



SAME STORM, DIFFERENT ARK: COPING STRATEGIES OF THE VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has caused changes in multiple aspects of life. As a response to these changes, the vulnerable communities have been forced to set out their coping strategies. Looking at their livelihoods, the vulnerable communities working in the nonagricultural sector have experienced an income decline during the pandemic. In contrast, the vulnerable communities working in the agricultural sector, such as land-owning farmers and agricultural business owners, have been able to maintain their income level. Some coping strategies used by the land and agricultural business owners, however, may cause sharecroppers and farm laborers to lose their jobs. Meanwhile, the economic coping strategies of those whose livelihood is in the industrial sector are dominated by efforts to change the product type and marketing strategies. At the same time, the economic coping strategies of people working in services and tourism are dominated by the movement of labor to other sectors. As for the aspect of social relations, there is a contradiction. On the one hand, strong social relations have supported the vulnerable communities' coping strategies in facing the pandemic. On the other hand, the strong social relations can in fact hinder the implementation of the health protocols. At the community level, the coping strategies rely on the social organization system, which enables the undertaking of various activities to handle the pandemic.

THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The first case of COVID-19 in Indonesia was announced on 2 March 2020. Until 9 November 2021, 4,248,843 COVID-19 positive cases were reported and this has made Indonesia rank first among countries with the biggest number of cases in Southeast Asia (Worldometer, 2021).

The high transmission rate of the virus has made COVID-19 the catalyst of various changes in the community. However, the community's capacity to build their resilience to deal with the changes caused by the pandemic is uneven. The vulnerable communities have limited capacity to cope with, adapt to, and recover from the impact of the pandemic. This vulnerability is related to various factors, such as the differences in welfare level, occupation, and social network.

This issue brief is aimed at providing information about the coping strategies of the vulnerable communities based on the findings of a study conducted by SMERU with regard to the sociocultural resilience of the vulnerable communities in facing the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was conducted from April 2020 to June 2021 in six *kabupaten* (districts)/*kota* (cities), namely Kota Jakarta Timur, Kabupaten Pacitan, Kabupaten Sidoarjo, Kabupaten Banyuwangi, Kabupaten Bantul, and Kabupaten Badung. Results of the study show that the vulnerable communities have employed several strategies to cope with, adapt to changes caused by the pandemic. The coping strategies vary in form and are influenced by their access to human, natural, financial, infrastructure, and social resources.

AGRICULTURE-BASED LIVELIHOODS SUPPORT HOUSEHOLD ECONOMIES DURING THE PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the agricultural sector is relatively lower than that on the services, industrial, and tourism sectors. As many as 76.63% of every 100 companies in the agricultural, animal husbandry, and fishery sectors still operate during the pandemic (Badan Pusat Statistik¹, 2020).

People whose livelihoods are agriculture-based in general can quite easily employ an economic coping strategy, namely maintaining household-level food self-sufficiency. The agricultural sector supports the income of the households of land-owning farmers and owners of agricultural businesses at the time when the households of those working in other sectors suffer a setback because of the pandemic (Figure 1). However, some of the strategies used by land-owning farmers and owners of agricultural businesses, for example, by working their land by themselves, have caused the sharecroppers and farm laborers to lose their jobs.

“For me, at the moment, I don't really feel the impact because animal husbandry is still running; it's got nothing to do with COVID-19. The impact [on sales] is little because the market prices [of farm animals] are somewhat low. (Male, 50 years old, cattle farmer, Kabupaten Pacitan, 22 April 2021)

There is no difference in farming; we still harvest twice a year because the land is wetter. Well, we can consume them on a daily basis. Thank God. [We can also sell them] To pay the school fees. (Female, 46 years old, farmer, Kabupaten Bantul, 27 April 2021)



Figure 1. Income of business owners in the agricultural sector is relatively unaffected by the pandemic



Figure 2. The economic coping strategies of pottery craftspeople in one village in Kabupaten Bantul include changing the types of pottery they produce and accepting online orders

LIMITED CHOICES OF ECONOMIC COPING STRATEGIES FOR PEOPLE WORKING IN NONAGRICULTURAL SECTORS

The choices of economic coping strategies for those working in the industrial, services, and tourism sectors are more limited. The public mobility and activity restrictions policy is the main reason why demands for goods and services have dropped and has also hampered their efforts to overcome such a decline.

The economic coping strategies of those working in the industrial sector are dominated by efforts to change the types of products and marketing strategies (Figure 2). Meanwhile, the economic coping strategies of those working in the services and tourism sectors are dominated by movements of labor to other sectors because of the limited coping choices in services and tourism.

After the pandemic started, we got a salary cut. They also cut our allowances. We don't get lunch money and transport money anymore. If the hotel is open, the government will give us a fine. If it is closed, the employees bear the impact. So, I've been trying to sell decorative plants to people around my house. My wife sells cookies online. (Male, 53 years old, hotel staff member, Kota Jakarta Timur, 25 April 2020)

In 2020, we still had some domestic tourists, but there were no more tourists from Europe. European and Chinese tourists are no longer visiting. The number of domestic tourists were gradually dropping in 2020, and by January 2021, they were no more. These domestic tourists are Jakarta people who are regulars in Bali; they are not afraid of the coronavirus. (Male, 52 years old, car rental owner, Kabupaten Badung, 3 May 2021)

¹ Statistics Indonesia.

