

## **COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN INDONESIA: A CRITIQUE FOR HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION**

### ***PANDEMI COVID-19 IN INDONESIA: SEBUAH KRITIK UNTUK KEBIJAKAN HUMANITARIAN***

**Irin Oktafiani**

The Australian National University - Pusat Riset Kependudukan BRIN

E-mail: [irin.oktafiani@gmail.com](mailto:irin.oktafiani@gmail.com)

#### **ABSTRACT**

The Covid-19 pandemic challenged countries worldwide to overcome the complex crisis resulting in every country's humanitarian interventions to protect the citizens. This paper aims to examine whether Indonesia's government intervention at the beginning of the pandemic was unsuccessful and gained some issues over it. This study analyses Indonesia's initial regulations during the pandemic in some news and how the interventions at the beginning of the pandemic were full of blunders in four ways. First is to explain that the regulation made by Indonesia's government was not prioritising the most vulnerable groups. Second, the blunders in the national media and lack of coordinations to spread the crisis awareness. Third, lack of collaborations with and among stakeholders as well as complicated bureaucracy. The last is the political intention, which obscured the intervention for the sake of humanity. It is, therefore, Indonesia's humanitarian interventions during the commencement of the pandemic that were not effective and should be evaluated as a pandemic intervention lesson learnt in the future.

Keywords: Covid-19 , humanitarian intervention, blunder, pandemic

#### **ABSTRAK**

*Pandemi Covid-19 menjadi tantangan tersendiri bagi neara-negara di seluruh dunia untuk menghadapi krisis, dan masing-masing negara harus mampu membuat kebijakan berbasis humanitarian untuk melindungi warga negaranya masing-masing. Tulisan ini melihat bahwa kebijakan-kebijakan yang dibuat pemerintah Indonesia pada masa awal pandemi tidak membuahkan hasil yang baik dan malah membawa permasalahan baru bagi banyak orang. Kajian ini menganalisis peraturan-peraturan yang dibuat pemerintah Indonesia pada masa awal pandemi sebagai langkah yang penuh dengan kesalahan dalam empat bagian. Pertama, kebijakan pemerintah Indonesia di masa awal pandemi tidak memprioritaskan kelompok-kelompok yang lebih rentan terhadap virus Covid-19. Kedua, adanya kecerobohan-kecerobohan di masa pandemi yang dipertunjukkan di media nasional dan kurangnya koordinasi dengan media masa untuk menciptakan pemahaman mengenai krisis di masa pandemi. Ketiga, kurangnya koordinasi dengan pihak-pihak terkait dan birokrasi yang rumit. Terakhir, adanya kepentingan-kepentingan pribadi yang mengaburkan usaha-usaha untuk mengatasi situasi kacau pada awal pandemi. Oleh karena itu, kebijakan-kebijakan humanitarian di Indonesia pada masa awal pandemi perlu dievaluasi kembali sebagai pelajaran untuk membuat kebijakan pandemi yang lebih baik di masa mendatang.*

*Kata Kunci: Covid-19, kebijakan-kebijakan humanitarian, kecerobohan, pandemi*

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The Covid-19 pandemic challenged countries worldwide to create a humanitarian intervention in the rapid and complex situation, including Indonesia. In a swift time, governments worldwide must prepare solutions to overcome the Covid-19 problem since the first case emerged in China. However, Indonesia's government interventions at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic were

unsuccessful and received criticism everywhere. The Jakarta Post, in April 2020, published an article on how Indonesia denied the existence of the Covid-19 pandemic and paid back its ignorance with a high record of 2,400 infection cases and 209 death not long after the government with high confidence, said that Indonesia was immune over the virus (Lindsey and Mann,

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2020). Eventually, scholars and the government admitted that the interventions made during the beginning Covid-19 pandemic were ineffective and insufficient in overcoming the tangled situations back then. Through analyses on news data and material at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, this essay argues that the humanitarian interventions sponsored by the Indonesian government were full of blunders, in four ways. First, the regulations did not consider or put priority on most vulnerable groups. Second, lack of using media broadcasting to disseminate the sense of crisis, otherwise spreading misleading situations of the Covid-19 pandemic. Third, minimum collaborations with local stakeholders to clearly spread awareness of the pandemic situation and complicated bureaucracy. Lastly, various political interests steered the pandemic, which caused slow responses to overcome the complex situation. Furthermore, this essay also provides brief conditions of Indonesia's situation and the decision made before the number of Covid-19 cases in Indonesia increased rapidly. Thus, this essay aims to provide criticism of the Indonesian humanitarian regulations during the Covid-19 pandemic, mainly before the vaccin program took place, as a way to evaluate the policies and make them as lessons learnt in terms of mitigation process when pandemic outbreak occurs.

