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DIRECT CASH TRANSFER-VILLAGE FUND FOR MITIGATING IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A STORY FROM THE VILLAGES

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The Direct Cash Transfer-Village Fund (BLT-DD) program implemented by villages indicates the villages' ability to manage social assistance programs transparently and accountably.
- The key is village deliberation meeting as the highest-ranked decision-making forum which is held openly and participatorily.
- BLT-DD facilitators' presence at the meeting is needed to verify and monitor the democratic process.

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic struck the world in early 2020 and, in a short time, transformed the world situation from a health crisis into an economic one. To minimize its impact on people's welfare, the Indonesian government took an anticipatory step by refocusing its budgets for three main aspects, namely health, economy, and social safety net. This policy also affects Village Fund (DD), a fund annually received by villages. Under the Government Regulation in Lieu of Law No. 1 of 2020,¹ the priorities of DD utilization for fiscal year 2020 are direct cash transfer (BLT) for poor population and the mitigation of COVID-19 pandemic.

To examine this issue, The SMERU Research Institute (SMERU) conducted a brief study on 6–18 May 2020. This study was conducted through online interviews with village heads or their representatives, community leaders, village facilitators/local village facilitators, and (prospective) BLT-DD beneficiaries in 32 villages located in 16 *kabupaten* (districts) of 8 provinces.

Results of this study show some indication of the villages' ability to manage the BLT-DD transparently and accountably. The key factors are institutional readiness and human resource availability in the villages, clarity of the criteria for prospective beneficiaries and the mechanism for BLT-DD distribution, and the involvement of various stakeholders in its process (participatory). The management of BLT-DD may even be better if it is supported by up-to-date basic data and harmonious policy coordination between supravillage government institutions.

VILLAGES' RESPONSES TO THE BLT-DD POLICY

Under the Regulation of Minister for Villages, Development of Disadvantaged Regions, and Transmigration (Permendesa PDTT) No. 6 of 2020,² all villages are required to reallocate 25%–35% of their DD of the fiscal year 2020 for BLT purpose. It has been expected that this policy will burden the villages because they have to make some changes to several activities in order to focus on certain activities and revise the previously set budget plan. Villages' objections are reflected in the statement of one village official, even though he later realized that the policy is needed for the benefit of the village community.

“Personally, at first, I disagreed with it because it seemed like ruining the previously set development plan. However, eventually, I admit that, in an emergency, different approaches need to be made. (Head of Financial Affairs of Village V20, Kabupaten Bekasi, 7 May 2020)

Most villages support this policy as they consider it an appropriate measure to mitigate the impact of the pandemic that has reached their village. In villages, only paddy rice farmers are not affected by the pandemic because they had harvested their crops in February to March 2020. As for the plantation farmers and livestock breeders, their incomes decrease as demands decrease after markets were closed or its operating hours were limited.

Factory workers, shopkeepers, and restaurant employees in cities had to be furloughed or even laid off. Construction workers or day laborers also lost their jobs because many construction projects were postponed. Many small retailers/itinerant merchants and home-based micro business owners, including those in tourist destinations temporarily closed due to the pandemic, were losing buyers because of the customers' declining purchasing power. This was expressed by a Village Consultative Body (BPD) chairperson:

Alhamdulillah [Praise be to God], I strongly agree with it, Ma'am, because it really helps the affected communities. For example, as I told you before, some families have many children, yet they have no job, thus inadequate income. (Village V32, Kabupaten Batanghari, 9 May 2020)

Some consider BLT-DD as a last resort kind of safety net for community members who do not receive social assistance from supravillage governments. During this pandemic, the central and regional governments have prepared various social assistance programs. However, some doubts remain as to whether these programs can reach all of the poor and affected communities.

I personally think that BLT-DD is very good because it can help villagers. The existing assistance programs are not necessarily sufficient, be it from the kabupaten, provincial, or central governments. (Secretary of Village V2, Kabupaten Deli Serdang, 13 May 2020)

Through BLT-DD policy, villages are authorized to determine prospective social assistance beneficiaries. Before this, social assistance from supravillage governments were distributed without involving villages, resulting in mistargeting.

