

What have we learnt?

James Loi Chun Han

IT would be unfair to say that Covid-19 took us by surprise. There had been signs and warnings since the end of 2019. Yet many of us, myself included, were totally unprepared when the Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia or lockdown in other countries was announced.

To say it was unprecedented would be a major understatement. Countries around the world were under lockdown, schools closed, offices shuttered, and for better or worse, everyone was stuck at home. Going out for grocery shopping felt like preparing for war – put on face mask and gloves, apply hand sanitiser, and, in the case of some seriously fearful ones, wear a full set of personal protective equipment (PPE).

Returning home from such a successful grocery run was an equally big production. The standard operating procedure (SOP) consist of sanitising the plastic bags holding the groceries, cleaning of shoes, laundering of clothes worn, and of course, taking a head-to-toe shower before coming into contact with anyone else at home.

It was a scary time, when the most innocent of things were viewed with fear and trepidation. Neighbours avoided each other, food delivery riders (shout out to all the unsung heroes who kept me fed throughout the MCO) were greeted with a healthy amount of caution and an unhealthy amount of dread, and every stranger was deemed to be a potential murderer.

Thankfully, those times are over to some extent. Shops have reopened, people are back at work, the roads are once again congested, and we are all easing back to the life we were used to before this madness. But should we?

During the 1918 flu pandemic, also referred to as the Spanish flu, people were told to stay home, distance themselves from each other, and cover their faces all in an effort to avoid the spread of the flu. Those were no different from the measures we took to fight Covid-19 including quarantine or lockdown, social distancing, and the wearing of face masks.

So, it is obvious that this Covid-19 pandemic is not the first catastrophe of its nature to hit the human race.

Having experienced the 1918 flu pandemic, and not forgetting the 2002-2004 SARS outbreak, the 2012 MERS outbreak, and so many others, how prepared were we to face Covid-19?

Like I mentioned at the start of this article, there had been warning signs, yet we were mostly taken by surprise, as if we were ambushed. Schools closed with no ready contingency plans (but a big round of applause to all school teachers who improvised and became online sensations overnight), offices closed with confusion of whether there would be layoffs, and businesses shuttered overnight with many going under during the lockdown.

I am not advocating that we should all live in fear. In fact, I am advocating the exact opposite. Countries built bomb shelters, cities have evacuation plans, and the more paranoid among us may even have nuclear bunkers. We are all rather prepared for wars, which arguably is something that we as the human race have control over. So why are we not prepared for a pandemic, which is something that we have encountered, and know very well could hit us again without us being able to control it?

This recent pandemic showed us how unprepared we are. We faced a shortage of face masks and hand sanitiser at the start of the pandemic. Many of us had to resort to panic buying before the start of the lockdown as we had no emergency food supply at home. There was confusion over what to do as officials issued conflicting statements and ambiguous directives. The homeless and the poor were left to fend for themselves. The list goes on.

If you have kept on reading until this stage, then you might be feeling rather depressed about the situation. I know I did, which is why I am writing this article, but we do not need to be.

As a community, as a collective species of intelligent beings, we can be better than this. When this pandemic is over, and I truly believe that it will eventually be over, we should definitely celebrate. But more importantly, we need to reflect on the entire experience, both on a personal and collective levels.

What have we done wrong? What could we have done? What did we do right? What could we do better? How can we be better prepared?

To be human is to learn and grow with each day, and each new experience. Nature has just handed us a very big lesson but what are we learning from it?

James Loi Chun Han is a law lecturer from the School of Foundation Studies, Swinburne University of Technology Sarawak Campus.