

Lack of Transparency

While small-scale fishers in Indonesia have not been hit by COVID-19 infections, the lockdown measures and economic policies have left them more vulnerable

The novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) has forced changes across the world. After cases spread rapidly outside Wuhan, China since January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. As the number of confirmed cases of infection crossed 31 mn in September, with more than 1 mn deaths, the pandemic has spread to about 200 countries. The United States, Brazil, India and Russia have recorded the greatest numbers.

Indonesia's first COVID-19 case was confirmed on 2 March 2020, although epidemiologists had reportedly mentioned that the virus had entered Indonesia in late January. The WHO urged Indonesia, in a letter, to immediately take concrete steps

country had the capacity to test only 1,976 persons per million population, neighboring Malaysia had reached 20,391 people tested per million, and Singapore's testing capacity was 98,519 per million.

A large island nation, Indonesia faces several challenges in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. What makes it worse is the attitude of the authorities who deny the gravity of the threat. In fact, economic activities were the focus, rather than the handling of the pandemic. Since the first COVID-19 cases began to emerge, there has been a lack of transparency regarding the number of cases.

This can be gauged from the absence of government strategic actions and efforts to take necessary action. The NDMA established the status of 'Certain Emergency Situations' from 28 January to 28 February. On 31 March, President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) declared COVID-19 a 'Public Health Emergency'. Eventually, he declared it a National Disaster on 13 April.

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Social restrictions

The Health Quarantine Law gives the government several options during a 'Public Health Emergency'. These include home quarantine, regional quarantine, hospital quarantine and large-scale social restrictions. The government opted for large-scale social restrictions (called PSBB) with a minimum of three forms of action: (i) closing schools and workplaces; (ii) restrictions on religious activities; and (iii) restrictions on activities in public places or facilities. These must also take into account meeting the basic needs of the population, such as healthcare, food and other daily requirements. Health quarantine actions can be carried out by the regional government with the approval of the Minister of Health. These include large-scale social restrictions or restrictions on

to slow the spread of the virus and declare a national emergency. In early September, Indonesia ranked 23rd in the list of affected countries, with about 194,000 confirmed cases, and over 8,000 recorded deaths. The number of COVID-19 positive cases has increased since 16 June, when the COVID-19 Accelerated Handling Task Force of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) confirmed 1,106 new cases in Indonesia. That figure was based on the Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test of 339,309 people. At the time, 15,703 people had recovered and were declared free of COVID-19.

These figures indicate that Indonesia is not testing up to the requirements, and that the country's COVID-19 testing capability is still very low. When the

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movement of people and goods to a certain province, district or city.

After establishing large-scale social restrictions in mid-April, the government issued several additional policy packages, including:

- **Electricity cost relief:** As a form of assistance to the community, the government waived the charge for electricity for the months of April, May and June.
- **Prohibition of homecoming:** The government formulated regulations for the festival of Id-ul-Fitri.
- **Credit relief:** A number of groups, such as online motorcycle taxi drivers, fishermen, and taxi drivers, were offered credit facilities for one year, starting 1 April.
- **Budget allocation:** To meet a number of needs in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak, the central government issued a budget of Rp 405.1 trillion (US\$ 24.5 bn) through the 2020 state budget. This policy has been established through a Government Regulation in Lieu of Law on Economic Stability during the Pandemic.

In the midst of an uncertain situation with a high rate of new

infections, President Jokowi announced a food deficit in a number of areas. One reason for this is the inter-regional logistics distribution getting hampered by the restrictions. Although the food deficit announcement does not mention fisheries as a staple food, the pandemic has had a significant impact on Indonesia's fisheries sector.

In the midst of large-scale social restrictions imposed by each local government, in general, fishers have continued operations. In certain areas, the harvest season has begun. A majority of operators in Indonesian fisheries are in the small-scale subsector; the country has 523,903 small vessels under 10 gross tonnage (GT). The government still does not have comprehensive data on all workers in the small-scale fisheries subsector in the pre-harvest stage. The post-harvest operations include both men and women.

Since the announcement of restrictions, most fishers have experienced significant impacts, although the fish catches are not affected, in general. The availability of fisheries commodities—processed food products in the service sector such as restaurants, hotels and tourism—decreased significantly. The top fish

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Fishing harbour in Indramayu, West Java. In the midst of large-scale social restrictions imposed by local governments, in general, fishers have continued operations.

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commodities for export and import were also affected due to the trade restrictions imposed by several countries. This has a direct impact on how the fish catches are absorbed in the market. The market now finds it difficult to absorb the catches because of restrictions on many community activities, from fish auctions at the village level to the distribution of fish at the provincial and cross-provincial levels. Fishers, especially small-scale fishers, catch fish daily as their only source of income and livelihood.

