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Families on the Edge

Mixed methods longitudinal research on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on women and children in lower income families

Issue 1: The immediate impact of the Movement Control Order period

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Cover photo by Acip (13 years old), of his uncle, aunts, grandmother and mother at their flat in PPR Desa Rejang.
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Introduction

In May 2020 UNICEF and UNFPA jointly commissioned the Families on the Edge study to explore the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on women and children in low income urban families in Malaysia. This report is the first in a series of reports under the Families on the Edge project and describes the immediate socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis on a group of 500 families with children in Kuala Lumpur's low-cost flats, as well as preliminary insights on the relevance, adequacy and accessibility of key COVID-19 mitigation policies and other critical social services for this particularly vulnerable group. Future reports are expected to monitor the extent to which these families recover and offer critical insights for the general public and policymakers as Malaysia aims to 'build-back-better'.

Background and objectives

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 was detected in Malaysia on 24th January 2020. On 18th March the government introduced a robust Movement Control Order (MCO) which is widely acknowledged to have been effective in controlling the spread of the virus: by end of July 8,976 people had contracted the disease in Malaysia and 125 people had died. However, the MCO has been extremely disruptive to social and economic life. Unemployment went up to 4.9% in June 2020 which is the highest in 30 years, and higher than during the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 (3.7%), and the Asian Financial Crisis of 1998 (3.4%). GDP has contracted by 17.1% in the second quarter of 2020 (DOSM, 2020), which was the lowest growth ever recorded since the Asian Financial Crisis.

As bad as these aggregate impacts are, it is also increasingly recognised at a global level that the COVID-19 crisis, like other economic crises before it, is likely to impact hardest on the most vulnerable. Data from the pre-COVID-19 period suggests this is also likely to be the case in Malaysia where it has been estimated that around two-thirds of job losses will fall on low skilled workers (MIER, 2020).

Yet even before the crisis, low income families were struggling to cope with the high cost of living. For example, between 2014 and 2016, households with monthly incomes below RM5,000 were forced to cut back on consumption of food despite spending more money on it (KRI, 2018). A recent UNICEF study among low income families in Kuala Lumpur's PPR flats also found that around half of households had recent experience of being unable to afford sufficient food and 15% of households experienced this every month (UNICEF, 2018). Meanwhile, about 1 in 2 of employed labour force is not covered by employment-based social protection (EPF, 2019; DOSM, 2019); 3 in 4 Malaysians find it a challenge to raise RM1,000 of immediate cash

money for emergencies (BNM 2016); and about 1 in 3 Malaysians can only cover a week's worth of expenses, at most, should they lose their source of income. (BNM, 2016). There are also concerns regarding the well-being of households, a study conducted in early April 2020 showed that almost half of the respondents self-reported experiencing varying levels of anxiety, depression (45%), and stress (34%) (The Center, 2020).

In response to these socio-economic risks, the Government of Malaysia introduced a wide range of policy measures to mitigate the socio-economic impact of COVID-19, including RM45Bn to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on households and businesses (MOF, 2020).

However, little is yet known about the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on different social group or about the relevance, adequacy and accessibility of these mitigation measures for the lowest income families. There is a particular gap in the evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on women and children in low income Malaysian families, groups that have been shown to be particularly affected elsewhere. It is also yet to be seen whether wider social protection and social service systems are in a position to provide adequate support to vulnerable groups over the longer-term, thereby ensuring a robust and inclusive recovery process.

UNICEF and UNFPA therefore commissioned the Families on the Edge study to address these critical evidence gaps. In doing so, UNICEF and UNFPA aim to further deliver on their commitment to supporting the development of short-, medium- and long-term social and economic policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis and, in doing so the study aims to make a significant contribution to securing the realisation of Malaysia's national development targets.

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© UNICEF Malaysia/2020/Acip (13 years old)

The photographs featured in this document were taken by the children from the surveyed households to document their family life during the Movement Control Order (MCO). Details of this photography activity can be found in page 34.

Overview of the study

The purpose of this study is to support the Government of Malaysia's efforts to mitigate the direct and indirect impacts of COVID-19 on vulnerable groups through the generation of high quality evidence and promotion of stakeholder dialogue on short-, medium- and long-term policy solutions.

Families on the Edge will be implemented over a period of at least 6 months beginning May 2020. Multiple rounds of quantitative and qualitative data collection will be undertaken over this period to allow the study to track the short-to-medium socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on participating women and children in low-income urban families including their interaction with changing policy and social service responses. It is envisaged that the study will respond to emerging evidence, exploring specific issues in more detail over time.

