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Fighting Covid-19 in Indonesia: What Needs to be Done

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No one expect that 2020 becomes one of the most difficult years for Indonesia, as various types of disasters occurred. Severe flooding in the capital and its surroundings caused suffering. Local authority mentioned that this disastrous annual event has cost 960 billion rupiahs economic potential just around this January.¹ Yet, the number is dwarfed by damages caused by the outbreak of a global-scale emerging infectious respiratory disease coded as Covid-19. Following the announcement made by President Joko Widodo on March 2 regarding Indonesia's first positive cases, the country made it to the list of affected nations by a pandemic, which was originally identified in Wuhan, China. The Ministry of Tourism has calculated that Indonesia lost US\$ 2.8 billion-worth of economic potential merely from Chinese tourists.²

¹ "BI: Kerugian Banjir Jakarta 2020 Lebih Kecil dibandingkan Tahun-Tahun Sebelumnya," Berita Satu, February 28, 2020, <https://www.beritasatu.com/megapolitan/604011/bi-kerugian-banjir-jakarta-2020-lebih-kecil-dibanding-tahun-tahun-sebelumnya>

² "Indonesia Offers Big Discounts to Attract Foreign Tourists Amid Cancellations," The Jakarta Post, February 19, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/02/19/indonesia-offers-big-discounts-to-attract-foreign-tourists-amid-cancellations.html>

The Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs also announced another round of loss worth around 500 million US dollars stemmed from the delays of Chinese investments in the country.³ The burden is economically painful since Indonesia just recently strived to neutralize the impacts of US-China trade war last year.

Beyond the financial damage, Indonesia should be much more concerns about safeguarding its citizens from the virus exposure. According to the official account of the government, there are 117 patients being taken care in eight provinces across Indonesia as of March 15.⁴ Two points could be derived from the current numbers. On the one hand, Indonesia has the leeway to carry out early interventions given that number is still far below the epicentres of the Covid-19 such as China (81,048 cases), Italy (21,157 cases), Iran (12,729 cases), and South Korea (8,162 cases).⁵ Setting aside the debate on whether such a leeway is generated from under-reporting patients or purely from the actual condition on the ground, it is also understood that Indonesia currently occupies the third rank among other Southeast Asian affected countries closely following behind Malaysia (238 cases), and Singapore (212 cases).⁶ Yet, different with these fellow Association of Southeast Asian (ASEAN) members, Indonesia does not have the privilege for any policy failure or any room for trial-and-errors in responding to the Covid-19. Indonesia is currently enlisted among a small group of countries where the cases double every two-days. Without a proper management to halt the Covid-19 crisis, a massive outbreak with more than 1,000 cases is possible to occur in just a week.

There is no single recipe for an effective response to Covid-19. Some choose a radical intervention through strict limitations of people's movement, be they locking down the mobilization inside a city, locking down the interaction between provinces, full closure of the whole nation, or merely just tightening the control over its entry points. With regard to the first model, the best case presented is the way China quarantined the Hubei province since January 23rd, following shortly the WHO field visit to Wuhan on the previous day. China suspended public transportation to leave the area, private vehicles were prohibited from the streets, people were required to wear masks, a general door-to-door health check were done, large-scale treatments in the makeshift quarantine camps are put in place, among other measures.⁷ The policies succeeded in controlling the outbreak, proven by the new infections surrounding the epicentre were then below 10 cases daily.⁸

Next to the Chinese model is the way Philippines lockdowns the Metro Manila per March 14th, 2020. This 'community quarantine' is designed to reduce interactions between the capital and other regions in the light of another new death case in the Southern Philippines. The government immediately applies travel

³ "Luhut Sebut Potensi Rugi Investasi US\$500 Juta Karena Corona," CNN Indonesia, February 20, 2020, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/ekonomi/20200220201307-92-476597/luhut-sebut-potensi-rugi-investasi-us-500-juta-karena-corona>

⁴ "Update Virus Corona di Indonesia; 117 Terinfeksi, 8 Sembuh, 5 Meninggal Dunia," Kompas, March 16, 2020, <https://www.kompas.com/tren/read/2020/03/16/070000965/update-virus-corona-di-indonesia-117-terinfeksi-8-semuh-dan-5-meninggal>

