

# Responding to the COVID-19 Outbreak in Indonesia: Lessons from European Countries and South Korea

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COVID-19 spreads rapidly to almost all countries in the world and disrupts political, economic, and social domains. Even developed countries who possess strong security, production, technology, and knowledge structures could not escape from adverse impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak. During this crisis, the governments are demanded to make strategic policies to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak, but not all of those policies are effective to overcome the negative impacts. Inaccurate policies cause other problems and become controversial instead, for example, the release of inmates and a plan to release graft convicts with respect to COVID-19 spread prevention proposed by Law and Human Rights Minister.

Effective and accurate policies to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak are crucial. Some countries have succeeded in implementing strategic policies to respond to it. Indonesia is approximately seven weeks behind Italy, and six weeks behind Spain, Germany and the United Kingdom considering the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Indonesia which was 7,775 cases on 24 April 2020.<sup>1</sup> There is still adequate time to learn effective responses

conducted by those countries which are relevant to the conditions in Indonesia indeed.

There are at least third points that should be considered deliberately by the governments to survive the disruption caused by the COVID-19 outbreak in the short run. First, increasing COVID-19 tests is a must. Second, flattening the curve of COVID-19 cases through social or physical distancing is a crucial measure, but these policies might impact the economic domain negatively. There might be a trade-off between doing the lockdown to flatten the curve and maintaining economic growth. Third, the government must protect the most vulnerable groups such as poor people or unemployed person and vulnerable sectors such as tourism, small and medium enterprise, or manufacturing sectors during the pandemic.

## Increasing and Accelerating COVID-19 Tests

The key success of South Korea government to deal with the COVID-19 outbreak is doing massive and indiscriminate testing to the people to trace people who have contracted the virus.<sup>2</sup> People might not have the symptoms, even though they have contracted the virus and become carriers. Invisible carriers who do not show symptoms are dangerous to vulnerable people with health problems. Therefore, massive and indiscriminate testing are pivotal measures to

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<sup>1</sup> “Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Report – 95,” World Health Organization, April 24, 2020, accessed April 25, 2020, [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200424-sitrep-95-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=e8065831\\_4](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200424-sitrep-95-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=e8065831_4).

<sup>2</sup> Will Bedingfield, “What the World Can Learn from South Korea’s Coronavirus Strategy,” *Wired.co.uk*, March 21, 2020, accessed April 25, 2020, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/south-korea-coronavirus>.

contain the COVID-19 outbreak. South Korea had conducted 595,161 tests in total from 3 January 2020 until 24 April 2020 (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2020).<sup>3</sup> This policy has succeeded to flatten the curve of COVID-19 cases. Then World Health Organization calls all countries to “test, test, test”. Germany also conducts massive and indiscriminate testing. There was a total of approximately 1.3 million tests done until 4 April 2020.<sup>4</sup> Germany has succeeded in lowering the death tolls, even though the number of confirmed cases is still increasing and has reached 150,383 on 24 April 2020. The result of the tests and the statistics are crucial to trace the people who have contracted the virus and to contain the spread in the initial stage.

The United Kingdom is another country which is struggling to flatten the curve. The number of confirmed cases and total deaths in the UK is the fifth-largest globally in April 2020.<sup>5</sup> The UK government is being criticized because the number of tests is far behind neighboring countries in Europe such as Germany. The tests in the UK seem limited to people with suspected coronavirus in the hospital, care homes and prisons.<sup>6</sup> There are still many National Health Service workers have not been tested yet. This situation has raised public concerns over the

testing crisis after several NHS workers have lost their life after contracting the virus.<sup>7</sup> Limited test conducted by the UK government results in difficulties in tracing people who have contracted the virus, and the containment measures cannot be done effectively.

Indonesia is lagging behind other countries in doing COVID-19 testing. Indonesia has only conducted 67,828 total tests until 25 April 2020. This number is below other countries in the Southeast Asian region such as Vietnam (206,253), Thailand (142,589), Malaysia 126,970, Singapore (121,775), Philippines (81,292).<sup>8</sup> Increasing the number of COVID-19 tests is crucial as an initial step to flatten the curve. Besides, it is also crucial for the Indonesian government to build public trust nationally and to gain a reputation internationally. Indonesia, as the biggest country in the Southeast Asia region in term of total gross domestic product and population, should be leading in conducting tests and becomes a leader of regional health governance in Southeast Asia.

### **Extending and Tightening Physical Distancing**

Lockdown phenomena that are happening internationally and become the exclusive concept

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<sup>3</sup> “Coronavirus Disease-19, Republic of Korea,” Ministry of Health and Welfare Republic of Korea, April 25, 2020, accessed April 25, 2020. <http://ncov.mohw.go.kr/en/>.

