

# INFRASTRUCTURES OF HOUSING AND FOOD FOR LOW-WAGE MIGRANT WORKERS IN SINGAPORE

**PROF MOHAN J DUTTA**  
Dean's Chair Professor  
Director, CARE, Massey University



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Mohan J Dutta - Director  
Center for Culture-Centred Approach to Research and  
Evaluation (CARE)  
College of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Room 3.46, Sir Geoffrey Peren Building  
Massey University Manawatū Campus  
Private Bag 11 222  
PALMERSTON NORTH 4442  
New Zealand  
**T:** +64 06 951 9282 ext 86282  
**E:** [m.j.dutta@massey.ac.nz](mailto:m.j.dutta@massey.ac.nz)  
**W:** [www.carecca.nz](http://www.carecca.nz)

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## **PROF MOHAN J DUTTA**

### **DIRECTOR**

CENTRE FOR CULTURE-CENTRED  
APPROACH TO RESEARCH AND  
EVALUATION (CARE)



### **ABOUT CARE**

The Centre for Culture-Centred Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE) at Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand, is a global hub for communication research that uses participatory and culture-centred methodologies to develop community-driven communication solutions to health and wellbeing. Through experiments in methods of radical democracy anchored in community ownership and community voice, the Centre collaborates with communities, community organisers, community researchers, advocates and activists to imagine and develop sustainable practices for prevention, health care organising, food and agriculture, worker organising, migrant and refugee rights, indigenous rights, rights of the poor and economic transformation.

Prof Mohan J Dutta is the Director of CARE and author of books such as *Neoliberal Health Organizing*, *Communicating Health*, and *Voices of Resistance*.

This white paper may include images and texts around topics such as sexual violence, physical violence, identity-based discrimination and harassment, and genocide. I encourage you to care for your safety and wellbeing while reading this paper.

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# INFRASTRUCTURES OF HOUSING AND FOOD FOR LOW-WAGE MIGRANT WORKERS IN SINGAPORE

**MOHAN J DUTTA**  
**CARE, MASSEY UNIVERSITY**

This white paper responds to the high prevalence of COVID-19 in clusters associated with dormitories that house low-wage migrant workers in Singapore. Based on an ongoing digital ethnography (45 hours of participant observation) conducted in spaces where low-wage migrant workers participate online, 43 interviews conducted between April 7 2020 and April 13, 2020, inputs from advisory group of low-wage migrant workers, and drawing on 157 in-depth interviews conducted since 2013, the following key challenges with housing and food, as well as corresponding key solutions are proposed. Each of the key challenges is presented, alongside specific recommendations for solutions. The participants for the interviews were identified using snowball sampling. The interviews were conducted in Bengali, mix of Bengali and English, or English, depending on the level of comfort of the participant. Given the sense of anxiety expressed by the participants (see theme 7 below), the white paper does not disclose the locations. Also, it does not separate the different forms of arrangements to protect the confidentiality of the participants. The excerpts from the interviews are truncated to protect the identity of the participants. One of the limitations of the current study is the small sample size of the COVID-19 specific data gathered between the April 7 and April 13 timeframe; however, the depth of the narratives offer rich contextually-embedded insights into the challenges being experienced by low-wage migrant workers and the potential insights they envision. The CARE research team is currently conducting a follow-up quantitative study exploring everyday experiences of health and wellbeing among low-wage migrant workers.

## 1. OVERCROWDED DORMITORY ARRANGEMENTS

The participants in our research highlight ongoing challenges with overcrowding in the living arrangements. Although participants point to variance of living arrangements, for a large number of them, the usual living arrangement is in a dormitory, with between 15 and 20 workers in a room. Noted one participated, “For me, I’m exactly don’t know my room size exactly, but I feel that 10 person also maximum in my room, but they keep 20 person.” Another noted, “They keep bringing in more workers into the room. There is no space to move even.” For another participant, “The workers are put in like in a jail. There is no room to move.” Participants often wondered about the approval process for building these arrangements and what the regulatory guidelines were, “The answer for why, our dormitory authority, or dormitory approval authority only know, who give them the approval to arrange 20 person.” A participant pointed to absence of oversight, “Even the place where I am staying, some time they bring in even more workers.” These overcrowded arrangements affect the health and wellbeing of workers. One participant noted, “I can’t breathe. The air is stale and there is smell in the room.” Participants note that with many workers in a room, there are often conflicts. Their sleep patterns are also affected because of different work schedules and sleeping patterns. This in turn significantly affects their health and wellbeing, and also contributes to accidents in the workplace. Participants pointed to the sense of feeling depressed, “I didn’t think before coming here I will have to live like this. In (referring to home), we have open fields, and open air.

When I came here and looked at how I have to live, I became sad.” Multiple participants refer to feelings of depression when discussing their living arrangements. Referring specifically to the COVID-19 situation, a participant noted “How can a worker follow 1-meter distance? The room has 20 people.” Another participant noted, “They are saying you need to do those things, washing hand and not go outside together. That’s no point when there are so many workers are in a room.”