This program is very helpful for poor people. Some assistance programs from the government have not been on target so far. The poorer communities do not receive them, while the wealthier ones do. (Community leader from Village V8, Kabupaten Pacitan, 8 May 2020)

¹ On State Financial Policy and Financial System Stability to Control the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic and/or in Response to Dangerous Threats to the National Economy and/or Financial System Stability.

² On the Amendment of Permendesa PDTT No. 11 of 2019 on the Priority of the 2020 Village Fund Utilization.

In general, villages understand that BLT-DD is a special policy that needs to be implemented to help community members cope with the economic crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This policy is even considered as having the potential of spurring villages to demonstrate their abilities to manage social assistance programs better than the supravillage governments do.

THE WAYS VILLAGES ENSURE THAT BLT-DD BENEFICIARIES ARE ACCURATELY TARGETED

Based on Permendesa PDPT No. 6 of 2020, BLT-DD beneficiaries are poor families who do not receive the Family of Hope (PKH) program³/Noncash Food Assistance (BPNT) and (i) have lost their jobs, (ii) are not yet registered with PKH/BPNT, or (iii) have family members with prolonged/chronic illnesses. In practice, the beneficiaries of social assistance programs from the central, provincial, and *kabupaten/kota* (city) governments are excluded from the list of prospective BLT-DD beneficiaries. Making the exclusion, the villages also seem to have a goal of preventing BLT-DD distribution from overlapping with other programs and social jealousy from occurring between the community members. The villages act prudently in ensuring that BLT-DD beneficiaries are accurately targeted.

The villages' prudence is indicated by their layered screening efforts, starting from data collection to determination of prospective BLT-DD beneficiaries. Various challenges also had to be addressed by the villages during this screening process.

The initial screening is sorting prospective beneficiary families using data on PKH and BPNT program participants from the *kabupaten*. Some villages conducted the sorting before collecting data, but some others directly collected data by visiting the residents' houses.

Sorting prospective BLT-DD beneficiaries is far from being simple due to the many problems with the available data. Those problems include the prospective assistance beneficiaries having duplicate data or unmatched addresses with their identity card (KTP)/family identity card (KK), being deceased, or being a civil servant. It thus took the villages a longer time to collect data since, at the same time, they had to update the existing data.

“Apparently, many participants are no longer eligible there. It means, [the data] must be updated based on the current condition. Some participants' addresses are unmatched with their KK and KTP, some others mentioned [or, were registered under] their children's names, making [the data collection] behind the schedule. (Secretary of Village V5, Kabupaten Jember, 6 May 2020)

Another data-related issue is that the same person in one program is registered under a different name in another program. This is one of the reasons why the data collection officers had to visit the prospective beneficiaries door to door. Each family was required to show their administrative documents, such as KK and KTP. These documents were used to check whether any of their family members have been registered under other social assistance programs.

Especially for PKH beneficiaries, [for example] the name registered in it is a woman, while in our [BLT-DD] program, the name registered is a man. For that reason, checking the information directly to the field is needed. [We] won't let the wife be registered under the PKH program, while the husband receives this BLT. (Head of Village V18, Kabupaten Maros, 11 May 2020)

The second sorting is verifying the eligibility of a family to be a prospective BLT-DD beneficiary. Each village had varied categories to assess this eligibility. However, at least two mechanisms were used by the villages, namely interview and deliberation meeting at neighborhood unit (RT)⁴ or *dusun* (hamlet) level.

In the villages employing the interview mechanism, volunteer teams visited prospective beneficiary families to gather information about their economic condition. This information was used to determine the families' eligibility to be BLT-DD beneficiaries.

We look at how bad they are affected. We assess their incomes and their current condition. For example, they might be affected, but they receive assistance from their children; in this case, we exclude them. If not [receive any assistance from their children], they will be given the BLT. (Head of Village V4, Kabupaten Kubu Raya, 7 May 2020)

RT or *dusun* deliberation meetings seem to be held when there is a policy by the village government to assign a certain quota for each RT/*dusun*. At those meetings, a list of prospective BLT-DD beneficiaries is presented openly for consideration and approval from the communities. A village facilitator revealed that, in his village, local wisdom was used to confirm prospective BLT-DD beneficiaries.