<sup>4</sup> Morris, Chris. “Coronavirus: What can the UK learn from Germany on testing?”. BBC, April 11, 2020. Accessed April 25, 2020. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-52234061>.

<sup>5</sup> World Health Organization, “Coronavirus Disease.”

<sup>6</sup> Rowena Mason, “Fall in Covid-19 Tests Putting Lives at Risk, Critics Claim,” The Guardian, Accessed April 25, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/30/fall-in-covid-19-tests-putting-lives-at-risk-critics-claim>.

<sup>7</sup> Victoria Ward et al. “These are the NHS Workers Who Have Died from Coronavirus.” Telegraph, April 23, 2020. Accessed April 25, 2020.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/0/nhs-workers-died-coronavirus-frontline-victims/>.

<sup>8</sup> “Reported Cases and Deaths by Country, Territory, or Conveyance,” Worldometers.info, accessed April 25, 2020, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>.

used by the government are adopted locally in Indonesia at the village level, even in the rural area. People at the village level begin village lockdown to contain the virus infecting their village voluntarily. They close the road to enter their village by using bamboo or other simple materials such as pieces of plants growing in their village. These phenomena have occurred even before the large-scale social distancing (PSBB) announced by the Indonesian government on 10 April 2020 for Special Capital Region of Jakarta. These are good signs that Indonesian people have been aware of the risks of the virus. However, it does not guarantee that all of the people will obey PSBB or physical distancing. The biggest challenge is banning ‘mudik’ which might cause mass contagion from the center of the outbreak in Jakarta to the peripheral area throughout Indonesia.

PSBB should be conducted more than just two weeks for an effective containment result. The UK has been experiencing lockdown since 23 March 2020. Dominic Raab, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, announced that the lockdown would be extended at least another three weeks on 16 April 2020.<sup>9</sup> However, there has been no sign that the lockdown has succeeded to flatten the curve after a month of lockdown. The number of daily confirmed cases is still high, which is around 4,000 to 5,000 new cases a day. For example, there are 4,583 total new confirmed cases on 24 April 2020 within 24 hours.

The government’s policy to conduct flexible PSBB, which is different from one region to another is the right decision. It prevents economic

disruption for regions which has a few confirmed cases. There is no need to conduct PSBB nationally at this point, but the government has to extend and to tighten PSBB in the centers of the outbreak. Extending PSBB for Jakarta, West Java and another red zone area is urgently needed since short term lockdown has not resulted in a significant decrease of daily confirmed cases like in the UK. When the number of the case seems to decrease, the government might begin to ease PSBB for several sectors step-by-step, for example, manufacturing and education sectors might return to normal activities first, then they are followed by another sector.

### **The Distribution of Economic Incentives**

Countries throughout the world might face the worst global recession in the modern era caused by the COVID-19 crisis. Interventionist ideas of John Maynard Keynes are relevant amid economic uncertainty condition and the government should make some economic interventions to overcome market failure caused by the health crisis. Accurate distributions of national resources to the market through economic stimulus packages and financial incentives for households are crucial at this point.

Indonesia’s socioeconomic conditions are unique. An economic intervention that might plausible to be implemented in other countries will not fit to be implemented in Indonesia. For example, there is an economic policy in the United Kingdom that the government will pay 80% of wages for workers who are at risk of being laid off during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>10</sup> This kind of policy

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<sup>9</sup> Sabrina Barr, “Coronavirus: When Might the UK Lockdown Come to An End?” *Independent*, (April 24, 2020), <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/coronavirus-lockdown-uk-remove-end-review-schools-when-government-a9453246.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Ben Chapman, “Coronavirus: UK government to pay 80% of wages for those not working during crisis,” *Independent*, March 20, 2020, accessed April 25, 2020,

cannot be implemented in Indonesia that has 260 million population.

Indonesia has technocrats who are experts in their field, such as Minister Sri Mulyani who has fruitful experiences in dealing with the economic crisis. The economic policy with respect to the COVID-19 outbreak, such as cash transfers or *Bantuan Langsung Tunai* (BLT) should be formulated deliberately by the central government considering the socioeconomic condition in Indonesia. The most important thing is that the distribution should be accurate. Only people who are at the risk it can experience the BLT. The problem is that the data of vulnerable groups is not clear. There are ambiguities to categorize people at risk who are rightful to get the BLT.

Indonesia has a social capital that might become a key factor to win the war on the COVID-19. We should not only depend on the interventionist idea by Keynes and depends on the intervention by the government. '*Gotong royong*' or mutual cooperation is the key to help people at risk. Caring people within our neighborhood is part of our culture. When the medical workers cannot get protective equipment and the government cannot supply it immediately, support comes from the civil society voluntarily. The role of non-state actors should be embraced.

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