⁵ Max Roser, Hannah Ritchie, Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, "Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19) Statistics and Research," Our World in Data, March 15, 2019, <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus>

⁶ *Ibid.*,

⁷ "China Tightens Wuhan Lockdown in 'Wartime' Battle With Coronavirus," New York Times, 6 February 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/06/world/asia/coronavirus-china-wuhan-quarantine.html>, check as well: Amy Gunia, 'China's Draconian Lockdown is Getting Credit for Slowing Coronavirus. Would it Work Anywhere Else?,' Time, March 13, 2020, <https://time.com/5796425/china-coronavirus-lockdown/>

⁸ Kaelan Deese, "China Says Coronavirus Cases on Decline After Hitting Peak in Epicenter," The Hill, March 12, 2020, <https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/public-global-health/487208-china-says-coronavirus-cases-declining-after-hitting-peak-in-epicenter>

restrictions to and from the capital by any transport, deployment of police and military for temperature checks across 56 checkpoints, the night-time curfews from 8 pm to 5 am, among other measures.⁹

Meanwhile, one last lockdown case that is worth for attention is Italy. As soon as the announcement made by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte on March 9th, Italy is pursuing the full closure at the national level following the outbreak of Covid-19 in all provinces as well as the tipping point of 100 death cases has been reached. Italy now imposes the obligation to carry an 'auto-certification' form released by the Interior Ministry when people leave their homes, cancellation of sport events and religious activities (masses, funerals, or weddings), night time curfew that is started at 6 pm, suspension of family visit to prison, and a three-month prison sentence or a fine of \$230 for any violation upon the decree on the national lockdown.¹⁰

Contrary to the Chinese model, the success rate of both Italian and Filipino quarantine mechanisms could not be measured anytime soon as the outbreak is still ongoing. But it is likely that the degree of success in each respective lockdown mechanism would be varied depending on their geographical character, political system, community behaviour, and resiliency of their economy. No one could guarantee that the lockdown would necessarily equal to the decline of Covid-19 cases in that area. Instead, it might be national stability which declines at certain cases of lockdown.

On the other part of the spectrum, Singapore champions the Covid-19 crisis by using moderate interventions through surveillance and containment mechanisms without closing the borders. Singapore intentionally designs necessary policies against Covid-19 where mobility of people is eventually discouraged. Among others, those policies including the online submission of health clearance prior to the arrival, requirement to attach the proof of the place for 14-day mandatory Stay-Home Notice, reducing participants for each mass gathering to below 250 participants with the previous suggestion to improve ventilation and to facilitate a contact tracing, demanding the owners and tenants of public venues to limit number of visitors at one time and to enhance their business continuity plans.¹¹ It is pretty confident that the aforementioned set of 'moderate' policies epitomize how the country seriously grasped lessons from the injurious SARS outbreak in 2003. Having the right policies and experiences at their disposal, Singapore relatively could maintain its 'zero-death' caused by Covid-19 despite the country just experiencing the highest spike¹² in a day with 17 cases found in a day.

No lockdown is needed for Indonesia at the moment. The Singapore model as mentioned above is one good example of no-lockdown measure, even though directly copying its model will not be possible. Another supporting ground for easing the lockdown option from our national Covid-19 strategy is definitely from economic perspective. The lockdown would definitely hamper the total 33.2 trillion

⁹ "Philippine Capital to Undergo Curfew Mall Closures as Coronavirus rise to Six," The Jakarta Post, March 14, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/03/14/philippine-capital-to-undergo-curfew-mall-closures-as-coronavirus-deaths-rise-to-six.html>. Please also check Ana P. Santos, "Ghost Town: Manila Under Coronavirus Lockdown," Al Jazeera, March 16, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/manila-turns-ghost-town-coronavirus-lockdown-200315121507679.html>,

¹⁰ Elaine Allaby, "Italy: Punishment in the Time of Coronavirus," Aljazeera, March 13, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/italy-punishment-time-coronavirus-200312171128553.html>. Please also check: Rhea Mahbubani et. Al, "Italy Enters its First Day of A Nationwide Coronavirus Lockdown as it becomes the worst-hit country outside China," Business Insider, March 10, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.sg/italy-prime-minister-extends-coronavirus-restriction-zone-entire-country-2020-3?r=US&IR=T>