Here, we prioritize the local wisdom of each village. At *dusun* deliberation meetings, the community are gathered. They are asked whether a person is eligible [for the assistance] or not. If they say yes ... alright, it is set then. (Facilitator of Village V1, Kabupaten Deli Serdang, 10 May 2020)

The final sorting is a special village deliberation meeting attended by village government, BPD, *dusun* heads, RT chairpersons, community leaders, village/local village facilitators, PKH facilitators, *bintara pembina desa* (babinsa)⁵, and community police officers (bhabinkamtibmas).

³ Or the Household Conditional Cash Transfer (Household CCT) program.

⁴ The smallest unit of local administration consisting of a number of households.

⁵ Non-commissioned military officers stationed in villages.

At the special meeting, all the collected data of the prospective BLT-DD beneficiaries are considered one by one for at least two purposes. Firstly, the village government needs to ensure that the prospective BLT-DD beneficiaries are not registered as PKH or BNPT beneficiaries. For this purpose, PKH facilitators are asked to check the data. Secondly, the village government needs to rate the prospective BLT-DD beneficiaries if their number has exceeded the available budget capacity. Each family is ranked by their level of poverty and need for assistance based on assessments by the meeting's participants. Village/local village facilitators play a role in ensuring that the decision-making process run democratically and participatorily.

“As a deliberation meeting leader, I ask the reason for suggesting to write off or keep a name. Everything *di-floor-kan* [is discussed openly]. Then a comparison is made between A and B, which one is worse. So, at this village deliberation meeting, data are verified and explanations are given. (BPD chairperson of Village V25, Kabupaten Kendal, 13 May 2020)

We examine (them) one by one. [For example] A is registered, we ask what the reasons are. Finally, 67 people from our *nagari* [village] passed. Actually, we target 138 people, but we cannot make it, because if we insist on passing these 138 people, some rich people might receive the assistance. (Head of Village V24, Kabupaten Tanah Datar, 15 May 2020)

The team leader who is also a *kelian dinas banjar* [*dusun* head] shows why someone's name is chosen to be a prospective beneficiary, and then it will be criticized by the meeting's participants. (Local Facilitator of Village V27, Kabupaten Badung, 13 May 2020)

Having gone through a layered sorting process, all of the villages claimed that the implementation of BLT-DD had been right on the target and in accordance with the rules. In addition, allowing the community to participate in assessing and approving prospective beneficiaries was considered to be the distinguishing characteristic that makes BLT-DD different from other social assistance.

BLT-DD [becomes] the authority of the villages, making it more precise in its targeting by involving RT/RW⁶ in the data collection. It is unlike any other assistance that is often not on target. The village government is committed to prioritizing the poor. (Community leader from Village D16, Kabupaten Kendal, 14 May 2020)

Results of the whole process can be seen in Table 1. In the villages that strictly selected prospective BLT-DD beneficiaries during the data collection, no discrepancy in household head data was found between the processes of data collection, determination of beneficiaries, and distribution of BLT-DD. In the villages that selected prospective assistance beneficiaries through village deliberation meetings, the final data changed as the prospective BLT-DD beneficiaries were sorted further in the special village deliberation meetings.

SUPPORTING FACTORS OF THE BLT-DD'S SUCCESS

The villages' success in implementing the BLT-DD program is influenced by at least three key factors. Firstly, they have institutional readiness and commitments from its actors and facilitators, who are directly involved in the data collection of prospective beneficiaries and in the social assistance distribution. The backbone of BLT-DD implementation is village against COVID-19 volunteer team (the volunteer team) that had been established under the Circular Letter (SE) of Minister for Villages, Development of Disadvantaged Regions, and Transmigration No. 8 of 2020 on COVID-19-Responsive Village and Village Cash Labor-Extensive Affirmation before BLT-DD policy was set. As Permendesa PDPT No. 6 of 2020 was issued, the volunteer teams were assigned with additional tasks, namely recording and verifying prospective BLT-DD beneficiaries.

