



# MAINTAINING PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE COVID-19 TRANSMISSION RISKS THROUGH EFFECTIVE RISK COMMUNICATION

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The rising number of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) cases in Indonesia is a sure sign that the country is still very far from beating the pandemic. Various efforts have been made, but some have not been effective to control the pandemic. The spread of hoaxes and the incongruity of government policies in handling the COVID-19 pandemic have caused general confusion about how to deal with the pandemic. As a result, the public perception of risks of the COVID-19 transmission often and easily changes, inducing a false sense of security.

This false sense of security leads to the increasing incidents of risky behaviors and the public's inconsistency in adapting to and observing the health protocols. Such circumstances indicate a problem in the risk communication strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. To minimize the risks of the COVID-19 transmission, discourage the false sense of security, and foster the people's continuous and consistent adaptive behaviors, the government needs to take the following steps.

- First, improve the strategies for communicating the risks of the COVID-19 transmission by emphasizing on the information disclosure principle.
- Second, support the people's adaptive behavioral changes in observing the health protocols in a consistent and lasting manner.
- Third, strengthen public participation in communicating the risks of the COVID-19 transmission and ensuring the people's adaptive behaviors in observing the health protocols.
- Fourth, develop a system to periodically monitor and evaluate the COVID-19 mitigation communication strategies and their effectiveness.

## RISING RATES OF COVID-19 CASES AND DEATHS

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken many lives as well as sent people with either confirmed or suspected cases to hospitals, and the numbers keep rising. Based on the data released by the COVID-19 Response Acceleration Task Force, on 11 November 2020, there were 448,118 confirmed cases and 14,836 deaths. Data from Worldometers on November 2020 shows that Indonesia ranked first in Southeast Asia in terms of the number of confirmed cases. Also, the Task Force data shows that Indonesia for the first time reported above 4,000 additional new cases in a day on 19 September 2020 (4,168 cases). Although the number of cured patients continues to rise, the transmission of the virus within the community is increasingly threatening the resilience of the health system.

## THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ITS SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACTS

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about massive socioeconomic impacts. The poverty rate in 2020 was predicted to reach 12.4%, or, in other words, there would be 8.5 million new poor people because of the pandemic (Suryahadi, Al Izzati, and Suryadarma, 2020). The percentage of poor people in March 2020 reached 9.78% of the population (26.42 million people), a 0.56-percent increase from that in September 2019 (Badan Pusat Statistik<sup>1</sup>, 2020a). Indonesia's economic growth in the third quarter of 2020 also suffered from a contraction of 3.49% compared with the growth in the same quarter in 2019 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2020b). The open unemployment rate also rose to 6.19%–6.69% until the end of March 2020. This percentage equals the decrease in the rate of workforce absorption, which reached between 1.6 million and 2.3 million people (Rahman et al., 2020).

On the other hand, the economic pressure and health threats because of the pandemic have somehow helped foster the sense of social solidarity among the people. In various regions, people actively collected donations in the form of goods and funds to help those who have lost their job or suffered a significant reduction in income because of the pandemic as well as those at high risk of COVID-19 infection (Figure 1). The prolonged pandemic, however, can threaten this social cohesion and, in time, can impact the socioeconomic resilience of the people.

## LOW RISK PERCEPTION AND INCONSISTENT ADAPTATION: MAJOR CHALLENGES IN THE HANDLING OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Even with the numbers of positive cases and deaths continuing to rise, some people are still harboring a false sense of security. This is evident from the fact that more and more people have returned to work, engaged in social activities, gone to places of worship, and even traveled for pleasure, just like many people did before the pandemic. If this continues, the risks of virus transmission will increase, thus widening the spread of COVID-19.



Figure 1. Distribution of foodstuff to people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic

The increased sense of security felt by the people is due to at least three factors. The first one is the different perceptions held by the people about the risks of catching the virus. Respective sociocultural contexts and the way the government handles the COVID-19 pandemic contribute to the heterogeneous perceptions. People tend to have low and volatile risk perception following the changes in their own health and economic risk assessments, as well as the changes in COVID-19 pandemic mitigation policies at the central and regional levels (Fillaili, 2020).