Quarantine

Fishers in Pari Island, Kepulauan Seribu Regency in the Greater Capital of Jakarta Province face the same problem. Edy, a fisherman from Pari Island, said his income has decreased dramatically since COVID-19 began to spread in Indonesia. Fishermen of Pari Island also imposed a quarantine independently. Everyone is prohibited from traveling outside the island. Access to this community from outside also remained closed up to the time of writing. Only fishing activity is permitted. Besides being a fishing village, Pari Island is also a community-based tourism spot, with small-scale fishers earning additional income as tour guides. They were forced

to close these tourism operations. “For approximately three months we did not travel out of the island. Income from fishing has decreased by 50-70 per cent. If there is tourism, there is extra money, but now there is no extra money because we have closed the tourism business,” Edy told a news reporter on 15 June.

The Jakarta provincial government was the first to implement concrete measures in response to the pandemic, with the governor on 25 February issuing instructions on increasing risk awareness. The Jakarta government also decided to provide various stimulants for meeting the basic needs in a month; one of them was a package of staple food. “For three months the government provided assistance in the form of 5 kg of rice. Residents still lack essential food, but try to survive by fishing every day to meet their food needs. At present, although the restrictions have been revoked, the residents have deliberately decided to close the area to outsiders,” Edy said.

In Tarakan City of North Kalimantan Province, a fisherman named Rustan has been feeling the heat of the pandemic. “Fishers’ incomes have decreased dramatically due to the many restrictions on activities. Fish can only

be sold in local markets, whereas the catches were always sold as an export commodity before the pandemic. The price of fish has dropped almost 90 per cent. Fishers have felt this since March. Moreover, the government's social assistance programme is not evenly distributed," Rustan was quoted as saying in a news report.

He said fishers have limited social activities and still use masks when going to sea. Yet about 10 fishermen contracted the virus in the area of Gowa in South Sulawesi. This, however, did not have anything to do with fishing activities but occurred during the religious festival of Tabligh Akbar.

Fishers face similar conditions in areas such as Karanghantu, Serang-Banten; Lamongan, East Java; Surabaya, East Java; Sumenep, East Java; and Indramayu, West Java. They can still engage in fishing activities even though they know the price of fish is low. The catch produced is used to meet daily needs and buy fuel. Fishers are also looking for alternatives. For example, in the Lamongan area of East Java, fishers go out to sea using loan capital from investors. The catches are sold to the investors as a form of instalment or return of capital. On Pari Island, Thousand Islands and Surabaya, fishers convert catches that are not sold into salted fish. This, in turn, is sold to a co-operative in Pari Island. In Surabaya salted fish is sold to collectors at low prices. "Fish that is not bought by collectors, we usually try to sell it around the house. They don't always buy it but, who knows, if someone wants to buy. We must be proactive to survive," said Serang Banten, a fisherman from Karanghantu. In Sumenep, East Java, fishers have reduced the number of workers on vessels to both cut costs and maintain physical distancing while fishing.

In general, the problems faced by fishermen include both declining fish prices and restrictions on social activities. Small-scale fishers who depend on daily income are forced to stay at sea even though they know the prices of fish have dropped dramatically. Others choose alternative jobs that are inadequate in meeting their daily needs.

The government's financial stimulants and aid packages are not accessible to all fishers. The lack of data on the small-scale fisheries sub-sector—from the national to the regional level—handicaps all efforts to help the fishers.

They still find it difficult to access capital.

With the enforcement of physical distancing and social restrictions in Indonesia, fish markets, restaurants and hotels are experiencing a shortage of customers. The resulting decrease in fish demand and consumption has, in turn, reduced incomes in the fishing sector.

When certain regions restrict access to their territory, the problems for the fisheries sector are multiplied due to increasing transportation costs. At the same time, this unprecedented situation has resulted in innovative practices that could affect the way the sector functions in the future. It is unfortunate that the authorities are entrenched in business as usual, denying scientific advice and a data driven approach to

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policy making. This has led to chaos in addressing problems in the field, even as the number of people infected with the coronavirus increases.

Food-value chain

The deficit in food availability was not addressed by the government with a specific strategy that encouraged small-scale food producers as important elements of the food-value chain. Indonesia already has a legal instrument that could have played a key role in this: Law No 7 of 2016, concerning Protection and Empowerment of Fishermen, Fish Cultivators, and Salt Farmers. Among other things, it calls for ensuring the certainty of business for small-scale fisheries. In particular, it paves the way for creating conditions that produce favourable fish prices and encourage the development of fish commodity marketing systems through storage, transportation, distribution and promotion. 3

For more

<http://extwprlegs1.fao.org/docs/pdf/ins159362.pdf>

Law of the R.I. No. 7/2016 on the Protection and Empowerment of Fishermen, Fish Cultivators and Salt Farmers.

<https://www.seafoodsource.com/news/supply-trade/indonesia-considers-allocating-usd-69-million-for-fisheries-aquaculture-amid-covid-19-pandemic>
Indonesia considers allocating USD 69 million for fisheries, aquaculture amid COVID-19 pandemic

<https://news.mongabay.com/2020/04/sinking-feeling-for-indonesian-fishers-as-covid-19-hits-seafood-sales/>
Sinking feeling for Indonesian fishers as COVID-19 hits seafood sales

https://www.ilo.org/jakarta/info/public/pr/WCMS_748037/lang--en/index.htm
ILO teams up with trade unions to protect fishers from COVID-19 pandemic and human trafficking