In many villages, the driving force of these volunteer teams is villages' youth. Together with village officials and RT/*dusun* heads, they collected data within a short time. Appreciation of their performance was expressed by both village heads and BLT-DD beneficiaries.

These volunteers, I think, play the most significant role. They are really dedicated and committed to completing all of the steps of implementation. I am very grateful to this volunteer team. (Head of Village V18, Kabupaten Maros, 11 May 2020)

They [the volunteer team] are really helpful. They came to me and asked me questions, asked for [my] KTP and KK, and took notes. It was not me who had to come to them to apply for the assistance. (Unemployed construction laborer, Village V28, Kabupaten Badung, 12 May 2020)

Secondly, the criteria for prospective beneficiaries used by the villages are not complicated. This makes it easier for the villages to select the prospective BLT-DD beneficiaries. The villages also have the flexibility to add components to the beneficiary criteria. Furthermore, the villages have the authority to decide who deserves the assistance by, for example, comparing the conditions between the prospective beneficiaries, including to rate them.

⁶ RW is a unit of local administration consisting of several RT within a village.

Table 1. List of Data Collection Results for BLT-DD and Other Assistance Beneficiaries

<i>Kabupaten</i>	Village Name (Disguised)	Number of Household Heads (HH)	PKH HH	BPNT HH	Social Cash Assistance (BST) HH	BLT-DD HH (Data Collection)	BLT-DD HH	BLT-DD HH (Distribution)
Deli Serdang	V1	3,308	460	132	192	187	187	187
	V2	10,350	343	n.a.	513	153	153	153
Tanah Datar	V23	1,627	256	282		981 ^a	152	152
	V24	1,604	256	245		500, more or less ^a	67	67
Batanghari	V31	315	28	47		315	110	110
	V32	810	78	40		350	178	178
Kubu Raya	V3	3,307	574	156	721	255	255	255
	V4	1,831	273	112	485	175	175	175
Indramayu	V15	1,860	n.a.	n.a.		n.a.	200	Not yet distributed
	V16	1,600	209	483		n.a.	200	200
Bekasi	V19	3,835	584	610		462	452	452
	V20	15,146	799	433		489	400	400
Banyumas	V13	3,863	500	415		800	200	Not yet distributed
	V14	1,553	319	411		340	250	Not yet distributed
Kendal	V25	542	50	87	80	150	89	80
	V26	1,300	186	337	49	152	137	88
Jember	V5	13,736	700	526		n.a.	268	Not yet distributed
	V6	1,628	412	227		n.a.	196	Not yet distributed
Pacitan	V7	2,179	549	1,130	135	n.a.	231	Not yet distributed
	V8	2,104	630	1,167		n.a.	183	Not yet distributed
Bandung	V27	5,616	8	40	28	199	171	143
	V28	910	93	37		197	125	125
Karangasem	V21	1,435	38	153	90	300, more or less	157	157
	V22	1,844	89	43		210, more or less	162	162
Ngada	V9 ^b	325	77	n.a.		n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
	V10 ^b	195	37	1		n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
TTS	V11	931	386	486		281	273	Not yet distributed
	V12	781	378	409		215	174	Not yet distributed
Maros	V17	736	65	115	18	300	141	141
	V18	1,145	413	292	95	255	183	183
Pangkep	V29	1,520	265	68	220	200	166	166
	V30	950	263	243		258	207	207

Source: In-depth interview.

^a In Kabupaten Tanah Datar, the data collection of prospective BLT-DD beneficiaries was carried out simultaneously with that for prospective beneficiaries of BST from the Ministry of Social Affairs (Kemensos) and that for prospective beneficiaries of provincial and *kabupaten* social assistance. The collected data from each *nagari* were submitted to *kabupaten* to be sorted. Results of the sorting were then determined by the villages to be the BLT-DD beneficiaries.

^b The data collection has not started because no regulation of the *kabupaten* head on this matter has been issued.

Thirdly, the villages involve the community in determining the prospective beneficiaries. In this case, the effectively used institutional activity is deliberation meeting. Deliberation meeting allows the villages to make the decision making transparent by assessing families' eligibility to be BLT-DD beneficiaries. In some villages, the room for participation is even opened since deliberation meetings at RT or *dusun* levels. Accountability can be maintained because the list of prospective beneficiaries is decided together so that the results can be accepted by all parties.