The second factor is the short-lived adaptation strategies implemented at the individual and community levels. Low understanding of the risks, boredom, and economic pressure have made people become ignorant about the health protocols. The adaptation strategies at the individual and community levels have also been inconsistent. This has led to confusion, which in turn has lowered people's compliance level and increased the risk of the COVID-19 transmission (Tamyis, 2020).

The third factor is the incongruity of government policies. To limit the movement of people and goods, the government enacted the Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB) policy. However, the implementation has been marred by multiple policies that do not support each other and overlap. This is the result of the different interests between the central and regional governments and between regional governments. The implementation of the PSBB policy relies heavily on the regions and this has led to the regional governments acting on their own. Meanwhile, in Jabodetabek<sup>2</sup>, the effectiveness of the policy has faced a challenge because regional governments' policies sometimes clash with those issued by some ministries (Kurniawan, 2020). This situation eventually results in the public's incomplete understanding of the risks and handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, which causes confusion among them.

<sup>1</sup> Statistics Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> a metropolitan area comprising the cities of Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, Tangerang Selatan, and Bekasi



## MAKING COMPREHENSIVE EFFORTS TO DEVELOP EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN ORDER TO IMPROVE RISK PERCEPTION AND ENSURE LASTING ADAPTIVE BEHAVIOR

To reduce the risks of the COVID-19 transmission, eliminate the false sense of security, and foster lasting adaptive behavior in the community, simultaneous efforts and people's active participation are necessary. This policy brief proposes the following four recommendations.

### **Recommendation 1. Improving the Communication Strategies on the Risks of the COVID-19 Transmission by Emphasizing on the Information Disclosure Principle**

The central government, regional governments, nongovernment organizations, and healthcare professional organizations need to work together to improve the communication strategies on the risks of the COVID-19 transmission. To ensure that people have a strong and correct perception of the risks of the COVID-19 transmission, the central and regional governments should continue to openly and consistently convey the latest information on the numbers of COVID-19 positive cases and deaths in a region, and the rates at which they increase periodically.

To increase vigilance and maintain public compliance, information about the COVID-19 transmission routes and potential must also be disclosed. While disclosing the information, the government should include guidelines on what the public should do upon finding out that there are positive cases in their vicinity.

The communication strategy guidelines prepared by the government and related institutions need to be disseminated. The central government has prepared the protocol for public communication on the handling of COVID-19, adopted from the World Health Organization (WHO) protocol. The protocol that the central government prepared should cover communication activities that the regional governments must do. Also, the regional governments should complement the guidelines with more specific strategies, taking into account the condition in their respective regions and the local sociocultural contexts. Nongovernment organizations and healthcare professional organizations, for example, can act as providers of data and analyses about the condition of the people and regional governments can make use of these data and analyses to help them formulate their own guidelines. Messages for the public about preventing the transmission of COVID-19 should be clear. They should not be contradictory and overlapping, nor should they be open to multiple interpretation. They must also be able to effectively fight hoaxes.

Communicating the risks of the COVID-19 transmission should take into account the societal context, which encompasses the area types (rural and urban areas) and livelihood sectors (formal and informal sectors). The government's communication strategies should also reach

the poor and vulnerable groups as well as groups at high risk of the COVID-19 infection. The central government, regional governments, nongovernment organizations, and healthcare professional organizations can use multiple communication media, such as electronic media (television and radio); online media—including social media (institutions' official accounts); printed media; and communication networks used by community groups. The effectiveness of the communication strategies needs periodic monitoring to ensure that the information about COVID-19, such as the number of cases, the increase rate, spread, and anticipation of the transmission, can reach all groups in the community and can be used by the people as a guideline for their behavior.

### **Recommendation 2. Supporting the People's Adaptive Behavioral Changes in Observing the Health Protocols in a Consistent and Lasting Manner**

All the community members have to follow the health protocols in all aspects of life. Therefore, it is important for everyone to practice a clean and healthy lifestyle. A number of strategies to encourage the people to adopt such lifestyle are as follows.

The first strategy is to utilize widely used communication media to disseminate various messages about adaptation strategies and to raise and build awareness of clean and healthy living in accordance with the COVID-19 prevention protocol. The use of traditional media, such as communication networks involving village/*kelurahan*<sup>3</sup> officials, public/community figures, religious figures, RT/RW<sup>4</sup> officials, and health cadres, is an alternative to reaching those with limited access to technology-based communication media or those who trust certain actors more as their information sources.

