

## **Practical Safety Guide for Journalists and CSOs Working in the Time of COVID-19**

Under the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) in Malaysia, people can travel across states for work and domestic tourism starting from June 10 to August 31. Freelance journalists, media organizations and CSOs will be resuming their work especially involving field reporting, media coverage and assessments during this period. To prepare for this interstate movement as well as community engagement and interaction in the coming months, it is important to ensure that journalists and CSOs do not contribute to further spreading COVID-19 while at the same time protecting themselves.

The following are key guidelines presented by the resource persons and drawn from discussions during the July 9 webinar on Physical Safety and Risk Mitigation Strategies for Community Engagement by Internews in Malaysia organized to address the above.

This simplified guide is divided into three main parts:

1. Planning and Preparations: Keeping Yourself and Others Safe
2. Taking Care of Yourself While on Assignment
3. Taking Care of Yourself After Assignment

### **I. Planning and Preparations: Keeping Yourself and Others Safe**

It is important to be prepared for any situation or eventuality and the best way to do that is to assess the risks before going on assignment. By answering the following questions, you will be able to determine the level of risk you will face when you go on field as well as help you make a final decision whether to proceed or not.

1. What COVID-19 story or issue are you working on? Is it a sensitive one?
2. How important and urgent is it? Why?

3. In what part of Malaysia will you be going for your assignment? Is it a high-risk area in terms of rate of infections or number of cases? Are there sufficient health care services in the area?
4. Who will you meet or talk to? Do they belong to sectors vulnerable to infections such as the elderly? Pregnant women? Members of an Indigenous Peoples community? Could your informant or sources be under threat or surveillance?
5. How prepared are you for the assignment both physically and mentally (no current health issues, exercising regularly, health safety protocols)?
6. What safety gear and personal protective equipment should you bring?

After you have completed your risk assessment keep in mind other safety considerations before traveling:

- When using a motor vehicle make sure that it is roadworthy.
- Do not drive when tired, sleepy or unwell (applies to hired driver as well).
- Keep handy list of emergency service like the Red Cross or Red Crescent, ambulance services, media support groups, car repair or towing shops.

To avoid getting infected or infecting others, it is best to find out first health safety measures in the area you plan to visit. Do not proceed if you are unsure.

Some high-risk areas:

- Hospitals, health care facilities, quarantine or isolation areas.
- Mortuaries, crematoriums, morgues.
- Homes for the elderly (remember that older people are more vulnerable to infection).
- Private residences where there could be a sick person or someone who is pregnant.
- Indigenous Peoples community especially one with little, if any, contact with outsiders People in IP communities are usually more vulnerable to infectious diseases especially those who have not developed natural immunity.

- Slum areas where houses are jam-packed, and physical distancing is impossible.
- Prisons or detention centers which are usually overcrowded.
- Follow health safety protocols and guidelines set by authorities.

## **II. Taking Care of Yourself (and Others) While on Assignment**

Some key points to keep in mind while you are on field to write a story or assess a project:

- Take extra care when reporting from rural areas as people may be fearful or resentful of outsiders who may bring the virus to their community. Learn how to deal with residents who may resent outsiders coming in. Respect their feelings and work through community leaders and respected elders. Back off if there is resistance.
- Be alert to how the police or authorities implement lockdown measures. Develop situational awareness that will help you assess the threats in the environment you are in. For example, watch out for police behavior at quarantine checkpoints. Are they relaxed, respectful or aggressive?
- As much as possible conduct your interviews in an open space. If you have to do it indoors choose a place with open windows. Use recorders or microphones on selfie sticks to extend distance between you and your subject whenever necessary. People in urban areas may have been used to this practice, but in rural settings you may have to make clear to the person you are interviewing that it is also for their protection especially if he or she is not wearing mask. If you have an extra disposable mask, give it to him or her.
- Try to avoid using cash and regularly disinfect your purse/wallet, credit cards.
- Carefully choose what you will wear since some fabrics are easier to clean than others. This is an important consideration especially when you are on assignment for an extended period of time as you need to change clothes at the end of each. Dry-fit clothes are easy to wash and dry.
- If you wear a niqab, make sure to put on a protective mask underneath. The niqab is a covering and does not have the same protective properties as

health safety face masks.

- Face masks -- if you are using re-usable ones and will be on assignment for more than a day, bring several sets including filters. Have a Zip-lock bag for storing used masks. For disposable masks, place in a temporary container or plastic bag before proper disposal.
- Avoid using public transportation especially during rush hour and make sure to sanitize your hands with alcohol after disembarking.
- If using company or personal vehicle, make sure those traveling with you have been medically cleared, minimize use of air-conditioning and just keep the windows open, wear masks. According to health experts, the virus dissipates faster in open environments.
- Take regular breaks, fatigue can make you careless and forgetful of safety protocols.
- Have a contingency plan (what to do, who to call in case something goes wrong).

### **III. Taking Care of Yourself (and Your Family) After Coverage**

Some important reminders for when you return from a field assignment:

- Before entering the house, remove and disinfect your shoes, sanitize hands with alcohol in a dispenser placed near the entrance, do not reuse clothes and instead place them in a separate laundry bin, take a shower before interacting with family members.
- Should you self-isolate upon returning from a high-risk area? Before coverage, ask health authorities about self-quarantine protocols. Is there a space in your house where you can safely do that? If not, are there other options such as government-run quarantine facilities or those operated by NGOs?
- Monitor your health condition and listen to updates and advisories from relevant government agencies.
- List down the names, office or residential addresses, phone numbers and/or email addresses of all persons you interviewed or have closely interacted with

for contact tracing purposes if it becomes necessary.

- If you develop symptoms, immediately inform local health officials and the management of your news organization.

You also need to take care of your psychological well-being.

- News organizations should practice duty of care by making sure that journalists are regularly checked and provided guidance and support whenever necessary.
- Regularly discuss with family members your work as they may be deeply concerned about your safety and risk of infection within the household.
- Consider potential impact to your mental well-being of reporting from COVID-19 areas. For example, you can consult online resource of DART Center for Journalism and Trauma.

### **Lessons from covering the pandemic in the Philippines**

1. Need for a quick response mechanism. The Photojournalists Center of the Philippines (PCP) set up in early April its own stockpile of personal protective equipment (masks, safety goggles, alcohol, sanitizing wipes) for both members and non-members. The PCP sourced the items from non-government organizations and the Philippine Red Cross.
2. Coordination with health authorities often result in better and safer access to community sources and resources. For example, Pasay City in Metro Manila and the Philippine Red Cross (PRC) provided rapid and PCR-based tests to journalists, especially freelancers, covering the city to ensure the safety of citizens as well during data gathering activities.
3. Psychological well-being is equally important as physical health. It is okay to say 'No' when you think you cannot take on the assignment.