## INDONESIA'S CONDITION AT THE BEGINNING OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In December 2019, The first Covid-19 case happened in Wuhan, China, and this illness shortly became an outbreak in China and caught peoples attention worldwide, including in Indonesia. However, two months after the first case in Wuhan, the government of Indonesia thought that the situation was good for promoting Indonesia's tourism because China was fighting the Covid-19 virus. At that moment, the Indonesian government thought that the situation was the right momentum for Indonesia to be the second option for foreign tourists that could not enter China because of the virus. Also, President Joko Widodo stated that the government was ready to fund more incentives for the tourism sector.

Not long after the president's statement, Indonesia confirmed the first case of Covid-19 on March 2020 and gave them complete treatment to recover from the Covid-19 virus. Furthermore, the president's ignorance continued, especially after the first patients of Covid-19 recovered. President Joko Widodo said that Jamu, a herbal drink from Indonesia, is suitable for tackling the virus and strengthening immunity (The Strait Times, 2020). During that period, on March 11 2020, World Health Organisation (WHO) announced Covid-19 as a pandemic, and the case of it in Indonesia slowly increased daily. Furthermore, as the number of Covid-19 cases in Indonesia was getting higher on May 2020,



Picture 1. Joko Widodo Tweet in the beginning of Covid-19 outbreak.

Source: personal documentation

the Indonesian government announced to regulate of a Large-Scale Social Restriction (or PSBB) from March 31, 2020, particularly to the epicentre region in Jabodetabek (Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, Bekasi). However, the regulation was not synchronised with the regional government, as each regional chief decided their period PSBB. As a result, the Covid-19 virus spread widely because one region might be closed, while the others were still open. The inconsistency created a lengthy debate because not all people received a privilege of working at home, and the regulation to stay at home only exacerbated their situation and made them suffer in uncertainty. During the complexness, on May 2020, the minister of Political and Security Affairs made a joke about the Covid-19 virus. He stated, *“Corona is like your wife. You try to control it then you realise that you can’t. Then you learn to live with it”* (Fachriansyah, 2020). This statement angered public; not only it was sexist, but also public considered it less empathetic in chaotic situation, when the majority of people were suffering, and instead, the minister made a joke about it.

Besides the statements and uncoordinated PSBB regulations, epidemiologists argued that while the government ordered them to wear masks and enforced social distancing in public areas, some government institutions failed to follow those regulations (The Jakarta Post, 2020). Also, the government still had to increase the daily testing to keep on track of the number of Covid-19 cases. With an addition of the air corruption case, these uncertain regulations and acts were exacerbating the Covid-19 situation in Indonesia. Hypothetically, the government then seemed to fail to implement proper and suitable mechanisms to overcome the pandemic effects. Considering the critical impacts of such conditions and arrangements, this essay will provide critics on how Indonesia’s government interventions at the beginning of the pandemic were unsuccessful which led to creating an enormous number of Covid-19 victims.

## **INTERVENTION WITHOUT CONSIDERING THE ONES WHO WOULD BE MOST VULNERABLE**

On March 11, 2020, WHO announced the status of the Covid-19 outbreak as a pandemic, which means that the virus became a global threat. All countries, including Indonesia, created a mechanism per WHO’s recommendation to do social distancing and made PSBB the first step. Theoretically, PSBB was similar to partial lockdown because only certain regions with high Covid-19 cases should apply this intervention. However, it was inefficient as not all the local governments of the five big cities of Jabodetabek (Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, Bekasi) applied the PSBB simultaneously. Furthermore, PSBB intervention was created without considering the layers of vulnerabilities of various groups in those cities. For example, when the local governments suddenly applied PSBB, they expected all people would stay at home and do the works at home. However, particular groups of people needed help to do their job at home, such as the working labourers, manufacturers or street sellers who earned their income by walking around the neighbourhood. In the reality, the governments were failed to consider the situation of these groups.

