

When science and aid meets

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In high gear: Volunteers working together in a chemical lab to produce hand sanitiser.

PETALING JAYA: When Covid-19 hit Malaysia, Murali Prasad Vandayar found an innovative way to provide free hand sanitiser and distribute food supply to marginalised communities.

Being the country head of the US Department of State's Global Innovation through Science and Technology initiative in Malaysia, Murali spearheaded the initiative to produce and distribute free hand sanitiser to nearly 30,000 people, especially the low-income groups.

It all started when the 39-year-old from Kuala Lumpur noticed a sudden price increase of hand sanitiser in the early stages of the outbreak, which was in late March.

"I was aghast to find the price of hand sanitiser going up five to six times its normal price," he said, adding that he stumbled upon an article online about how a prestigious university in India produced their own hand sanitiser for a tenth of the retail price.

After getting some tips from the World Health Organisation, the idea to produce free hand sanitiser took shape. Although the initial plan was to work with universities across the country, Murali managed to secure assistance from six universities that volunteered as temporary production facilities.

The six were Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Utara Malaysia, Universiti Malaysia Perlis, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Universiti Malaysia Sabah and Universiti Putra Malaysia. Each university had roughly 10 volunteers comprising lecturers and university researchers, he said.

“Our first hurdle was actually getting the volunteers into the universities as the people were afraid to come out at the beginning of the movement control order (MCO),” he said, adding that UM was the first university to agree to the initiative.

“Everyone was eager to be part of this initiative as it was one way to show that lessons from science and technology are purposeful to help communities in need, especially in the fight against the pandemic,” Murali said, dubbing the project “Function of Science”.



He said spirits were high throughout the entire initiative as it was a very exciting project.

“We all had the same thought –this is going to save lives,” he added.

Murali said there were some challenges throughout the initiative. One was to get raw materials because factories were still closed at that time.

After the production stage kicked off, Murali and his team faced another challenge, which was distributing the hand sanitiser during the MCO period.

"With the help of several non-governmental organisations, we managed to give them out as planned," he said.

The hand sanitiser was distributed across Perlis, Kedah, Penang, Perak, Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Negri Sembilan, Melaka, Sabah and Sarawak.

"Ideally, we would have wanted to cover every state but we focused on these states first due to time and movement constraints," he added.

Murali and his team managed to produce over 3,000 litres of hand sanitiser, which was bottled into 50ml, 80ml and 100ml containers as it was much easier to carry around.

He said they targeted the B40 essential service providers as a lot of attention was given to healthcare service providers in the hospitals.

"I don't think there was enough attention given to rubbish collectors, petrol pump attendants, food delivery riders and security guards, who were equally exposed to the disease. We decided to look into that group first and later, a few healthcare institutions as well," he noted. Murali said seeing the smile on the faces of the recipients made their initiative "more worthwhile".

He said for the project, they managed to secure RM70,000 in financial support and raw materials from individual investors, corporate investors and local public-listed companies. Some firms even donated chemicals and plastic bottles.

As the Covid-19 situation started to improve, Phase One of the initiative was completed after about 75 days. They are now planning for Phase Two by roping in more partners and universities to participate.

"We want this initiative to reach more people because we don't know how long this pandemic will last. With schools reopening, a lot of hand sanitiser may be needed," he said, expressing his willingness to help any college or school to produce their own.

Murali also started a food distribution aid to marginalised communities in Tanjung Malim, Ulu Bernam, Puchong, Klang, Selayang and Batu Caves.

It began when a UM professor asked him if he could coordinate food supply to a group of students who did not have access to food.

"During the MCO period, there were people who had no access to daily wages and basic meals," he said. So, Murali mobilised a group of 10 volunteers and built kitchens in a few locations for communities who were in dire need of food.

"We had volunteers who were willing to cook, so we would supply all the materials to them and distribute it with the help of some friends, " he added.

The food distribution – which he called "Annapurna" – of around 100 meals daily were given out over a two-month period with the help of crowdfunding.

"This food aid was supposed to be a side project. We were taken by surprise with the high demand, " he said, adding that the initiative had now been extended to Chennai, India, when requests for help came in.