“ Many companies that were our regulars stopped doing business with us. These companies have closed down. I know it was because of COVID-19. Meanwhile, here, people are still going out and about [working], and nobody knows yet. I still send half-finished metal plates to small businesses so that I can earn some cash. (Female, 44 years old, half-finished metal plate supplier, Kabupaten Sidoarjo, 7 May 2021)

STRONG SOCIAL RELATIONS BEING A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD DURING THE PANDEMIC

Strong social relations can support the vulnerable communities’ efforts to cope with the pandemic. Such relations have given rise to several types of support, such as food assistance for those having to self-isolate and those affected economically (Figure 3).

Social relations, however, can also affect the implementation of the health protocols. People consider interacting directly with their neighbors to be safe (false sense of security); therefore, they tend to disregard the health protocols. This, in turn, makes them reluctant to reprimand their neighbors/relatives who do not observe the protocols (Figure 4). The caution against the risk of transmission is focused more on guests/visitors from other areas. There are no gathering activities involving out-of-town guests, but there are still gatherings with neighbors.

The stigma given to COVID-19 patients and their close contacts can still be found in the villages. This stigma interferes with the relationship between the patients—as well as their close contacts—and their neighbors, thus hampering the contact-tracing process and COVID-19 testing (Box 1).

Clashes sometimes happen when it comes to traditions like when someone is holding a celebration; they will usually invite many people. We still enforce the restrictions. We send a team to the field, although it is a bit difficult to keep watch until the end. (Male, kabupaten-level COVID-19 task force member, Kabupaten Pacitan, 18 January 2021)

Relationships [among the people] are normal because at our place, it is business as usual. [Farmers] keep going to the field. However, if there is [someone] from outside [the area] or outside the village, then there are health protocols to observe. (Male, 40 years old, coffee farmer and coffee plantation agritourism entrepreneur, Banyuwangi, 17 April 2021)

I had a friend who came to me, complaining that she hadn’t received any assistance. So, I gave her a share of the assistance I had received. The next morning, I received more assistance, but I swear to God, I never asked for anything in return. It was just a sincere act of mine. (Female, 49 years old, art worker/singer, household head, East Jakarta City, 26 April 2021)

I used to be afraid and did not want to go near people who were positive and were in isolation. Now, it seems like COVID-19 has disappeared. My neighbors think so, and we never talk about it. Celebrations are held as usual. If I get invited, I’ll surely attend. However, our relatives who want to return home from the cities at the end of the holy month of Ramadan still cannot do so.



Figure 3. Distribution of food assistance to a household at a village in Kabupaten Bantul whose members were self-isolating

Box 1. Survey of People’s Behaviors during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Results of a survey by Badan Pusat Statistik (2021) in the period of 13–20 July 2021 about people’s behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic, which involved 212,762 respondents, reveal the following.

- As many as 66.7% of the respondents said that they observe the policy of keeping a distance of a minimum of two meters and 78.5% of the respondents said that they have been avoiding the crowds. On the contrary, based on the respondents’ assessment, they find that people around them still disregard the health protocols. Only 40.0% of the people are said to observe the two-meter distancing protocol and 43.3% are said to avoid the crowds.
- There are 36.9% of the respondents who said that they were exposed to COVID-19, but they did not report it even though they knew the location of the task force or reporting posts in their surrounding area.



Figure 4. A group of children in one residential area in Kota Jakarta Timur who were playing without wearing face masks

They cannot enter [the village]. (Female, 39 years old, tour guide, Kabupaten Pacitan, 1 June 2021)

COPING STRATEGIES AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL RELY ON THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION SYSTEM

The village/*kelurahan* administration through the COVID-19 task force has become an important social organization system in supporting the coping strategies at the community level. The task force’s support includes preparing self-isolation facilities, coordinating assistance

collection for people impacted by the pandemic, and providing blocking posts and access portals to help document and monitor the mobility of people who enter from and leave for other areas. The COVID-19 task force also helps the health workers in COVID-19 mitigation at the community level (Figure 5).

Coping support from the social organization system is predicted not to last long. This is because of (i) the community's limited capacity, such as their financial capability and the availability of human resources; (ii) pandemic fatigue; and (iii) the decline in people's risk perception.

“ There is a decrease in performance because the money is no more, but we are still getting tons of homework. The village-level task force was formed to deal with an emergency, but the emergency situation lasts too long, drags on, with no end in sight. ... Sometimes we [the village-level COVID-19 task force] would get some lunch, but our wives and children [still] go hungry. (Male, 35 years old, village-level COVID-19 task force member, Kabupaten Badung, 18 January 2021)

THE IMPORTANCE OF UPDATING INFORMATION ON THE VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES' COPING STRATEGIES

The coping strategies employed by the vulnerable communities are their way of quickly and temporarily responding to the pandemic. The way they cope with the pandemic changes with the change in the situation

of their household and the community, dynamics of the COVID-19 cases, and direction of the government policies. Information about the coping strategies employed by the vulnerable communities need to be updated, as the pandemic persists and moves in a dynamic manner. The ability of the vulnerable communities to employ the coping strategies will help build their resilience in facing the COVID-19 pandemic. ■

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Figure 5. The COVID-19 task force in a *desa adat* (customary village) in Kabupaten Badung helping with the COVID-19 vaccination for the elderly