The Covid-19 pandemic, as a big humanitarian event, created a significant impact on people around the world, and the government, as a primary institution, should consider the condition of all the people, especially people at the most vulnerable risk. For Hillhorst et al. (Hilhorst, Porter and Gordon, 2018, p. s6), seeking the need of the vulnerable group should be the primary concern to do humanitarian intervention. Unfortunately, in this case, the government created the intervention un-deliberately and sacrificed the needs of people who did not have the opportunity to work at home. Hence, the government did not consider the power imbalance in society. Street sellers, people who had to commute from one city to another to work, and manufacturing labourers were vulnerable; they were disadvantaged regarding social power and influence, control of resources, control of their bodies and participation in public life (Hilhorst,

Porter and Gordon, 2018, p. s9). They were away from the power to choose where and how to work, while suddenly the PSBB intervention became a new challenge that limited their access to gain their income.

PSBB regulation was an urgent decision to prevent the Covid-19 virus from spreading widely, however, it was ineffective. WHO urged all countries worldwide to apply social distancing as one of the mechanisms to overcome the complicated situation, and the Indonesian government translated it as PSBB, which applied without an exception. The intervention logic illuminates how often a humanitarian intervention translated based on general assumption and universal remedies will apply for all conditions (Lokot, 2019, p. 474). However, PSBB in Indonesia has become a new burden for people who rely on daily incomes or do not have the option to work at home. Therefore, intervention in humanitarian events like Covid-19 should consider the vulnerabilities in all aspects and contexts and should anticipate the various possibilities that might happen as a result.

### **LACK OF COLLABORATION WITH MEDIA TO SPREAD THE CRISIS AWARENESS**

Humanitarian workers or organisations often use media to spread their campaigns or agenda. For Cottle and Nolan (2007, p. 863), media and journalism help humanitarian workers to disseminate their principles or awareness and often become a bridge between aid agencies, what they do, the public, and donors. Media indeed holds an essential position in humanitarian events. However, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Indonesian government failed to collaborate with the media to spread awareness about the crisis and the media, while on the contrary, disseminated counter activities over the government's orders. For example, some celebrities only wore face shields and not masks when leading a big show on television (Cahyana, 2020). In addition, the public watched how some government institutions held events without wearing masks. Such actions created a negative effect on people and some of them were cynical

about the regulation enforcement as the result of witnessing those violations

Besides, the Indonesian government at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic seemed to create a calm situation rather than an open up and explaining to public on what happened at that moment. The government showed to public how powerful *jamu* was in preventing the virus and that the first Covid-19 patients could have a speedy recovery under the proper treatment. Some experts argued that the Indonesian government denied the Covid-19 cases initially because they were afraid the situation would intervene in the economic situation (Souisa, 2020). As a result, the case increased daily. They framed images that created public discourse, and what media captured had a powerful meaning as the language (Hopkins, 2018, p. 275) in particular articles in Australian women's magazines, frame transnational celebrity activism. Using three recent case studies of commercial representations of popular female celebrities – Nicole Kidman in Marie Claire (Australia). Consequently, most people believed that Indonesians were 'immuned' over the virus, and many of them underestimated the government's advice to do social distancing and wear a mask in public. In this case, the media had done a great job in spreading the issue.

Public perceptions and understanding of the critical event or disaster are essential to minimise more significant damages, particularly during the pandemic. Jackson (2021) provided examples of how people of Bedamuni in Papua New Guinea and Emae Island in Vanuatu understood emergencies and created their cultural survival over their perceptions of past disasters. Emae people recognized disasters as natural events and had a future-oriented plan to overcome them. In contrast, the Bedamuni realized that some disasters related to people and spirits, and they normalised some bad events that occasionally happened as parts of their cosmology (Jackson, 2021, pp. 9–10). Emae and Bedamuni developed strategies to overcome disasters over their perceptions of risks. Perceptions of risk or crisis is essential. and this also happened during the Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia. In the early time of the Covid-19 outbreak, people perceived

that they were immune to the virus and did not care to follow the order to wear masks and do social distancing. However, they misunderstood the situation, resulting in the delay in keeping the number of Covid-19 cases down when the virus already spreaded in many places.