¹¹ "Multiple Lines of Defense to Guard Against Local Spread of Covid-19," Singapore Government, March 13, 2020, <https://www.gov.sg/article/multiple-lines-of-defence-to-guard-against-local-spread>

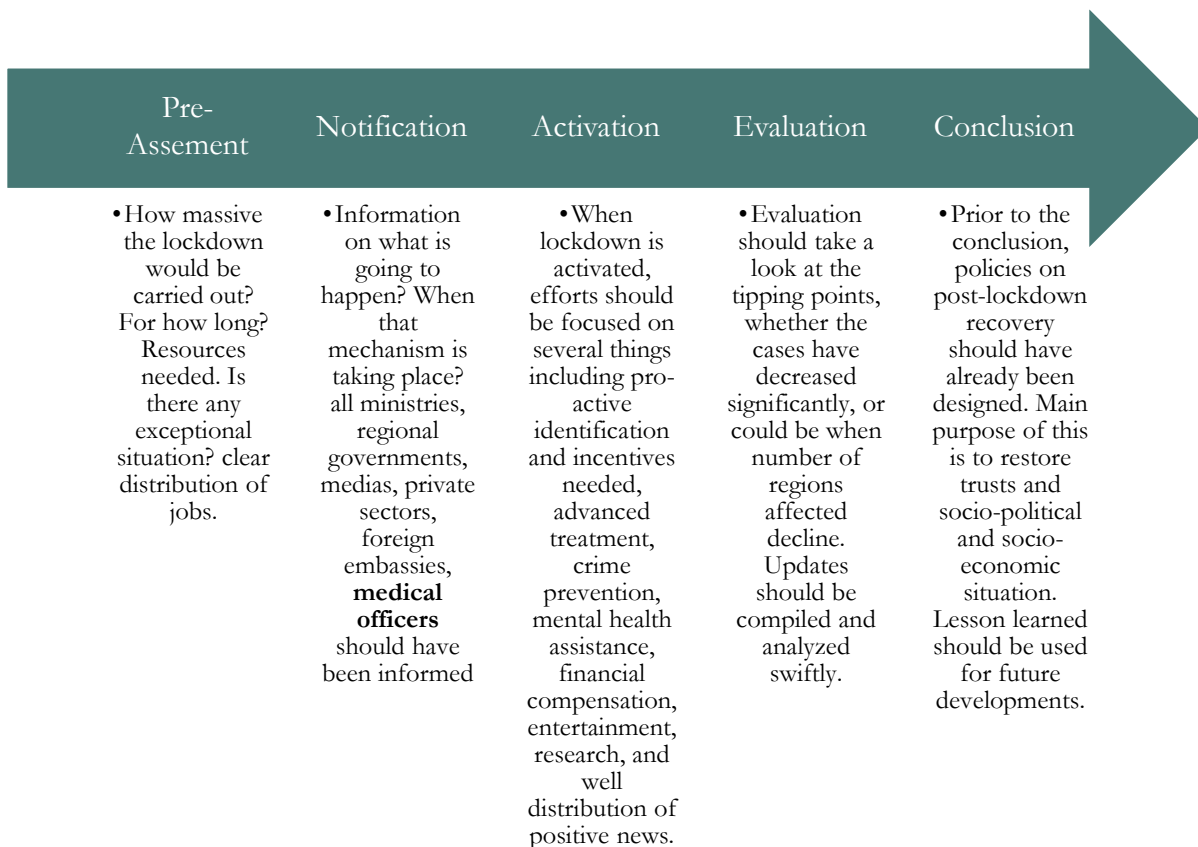
¹² "17 New Covid-19 Cases in S'Pore in Biggest Single-Day Spike, including 11 Imported: 86-year-old S'porean Man is Oldest Patient," The Straits Times, March 16, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/17-new-covid-19-cases-in-spore-in-biggest-single-day-spike-including-11-imported-86-year>

rupiahs-worth of incentive packages¹³ from realizing its optimum result as well as it is most likely worsening the damage experienced by the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and workers in informal sectors.