### Key solutions

The participants offer following key solutions to the living arrangements:

1. Participants suggest that their living arrangements should offer “at least a minimum space.” Although their recommendations for the number of workers per room varies from four in a room to 10 in a room, they are consistent in the suggestion that the number of workers per room should be capped at 10.
2. Participants suggest that there should be enough space between beds. When asked what is enough space, participants noted that they should have the room to move around without having to bump into another worker. A number of participants suggest that the distance between beds should be between three and five feet.
3. Participants suggest that there should be enough ventilation per room so they can breathe.
4. Participants suggest that the rooms should have enough number of fans.
5. Participants suggest that the duplex bed arrangement must be stopped. Instead, single bed arrangements should be made.
6. Participants suggest that rooms should have enough air circulating through them. The rooms should have a window for every four workers in a room.

## 2. LACK OF PRIVACY

The participants in our research highlight ongoing challenges with privacy in the rooms. Notes a participant, “With so many people in the room, there is no privacy.” With 20 migrant workers in a room in many instances, participants note that they are unable to communicate on the phone, move freely in their rooms, and have a sense of peace. This lack of privacy results in conflicts among workers in the rooms, and adversely affects the mental health and wellbeing of workers. Noted a participant, “I can’t sleep at night because some of the brothers in the room wake up early in the morning. This results in a sense of being tired all day.” Another participant voiced, “How can anyone rest when there are so many of us.” Another participant pointed out, “I have to go outside and walk around in the hallway if I want to talk to my wife. There are often money matters that we are discussing.” The sense of not having privacy, often with 20 workers in a room, adversely impacts the sense of health and wellbeing.

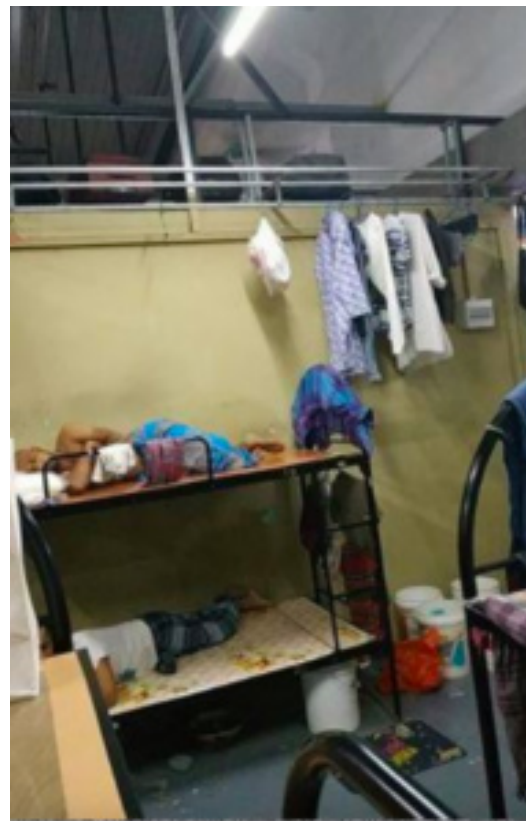


Figure 1: The double bunker arrangement in a dormitory

### Key solutions

The participants offer following key solutions to the living arrangements:

1. Participants suggest that in addition to the recommendations above, their living arrangements should offer each worker a locker to store their items, a luggage storage area, and adequate storage for minimal living standards.
2. Participants suggest that in addition to the recommendations above, their living arrangements should offer each worker a locker to store their items, a luggage storage area, and adequate storage for minimal living standards.
3. Participants suggest that room design should incorporate private lighting that is confined to each worker and is controlled by the worker. This will ensure that workers staying in the same room can get adequate rest.

## 3. UNCLEAN DORMITORY ARRANGEMENTS

The participants in our research point to overcrowding, often leading to unclean dormitory arrangements. For a number of them, the cleanliness of the dormitory is related to the design of the room and the wings, with the double bed system contributing to challenges with cleanliness (see Figure 1). Without adequate space to put up their luggage and clothes, participants suggest that clothes and laundry are often left lying around. Noted a participant, “How can the room be clean? How can the workers keep things clean when we are staying like this, you tell me.” Participants express anxiety amidst COVID-19, noting that the dormitories are not cleaned adequately. This translates into an ongoing sense of anxiety.

### Key solutions

The participants offer following key solutions to the living arrangements:

1. Participants suggest that adequate spaces should be built for hanging clothes.
2. Participants suggest that dormitories should employ regular cleaning support to clean the rooms thoroughly.
3. Participants suggest that limiting the number of workers per room to less than four will ensure the cleanliness of the room.

## 4. LACK OF TOILET FACILITIES

The participants in our research consistently note the absence of adequate toilet facilities in the dorms. Participants often pointed out that for a block of 5 rooms, with 20 workers in a room, there are five toilets and five shower spaces. These infrastructures are not adequate as there are often long queues, and the facilities remain unclean. One participant noted, “Toilet and shower facility is not enough, and there is always a long line. This is the problem in the morning. I have to wake up very early at 4 a.m. to use the toilet, and then I am tired the whole day.” Not having enough toilet translates into difficulties at the workplace, including difficulties in following workplace instructions and accidents at the workplace. This is noted by a participant, “How can a worker do the work in the site when he is tired because he wakes up very early in the morning to use the toilet?” This shortage of toilet facilities at places of accommodation is further exacerbated often by the lack of adequate toilet facilities and water at the workplace. Amidst COVID-19, participants express their anxiety about the toilets not being cleaned adequately amidst COVID-19.