### **MINIMUM COLLABORATION BETWEEN STAKEHOLDERS AND COMPLICATED BUREAUCRACY**

Indonesia is a home for various communities and cultures, in which creating certain challenges for the national authority to disseminate clear messages to people during the pandemic. Another significant mistake from the Indonesian government at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic after denial of the situation was insufficient supports for the urgent efforts to discipline people in conducting health protocols. The government made a clear statement in the news everywhere for people with outdoor activities to wear masks. Nevertheless, it was necessary for them to provide sufficient supports for people to purchase the masks. On March 3rd, 2020, after the government announced the first Covid-19 patient identified in Indonesia, people bought masks in panic, and some of them even hoarded them for their own benefits (Jefriando, 2020). Within a short time, masks then became expensive and rare because everyone tried to protect themselves. As a result, some people did their daily activities without wearing ones as for people who could not afford adequate masks (Raja Eben, 2020).

Basically, the national government required full support and collaboration with the local NGOs and provincial institutions. The authorities created a special division for Covid-19 and needed to give them full access to enforce a powerful movement during the pandemic (Souisa, 2020). The particular force for Covid-19 conducted routine announcements of Covid-19 situation but received limited access to make interventions related to handle Covid-19 pandemic. This situation illuminates how the complex bureaucracy limited access to humanitarian intervention (Stirrat, 2006, p. 14). The particular force might have had an

important task during the pandemic, but their power was limited because of the administration and structural arrangements in the government structure. Furthermore, during the pandemic, the local governments did not collaborate to discuss the best intervention to suppress the increasing number of Covid-19. They implemented any regulations they perceived were best for their provinces or cities. That condition led to a disparity among places. For example, the PSBB implementation's dates were different from one place (city or region) to another, in which made a possibility for people to move between the region of the epicentre.

During the pandemic situation, all regions of Indonesia were impacted, including the remote places where the indigenous communities live. Unfortunately, the collaboration between the government was still limited, and the locals, together with NGOs, as a result, invented a way to prevent further or larger outbreak in their regions. One of the indigenous community NGOs, named Indigenous Peoples' Alliance of The Archipelago or *Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara* (AMAN), argued that since the beginning of the pandemic, they already helped Indigenous communities by disseminating information of health protocol during the pandemic and helped the locals to make masks (*Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara*, 2021). During a humanitarian event like the Covid-19 pandemic, the best way to overcome the problem is by collaboration with the affected communities as they understand the best solutions for themselves and are able to implement longer-term strategies to mitigate the future impact (Clarke and Parris, 2019, p. 3) humanitarian events affected on average 120 million people annually. Whilst many of these events are human-induced, a large number of the 400 or so complex humanitarian emergencies that require international response each year are natural. Such events result in loss of life, injure and maim survivors, destroy infrastructure and give rise to psycho-social trauma. Aid agencies working alongside affected communities must address all these consequences as part of their responses. What is also required though is an appreciation that worldviews will inform how affected communities both understand the cause

of the event, their role in the event and how they will subsequently participate in rebuilding or reconstruction programs. Disasters can be affected by religious beliefs. With more than 85% of the global population self-professing religious belief, these worldviews are often shaped in whole or in part by sacred texts, religious teachings and sectarian practices. In this regard, it is not uncommon for those affected by disasters (particularly natural disasters). In the reality, the government did not sufficient collaborative works with the locals and NGOs to distribute information and support during the pandemic. Consequently, at the beginning of the pandemic, people and communities seemed to do any mechanisms to protect themselves without the government's much involvement.

### **COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND POLITICAL INTENTIONS**

During the pandemic, every country was surprised and overwhelmed by the effects of the Covid-19 outbreak. However, as a humanitarian event, everyone has the same right to be safe regardless of their living country and citizenship. The case of illegal migrant workers who had no safe place to survive during the pandemic is evident. An example comes from the Indonesian migrant workers who worked in Malaysia. During the pandemic, they could not return to Indonesia immediately because Malaysia applied Movement Control Order (MCO) regulation. On March 18th, 2020, Malaysia announced MCO, which banned interstate travel and closed its borders (Yusof, 2021). This regulation affected Indonesian migrant workers who work in Malaysia who were unable to return to Indonesia. Such situation became worse as most first cases of Covid-19 were migrant workers, and many Malaysians blamed the situation towards the migrant workers.