“It's amazing, Mas [local polite way of calling a young man]. Deliberation meeting is held even from the RT level. This is great because the community is involved in deciding who is eligible to receive [the assistance] based on the criteria set by the government. Thanks to this deliberation meeting, transparency is ensured and it helps minimize social jealousy in the community. (Facilitator of Village V25, Kabupaten Kendal, 12 May 2020)

Nevertheless, there is still some dissatisfaction from the people. The village governments are aware that the data collection process has a potential risk of mistargeting. However, having collected the data participatorily, the villages are willing to be held responsible for the problem and even to make corrections.

[At the special village deliberation meeting,] if a certain name is about to be omitted from the list, then the head of the *banjar* where the person of that name lives in will ask if the village government is willing to explain if the person protests for failing to receive the assistance. The meeting participants agree to the request on behalf of the village government. (Local facilitator of Village V27, Kabupaten Badung, 13 May 2020)

We are indeed open if people suggest that a beneficiary seems ineligible based on the criteria. So, if that happens, we inevitably have to organize a deliberation meeting to make a decision on that matter. (Administrative Section head of Village V19, Kabupaten Bekasi, 9 May 2020)

INHIBITING FACTORS IN THE BLT-DD IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation of BLT-DD program demands that villages move quickly. Permendesa PDPTT No. 6 of 2020 which serves as the operational footing of BLT-DD policy was established on 13 April 2020. However, villages had been targeted to distribute BLT-DD in the period of April–June 2020. They also faced various obstacles coming from the supravillage governments. The obstacles include (i) dualism of the criteria for target beneficiaries established by the Ministry of Villages, Development of Disadvantaged Regions, and Transmigration (Kemendesa PDPTT); (ii) “inflexible” provisions, such as the data collection that

requires beneficiaries to have a population identification number (NIK) and the assistance that must be distributed in non-cash form; (iii) *kabupaten* government being slow in verifying the data from a special village deliberation meeting or even in revising a regulation of the *kabupaten* head; and (iv) the overlapping data of the social assistance target beneficiaries.

At the beginning of the data collection process, the criteria for individuals to be the prospective BLT-DD beneficiaries came from two sources, and this made things harder for actors in the villages. The first source was Permendesa PDPTT No. 6 of 2020 which set three criteria for target beneficiaries. The second source was the Letter of Minister for Villages, Development of Disadvantaged Regions, and Transmigration No. 1261/PRI.00/IV/2020 dated 14 April 2020 concerning Notification. In this regulation, the appendix on the guidelines for collecting data on the prospective BLT-DD beneficiaries contains 14 criteria similar to those of the poor households from Kemensos. In general, our informants object to these 14 criteria. They said that finding a family that met 9 criteria to be social assistance beneficiaries had been really hard, let alone 14 criteria.

The situation was exacerbated by the administrative requirements to be the prospective social assistance beneficiaries and the non-cash social assistance distribution scheme. During the data collection, the necessity to record NIK as a requirement for receiving the BLT-DD made some families, who were eligible for the assistance, fail to get their rights because they did not have the document. Meanwhile, the non-cash distribution of BLT-DD will be difficult to implement, as not all poor people have a bank account.

Kemendesa PDPTT immediately responded to the problem by updating the regulation for distributing BLT-DD through the Letter of General Director of Village Community Development and Empowerment (Dirjen PPMD) No. 12/PRI.00/IV/2020 on BLT-DD Assertion. According to the letter, villages can distribute social assistance in cash by carefully implementing health protocols. The prospective beneficiaries were also not required to have NIK, yet their domicile address must be recorded completely. Most importantly, the regulation (i) changes the criteria of prospective beneficiaries to match Permendesa PDPTT No. 6 of 2020 and (ii) shifts the distribution time of the first phase to the first week of May 2020.

In some areas, nevertheless, the changes stipulated in the Letter of Dirjen PPMD had not been followed. Some *kabupaten* governments still insisted on distributing BLT-DD in non-cash, even though some village heads had suggested that Kemendesa PDPTT had allowed BLT-DD to be distributed in cash. Some *kabupaten* governments also still used ownership of NIK as one of the requirements to receive the BLT-DD, leading to the exclusion of eligible prospective beneficiaries from the list.