The second strategy is to involve all parties to play a part in disseminating messages about the adaptive strategies. The central and regional governments need to play a part as reliable sources of information—information which comes from experts and is evidence-based, valid, and open. The government needs to inform the background of the emergency that the nation is facing and counter hoaxes. Communication media administrators, including actors in community groups, need to play an active role in disseminating fully verified information. The public also needs to be critical by double checking the validity of information they receive and relaying only fully verified information.

The third strategy is to thoroughly monitor people's adherence to health protocols in the residential areas, work/business settings, and public facilities. The monitoring should engage not only the government but also the communities down to the individual level. In order for this engagement strategy to work, there has to be a community-based monitoring system established. Actors in the community groups can be appointed as members of a committee whose tasks include ensuring that the system works, while surveillance (whether the public follows the health protocols) is a responsibility that belongs to everyone, even those outside the committee. There is also a need for raising people's awareness that implementing the health protocols is the key to everyone's safety. For that reason, everyone is obligated to stay vigilant

<sup>3</sup> a village-level administrative area located in an urban center

<sup>4</sup> RT, or neighborhood unit, is the smallest unit of local administration consisting of a number of households. RW is a unit of local administration consisting of several RT within a *kelurahan*.

and disciplined. The monitoring system needs to include sanctions (punishment) for violating the health protocols. Formulating these sanctions should be done openly and all committee members need to take part. The sanctions must be designed in such a way that people are afraid to violate the protocols and that they give a deterrent effect.

### Recommendation 3. Strengthening public Participation in Communicating the Risks of the COVID-19 Transmission and Ensuring the People's Adaptive Behavior in Observing the Health Protocols

Strengthening public participation includes strengthening the role of RT/RW officials and actors in various (religious, economic, and social) community groups. They will spearhead the efforts to raise people's awareness, improve their understanding, and maintain the sustainability of the adaptive strategies through empowerment and monitoring.

The community members' active participation is an important prerequisite for fostering a society that is adaptive to living in the middle of a pandemic, which demonstrates their compliance with the health protocols in their daily socioeconomic activities. This compliance can be achieved by raising people's awareness and delivering valid information about the risks of the COVID-19 transmission.

The people can work with RT/RW officials, village/*kelurahan* officials, actors in community groups, and other actors, such as law enforcement officers, to conduct monitoring and impose sanctions. One good example comes from a customary village in Bali, in which the imposition of customary sanctions by customary officials has contributed to a high level of compliance (Fillaili, 2020; Tamyis, 2020). The poor and vulnerable groups as well as those at high risk of COVID-19 infection need to be given space to participate in these prevention and monitoring efforts so that their interests and needs are accommodated and protected.

### Recommendation 4. Developing a System to Periodically Monitor and Evaluate the COVID-19 Mitigation Communication Strategies and Their Effectiveness

The central and regional governments have enacted various policies, including those instituted in the communication strategies, to respond to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, the public's level of knowledge varies and this has affected how they act and respond to the pandemic. In order for the people to obey the health protocols, the government's policies set in the communication strategies as well as the messages delivered to the public must be coherent and consistent.

Despite the government's having implemented the strategies to ensure that the people have the correct understanding of the risks of the COVID-19 transmission, the people's actions are yet to reflect such understanding. That is why the government and other related institutions need to conduct a periodic monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of the implemented communication strategies. Results of the M&E can be used to reformulate the communication strategies so that they are more adaptive to the pandemic situation. The regional governments, with the help of nongovernment organizations and healthcare professional organizations in their respective regions, need to assess the effectiveness of each communication strategy and make any necessary adjustments. The government needs to ensure that the poor and vulnerable groups as well as those at high risk of COVID-19 infection are included in the M&E. ■

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Editor:  
Budhi Adrianto

Design & Layout:  
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The findings, views, and interpretations published in this policy brief are those of the author and should not be attributed to any of the agencies providing financial support to The SMERU Research Institute.

#### Suggested citation:

Fillaili, Rizki and Ana Rosidha Tamyis (2023) 'Maintaining Public Perception of the COVID-19 Transmission Risks through Effective Risk Communication.' SMERU Policy Brief No. 1/ June/2023. Jakarta: The SMERU Research Institute.

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