This first study assesses changes in a range of indicators between December 2019 (prior to the emergence of COVID-19 in Malaysia) and towards the end of the Movement Control Order in May and June 2020.

This study has four main objectives:

- 1** Measure the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the finances of the households
- 2** Collect evidence on its impact on psychosocial wellbeing and experiences.
- 3** Explore the relevance, adequacy and accessibility of COVID-19 mitigation policies and programmes for low income households as well as access to broader social services
- 4** Document the life of women and children living in low-income, high-density urban communities during the MCO, through the eye of the children of that community

Socio-economic study



500

Number of households interviewed



Respondents were the heads of households



To be conducted at least four times



Focuses on the financial situation

Wellbeing interviews



30

Number of households interviewed



Most respondents were mothers or female head of households



To be conducted every month



Focuses on the general wellbeing of households

Photography and videography



Photography and videography project to visualize the impact of COVID-19 as seen by children. Details are in page 34.

Location of interviewed households in Kuala Lumpur



1. Profile of study participants

Survey 1: Socio-economic Survey

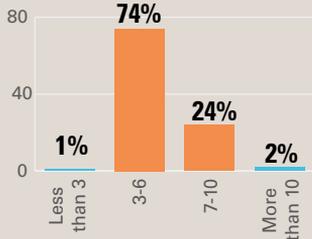
Households



On average, a household has 5.5 members.

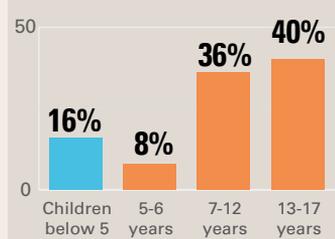
Figure 1.1: Distribution of household members (%)

3 in 4 households have 3 to 6 members.



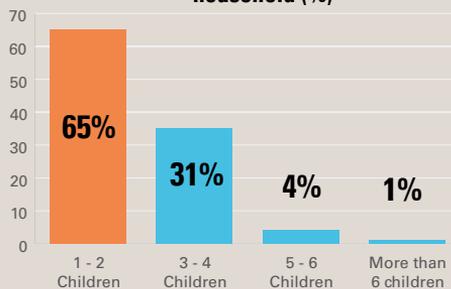
About 40% of household members are children, and about 3 in 4 are school-age children.

Figure 1.2: Total children by age group (%)



2 in 3 households less than 2 children (below 18 years old), with 2.2 children per household on average.

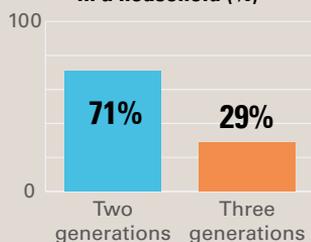
Figure 1.3: Distribution of children (0-17 years) living in a household (%)



3 in 10 households have three generations.

7% of households have the grandparent as the primary caretaker of the child.

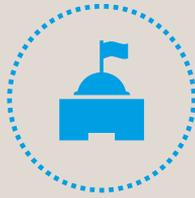
Figure 1.4: Generations in a household (%)



29% of households contain members with chronic diseases or persons with disabilities.



8% of total household members have chronic diseases or are persons with disabilities.



3% of persons with disability household members are registered with the Department of Social Welfare.

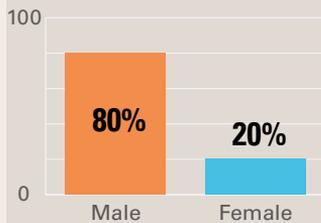


3% of the households have at least 1 pregnant woman (aged 15-49 years).

Heads of households

80% are male.

Figure 1.5: Head of household by gender (%)



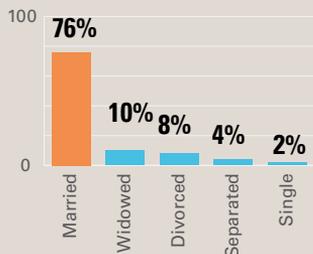
70% are Malay.

Figure 1.6: Head of household by ethnicity (%)



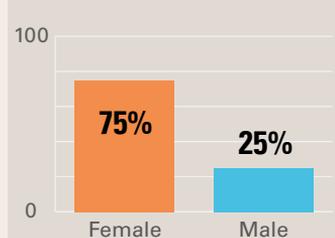
76% are married and 24% are single parents.

Figure 1.7: Head of household by marital status (%)



Single mothers are the majority of single parents.

Figure 1.8: Single parents by gender (%)



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