“ Banks are indeed everywhere. But the *kabupaten* government fails to consider that the banks need a letter of instruction from the central [government]. We contacted the BRI [bank] and they said they were still coordinating it with the central [government]. We contacted the BNI [bank] and they said they were still coordinating it with the central [government]. This eventually delayed the distribution. (Head of Village V21, Kabupaten Karangasem, 8 May 2020)

Only those who are poor, and who have family cards and NIK, will be served. Those without family cards and NIK will be removed from the BLT beneficiary list. (Head of Village V12, Kabupaten Timor Tengah Selatan, 11 May 2020)

In some study areas, the *kabupaten* governments seemed slow in verifying the list of beneficiaries approved by the villages. In fact, until this study finished collecting the data on 18 May 2020, some *kabupaten* governments still had not adjusted the regulations of their regions to Permendesda PDTT No. 6 of 2020. As a result, some villages had not started the distribution of BLT-DD as they were still waiting for technical rules from the *kabupaten* head. The delay seemed to be influenced by the various, overlapping social assistance data.

The simultaneously implemented, overlapping, and uncoordinated programs made the villages have to make several adjustments to the data. Some villages even had to hold two to three village deliberation meetings. They did it solely to ensure that the BLT-DD beneficiaries were not receiving assistance from other programs.

Now, another assistance comes, [namely] BST, Sir. So, after we crosschecked the data of BLT-DD and BST, apparently 60 HH still received both assistance. Finally, we coordinate with their RT heads to replace them [with other eligible candidates] in the BLT-DD list because their inclusion in BST cannot be canceled [revised]. (Head of Village V3, Kabupaten Kubu Raya, 14 May 2020)

Some villages in the *kecamatan* I am assigned to facilitate have to reorganize the meeting to establish the BLT beneficiaries because some names of the BLT beneficiaries are included in the BST program of the Social Affairs Agency. (Facilitator of Village V29, Kabupaten Pangkep, 14 May 2020)



To avoid crowds, village officers gave the BLT-DD assistance directly to the beneficiaries at their house.

The inhibiting factors above show the weak coordination between government institutions in managing policies of mitigating disasters with a huge impact, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The weak policy coordination, beneficiary data collection, and BLT-DD distribution in the field frequently make villages get the short end of the stick. One of the consequences was that the distribution of BLT-DD to prospective beneficiaries was delayed. The villages in this study generally only distributed the funds in the third and fourth weeks of May 2020.

CAN WE ENTRUST THE DISTRIBUTION OF BLT-DD TO VILLAGES?

This report concludes that, when trusted with a responsibility to carry out a social assistance program, villages are capable. The potential abuse of authority by villages can be prevented by optimizing the community participation through deliberation forums at both village and subvillage (RT/*dusun*) levels. The more community members are involved, the more accountable the BLT-DD program will be because its implementation is supervised not only by the supravillage governments, but also by the villages' own communities.

The implementation of BLT-DD by villages provides two important lessons related to village capacity. First, villages have what it takes to collect and update data on poor families. Second, villages are also capable of distributing social assistance to their communities. Villages' ability to collect data on prospective beneficiaries and distribute social assistance is greatly influenced by the implementation of Law No. 6 of 2014 on Village (Village Law) in the last five years. The implementation of Village Law has encouraged village governments to be more responsive to the priority needs of their communities. To some extent, village governments have also adopted the principles of participation, transparency, and accountability in their governance of village development (Bachtiar et al., 2019).

Assigning a bigger role to villages in the implementation of other social assistance programs seems to be no longer impossible. This is crucial to strengthen two main principles of the Village Law, namely recognition and subsidiarity, which recognize villages' authority. To enable villages to play their role well, the criteria for social assistance targets should be made as simple as possible. Appropriate regulations and strong commitment of all parties involved are needed to ensure that social assistance programs are implemented transparently and participatorily. The presence of a facilitator as an actor to verify and supervise the decision-making process is also needed to make it run openly and participatorily. ■

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