### **Key solutions**

The participants offer following key solutions to the living arrangements:

1. Participants suggest that adequate numbers of toilets should be built, with one toilet facility for every four workers.
2. Participants suggest that dormitories should have adequate shower facilities, with one shower for every five to six workers.
3. Participants suggest that toilets should be assigned per room, with every room having toilet and shower facilities allocated to it.
4. Participants suggest that toilets should be cleaned regularly. This is especially critical amidst COVID-19.

## **5. LACK OF INFRASTRUCTURES FOR HEALTH AND WELLBEING**

The participants in our research consistently note the absence of infrastructures for health and wellbeing in the dormitories. Referring to COVID-19, they articulate the experience of being imprisoned in the room with 20 workers, without the opportunity to walk outside or feel the fresh air. A participant noted, “I am in the room and not going anywhere. I can’t breathe here because there are so many of us in the room.” Participants suggested that this contributes to the feeling of anxiety and depression. Moreover, participants suggested that having gyms to work out in, exercise areas, play areas, open spaces around the dorm, and greenery around the dorm would contribute to the sense of health and wellbeing.

### **Key solutions**

The participants offer following key solutions to the living arrangements:

1. Participants suggest the building of adequate spaces for exercise in the dorm premises.
2. Participants suggest that each dorm should have play areas attached to them.
3. Participants suggest that each dorm should have spaces for healing, art and creative expression built into them.
4. Participants suggest that dormitories should have adequate green spaces. Pointing to COVID19, they note that having these green spaces would have helped them cope with their sense of depression and anxiety.
5. Participants suggest that dormitory compounds should have basic medical facilities paid for by the employer.
6. Participants suggest that dormitory compounds should have separate housing spaces for workers that are on medical leave.
7. Critical to COVID-19, the workers note that it is important to consider the quality of the spaces where they are being housed during isolation. They suggest that some of the current makeshift arrangements including car parks are not sustainable for health and wellbeing, further exacerbating their sense of anxiety and depression. Many of these makeshift spaces do not have electrical points to charge devices etc., which exacerbates the anxiety of workers that have been unable to contact their families.

## 6. LACK OF QUALITY FOOD THAT IS CULTURALLY-CENTRED

The participants in our research consistently note the ongoing absence of adequate and quality food. Our advisory groups have consistently highlighted the lack of quality food since 2013. For low-wage migrant workers (predominantly Bangladeshi that we have worked with), the lack of access to decent food is an everyday reality of life. Workers struggle with the quality of food, often reporting that they are provided with low-quality food. The food is often stale, and has been spoilt. One participant noted, “No one can survive on this kind of food. The food has made me sick many times.” In the voice of another participant, “The rice will have stones in it. The dal will have gone stale, it is just water.” This is further exacerbated by COVID-19, with one participant noting, “only eating catering. Also very poor food. Deduct per month \$140, which is \$20 more also, already can said cruelty.” This rise in the deduction amount for catering food amidst COVID-19 was reiterated by a number of participants. Moreover, our advisory group members note that in spite of the media attention to food and the stories about improvement in the quality of food, they are continuing to be served poor quality food.

### Key solutions

The participants offer following key solutions to the quality of food:

1. Participants note that the catering option is not sustainable. They demonstrate that they can save between SG\$50 and SG\$70 by cooking their own food. Moreover, countering the argument that most workers are too tired to cook, they note that culturally preparing food is a part of everyday life. Moreover, they note creative solutions such as cooking and sharing food in groups, which would further drive down the cost. Given a choice to prepare their own food is fundamental to their sense of health and wellbeing.
2. Participants suggest that adequate spaces should be built for low-wage migrant workers to cook their food.
3. Participants suggest that dormitories should build in kitchens for every room.
4. Participants suggest that creating an accessible grocery store in the dormitory compound is a key solution to making the price accessible.

## 7. LACK OF CLIMATE WELLBEING

To implement these key solutions, the participants consistently suggest the importance of a climate that promotes wellbeing. A number of participants note that the strong presence of the police and auxiliary, the forces at the dormitories, and isolation spaces, contributes to their sense of fear and anxiety. They suggest that the sense of fear about being deported has now been heightened, and this is further exacerbated by the presence of police and auxiliary forces. Participants noted that they know workers who have been threatened and asked to take down content they had posted. A number of participants note that they feel they are being monitored and will get into trouble for sharing their experiences.

### Key solutions

The participants offer following key solutions to the climate of wellbeing:

1. Foster open spaces of communication and enable workers to communicate their experiences without fear of retribution.
2. Minimise the presence of police and auxiliary forces. Participants note that this is key especially because of the ways in which they associate police with fear.
3. Ensure workers are not being threatened and intimidated for sharing their experiences. Participants suggested that being openly able to communicate about their experiences is important to creating solutions that foster their wellbeing.