be put together to study the structure and restructure a better framework so that Singapore can be a First World country that observes the ILO standards in the Tripartite Cooperative model, review the laws\textsuperscript{14}, ensures its State obligations on Conventions which Singapore takes seriously and also on the Sustainable Development Goals’ frameworks on Goals No.8.\textsuperscript{15}

C. For the Longer Term:

14. State-Speak

A Review of the Trade-Off policy language is important as that has become pervasive in the culture amongst Singaporeans who seem to think that cheap labour is a trade-off for the high levels of prosperity that Singaporeans enjoy. This is flawed thinking and much comes from political-speak and communication strategies used by government leaders in upholding pragmaticism as a trade-off over worker’s rights. We believe in values and the communications needs to be upright on this and sensitive in ensuring that people rights are recognised to be equal, even more so, when each person is a worker doing their part in building the country and their lives.

15. Globalisation

a. This pandemic has underlined the importance of essential workers – crucial to our well-being and to society, and on fault lines in relying on global supply chains of products and labour. Self-sufficiency means manufacturing our own supplies and relying on regional collaborations. It also means protecting Singapore workers and migrant workers by reviewing wage schemes and Singapore’s rising liveability costs. We say that we need an equitability direction, a refocus away from the

\textsuperscript{14} The laws: Employment Act, Employment of Foreign Workers’ Act, Employee Agency Act, Workplace Safety and Health Act, Work Injury Compensation Act, Foreign Employee Dormitories’ Act

\textsuperscript{15} https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/dw4sd/themes/standards/WCMS_558578/lang--en/index.htm
neoliberal model of the market-place and privatisation, as data shows the increasing income inequalities, and this pandemic shows up, more starkly the critical areas of deprivations, as containment efforts navigate the landscape to reach out to various people at risk of infections.

b. It is timely to set Minimum Wages for all workers so that Singaporeans too could do the work of migrant workers if the wages reach minimum levels and not at the current wages received by migrant workers in construction, in domestic work, in caregiving. And when migrant workers are needed for the jobs, they get the same stipulated wages with no deductions. What will be regional training arrangements amongst ASEAN or in the Asia-Pacific region as Singapore sets the tone with countries of origin of migrant workers? How can Singapore be a player and build up its economy on these terms of supply chains on labour and products, revised to universal norms and pegged to International standards.

16. Land

a. There are issues that have been raised through this pandemic on development of more malls, newer tourist attractions and more networks for transportation. Singapore is in a recession and the question here is worth considering on whether we need to limit construction as an industry.

b. Tied to development costs, land prices have escalated over the years that impact the cost of living space for migrant workers as well as many lower-wage earners in Singapore. How can we moderate on this construct when land prices are also pegged at private sector levels for public housing, public amenities, making it astronomically difficult for migrant workers to pay for the accommodation which is technically a bed, in a congested environment.

17. Multi-Partnerships

It is also important for the government recognise the worth of its civil society organisations and improve in its relationship and trust-building with CSOs/NGOs and likewise for CSOs/NGOs to have greater trust in the government, both being inclusive of each other, despite holding diverse views and taking on varied standpoints.
18. Education

This is key to junking a lot of misinformation about people that we have in our society. The pandemic has shown many beautiful and ugly sides of us as a people. We need discursive discussions and many need to be participants as education sets a value system that begins early when a young child is introduced to the various people in our society. That onset between home, schools, media and leadership, each augment the maturing of our Singapore fabric for keeps; not resurrected on occasions.

Concluding, Singapore is a global player. We are First World. We are first world means every worker, person has a right to food, health, living space that are adequate and decent. We are first world and so our communication standards that are value-driven and value-laden need to be inclusive and does not condone any form of ‘othering’. We are first world and, as experts in the country are hunkering down on this, they will also see the need to review our economic model and our compliance to universal standards as set through SDG frameworks, ILO Conventions, the UN and ASEAN.

Lastly, kindly see this as a document that does not lay blame but an effort to highlight what can be done for all of us, in Singapore.

Submitted by
MARUAH Secretariat
6 May 2020