Furthermore, Malaysia's authorities responded to the situation by confining migrant workers in working or living facilities and even catching the migrants to be placed in prison (Vandergeest, Marschke and Duker, 2021). On the contrary, the Indonesian government simultaneously could not pay attention to migrant workers because of too many cases of Covid-19

nationally. During the pandemic, a host country like Malaysia was concerned with prioritising all the support for its citizens first and neglecting migrant workers (Lee, 2020). The migrant workers are subject to external decision-making processes, and they live in doubt, waiting for which institutions that are willing to help them out (Lokot, 2019, p. 471). Therefore, this situation put the Indonesian migrant workers, particularly the illegal ones, in uncertainty.

Furthermore, during the pandemic situation in Indonesia, particular parties were trying to gain their own benefits from the difficult situation. Year 2020 was a political period for Indonesia because some provinces would implement the regional elections. However, the pandemic occurred before the elections. Alas during the pandemic and election year, several regional candidates contested in the election using strategies to support people in need. They provided aid to improve their images and aimed for people's votes in the election. One legislative candidate in East Nusa Tenggara, for example, distributed some donations to people; some people undoubtedly thought that the support was only a way for her to do a subtle campaign before the actual election happened (Suryanto, 2020). Political and subjective interest is one thing that cannot be denied in humanitarian events, especially in a complicated situation like the Covid-19 pandemic. Weiss (2014, pp. 12–13) argued that politics will always revolve around the responsibility to support humanitarian events. Regardless of the humanitarian situation, political and subjective intention beyond doubt will be the reason for the act, but to make benefit under challenging situations is something to be criticised.

During such pandemic situation, while multitude of people were struggling in difficult situations, unfortunately a few corruption cases took place over the Covid-19 supports. In December 2020, the scandal of bribery in the government's aid distribution involving the Indonesian Social Minister Juliari Batubara was revealed (AlJazeera, 2020). There was a serious public concern about this matter as it happened in the middle of a global-national-local unfortunate

situation.. However, this is also a proof that it is not easy to make all humanitarian events free from self-benefiting actions, avoiding misappropriation of aid supports and bribery in a period when most people were struggling to continue their lives. In turn, this would risk people's safety and lives.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Covid-19 pandemic is one of the humanitarian events that challenged all countries around the world at the same time. During the pandemic, all countries, including Indonesia, were overwhelmed to support and help their citizens. However, the Indonesian government took a misstep at the beginning of the pandemic by denying the virus and not being transparent about the data. As a result, the number of Covid-19 patients increased per daily. Findings show four points to criticise Indonesia's humanitarian intervention during the Covid-19 pandemic. First, the authorities were failed to identify who would be vulnerable under the PSBB regulation. Having a lack of consideration on certain people who did not have an opportunity to work at home, the government created PSBB regulations and led to a significant increase of the Covid-19 cases because the virus spread widely.

Second, less collaborations with the media and a lack of consistency during the regulation to wear masks. The government already announced the intervention to implement a social distance and to wear a mask in public. However, people noticed violations conducted by some public figures who deliberately did not comply the rules to wear masks while conducting public and outdoor activities. Furthermore, certain government institutions were necessary to be more consistent in enforcing wearing masks while having their activities. Third, lack of collaboration with local NGOs. It is necessary for the government to involve NGOs and stakeholders to distribute information and aids for people in the national scope. Lastly, some people sought to gain personal benefits during the Covid-19 pandemic. As 2020 was to be the election year, some legislative candidates tried to gain people's sympathy and support by distributing aid and donations to the people in their areas.

Besides those critical points, the corruption cases of the Covid-19 aid support became the most painful evidences that happened during the pandemic situation in Indonesia. Certainly, perfect humanitarian acts and interventions are inexistent, particularly during the pandemic while countries try their best to protect the citizens. However, criticism and learning from the past flaws during the pandemic are beneficial in helping Indonesia creating a better mitigation of any other pandemic in the future.

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