The other remaining reasons against the immediate lockdown could be found from the management perspective. At the moment, Indonesia might not yet reach a bold tipping point. In the case of Covid-19, the tipping point could be defined from the number of massive deaths, dramatic increase of new positive cases in a short amount of time, the number of provinces affected, or the sharp increase in local transmission case. In addition, Indonesia has yet to mobilize her whole national resources to focus on addressing the Covid-19. Private sectors seem left clueless on what kind of assistance that they can contribute, while media are left unguided on positive updates surrounding Covid-19.

It should be of our greatest concern as well whether the people right now are thoroughly aware with the current emergency situation and whether the functionality of our health emergency system has been properly prepared. One thing for sure that the lockdown is likely to fail the whole Covid-19 management if policies at the regional level are incoherent with the ones decided by the national government, considering the blunt fact that most of the regional governments have never built its preparedness in facing wide-ranging types of disasters.

Chart 1. Basic steps before activating the lockdown



¹³ The Ministry of Finance announced two incentive packages on February 25 around 10,3 trillion Rupiah, and on March 13 around 22,9 trillion Rupiah.

There are too many lessons where impulsive policies could only cause more disruptions instead of fixing the actual situation. Indonesia's Covid-19 strategy therefore should not prolong the list by abruptly activating lockdown. But, in any case where lockdown is getting needed or when one of the tipping points is achieved, Indonesia should have already had in minds five basic steps as shown in the chart number 1. The mentioned steps would be beneficial in mitigating the collateral damages from the lockdown activation, including mass hysteria, mental diseases, or further economic costs.

To win the battle against Covid-19, Indonesia needs innovative policies and tactics beyond bureaucracies' sectorial ego. Along with the existing efforts, four major points below are worth considering:

1. **Preparing the worst-case scenarios.** Covid-19 possesses different unforeseen consequences for countries. In Indonesia, some worst-case scenarios of Covid-19 that should be mitigated are: the outbreak occurs at the same time with natural disasters (e.g. floods, earthquakes), an existing disease (e.g. Dengue cases) combined with the outbreak, the outbreak infects many high-rank public officials, the outbreak continues during the upcoming holy month of Ramadan. Rapid formulation of contingency plans by the National Task Force for Covid-19 is imperative at the moment.
2. **Enhancing the posture of our medical response.** Robustness of medical responses in the time of Covid-19 can be indicated by the availability of necessary equipment (e.g. testing kits, masks, ventilators, thermometers), numbers of well-informed and insured medical officers, accessibility of the treatment (hospitals, or qualified clinics), and the use of artificial intelligence in detecting or curing the Covid-19. Ministry of Health should reassure our national capability are enough at those frontlines. Cases such as the use of rainwear by doctors who take care the Covid-19 suspects in Garut as there is no longer protective equipment, or the shortage of masks experienced by hospitals in Padang and Penajam Paser Utara, must be responded quickly.
3. **Intensifying international engagement.** Diplomatic interaction should be intensified with countries who succeed to pass through or to manage the Covid-19 outbreak. China, Singapore, and South Korea are among other champions bearing in mind that they are the real survivors of SARS 2003 and MERS 2012. Practical recommendations are including requesting all ambassadors to identify potential partners in their respective hosting countries to support our domestic needs against Covid-19, facilitating Indonesian scientists and laboratories to join the international network on the discovery of Covid-19 vaccines, inviting international philanthropists to participate in the national efforts against Covid-19, enhancing deliberations on traditional medicines to cure the Covid-19, and optimizing the roles of AHA Centre in mobilizing international assistance for Indonesia and ASEAN countries in the time of Covid-19.
4. **Mobilizing national resources from non-government sector.** In many cases, the role of non-government sectors is minimum due to the limited information they could access. The government should brief each sector on their respective potential roles in the national campaign against Covid-19. The public-private partnership against Covid-19 that could be imported from other countries, including the engagement of e-commerce firm such as Alibaba to suspend online sales of overpriced face masks through their platforms in China, and doing overseas purchases of medical supplies for Wuhan. Another good example is the Soju companies were encouraged to donate their alcohol for sanitizing public spaces in Daegu, South Korea. Fiscal incentives, such as tax deduction for any party who could contribute to the national and regional government efforts against Covid-19, might be a reasonable instrument to boost mobilization after all. Temporarily suspends visa-free policy might also be an option to be considered in order to prevent imported cases from beyond our border.