



COVID-19 in Indonesia:
Experiences of Children and Families
Livelihoods and Social Assistance

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Summary

This brief presents findings on the immediate and widespread impact of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of families across Indonesia. Understanding how livelihoods have changed; who has been most and least affected; how families coped; and the effectiveness of COVID-19 social assistance programmes will provide practical insights for more targeted policies and programmes.

The brief is part of a series of four research briefs looking at the multiple impacts of COVID-19 on families and children in a remote, longitudinal study held from May 2020 to February 2021. Study participants were families who researchers had previously lived with, or spent extended periods of time, as part of qualitative and immersive studies carried out between 2015 and 2020. These pre-existing relationships provided a basis for open and trusted remote interactions, phone conversations and messages using a range of digital communication tools.

Most families experienced a decline in income and continue to face challenges. Migrant workers who returned home found little to no work, although those with skills or living closer to urban areas had more opportunities. Informal labour opportunities in construction contracted due to travel restrictions, reduced spending and the shift in the use of village funds for COVID-19 relief. Kiosk and street vendors suffered reduced sales; many relocated or sold other goods, but made less money than before. Farmers who could not wait to sell crops had to accept lower prices. Urban families struggled more than rural families to cover daily expenses and supplement lost income.

Informal workers and low-skilled migrants have been most affected by the pandemic. Impacts have persisted for many migrant workers, street vendors and those relying on remittances. For migrant workers, uncertainty about job availability, travel restrictions and the cost of

living, including the cost of COVID-19 testing, were barriers to returning to work.

Families reduced spending on food and deferred large expenses such as construction, school fees or debt. Some families delayed university enrolment for older children. Families with multiple sources of income and those who relied less on cash for daily needs coped best.

The majority of families received COVID-19 social assistance, although some people in need were excluded. The amount and frequency of disbursements varied widely. Payments made early in the pandemic (July 2020) were helpful to supplement daily consumption costs, although too small and unpredictable to support long-term recovery.

People raised concerns regarding fairness and transparency of COVID-19 cash assistance processes. The centralized Bantuan Sosial Tunai (BST) allocation process was not well understood at the village level and there was limited opportunity to provide feedback or appeal. Village officials lacked guidance for allocating village funds for the COVID-19 response, including the Bantuan Langsung Tunai (BLT) cash disbursements. Some people preferred that village funds be used for public works rather than cash assistance, as this generates jobs and benefits for the whole community.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Provide a safety net for workers especially those more vulnerable to economic disruptions. Worker support schemes should include work opportunities for low-skilled and informal workers, savings or insurance to cover temporary periods of unemployment, direct financial support to companies to retain workers, subsidized wages and making it easier for microbusinesses to obtain emergency loans.

Review criteria for allocation of social assistance to reach more people in need. Ensuring that the criteria and assessments of people's changing financial circumstances are updated regularly will improve distribution of funds.

Increase effectiveness and transparency of social assistance by providing more information on the scheduling of distributions and selection processes for beneficiaries. Understanding the forms of support that can be expected, selection processes, amounts provided, when and how often disbursements will be made will help families plan ahead. A mechanism by which village officials (and community members) can suggest revisions to criteria, appeal decisions or nominate individuals for further assessment would help address community distrust of the system and motivate officials to improve targeting or expand assistance.

Support village governments with strategies for the use of village funds to support the pandemic response, including the fair and transparent allocation of social assistance. Consult with village officials to develop contextualized guidelines and strategies.

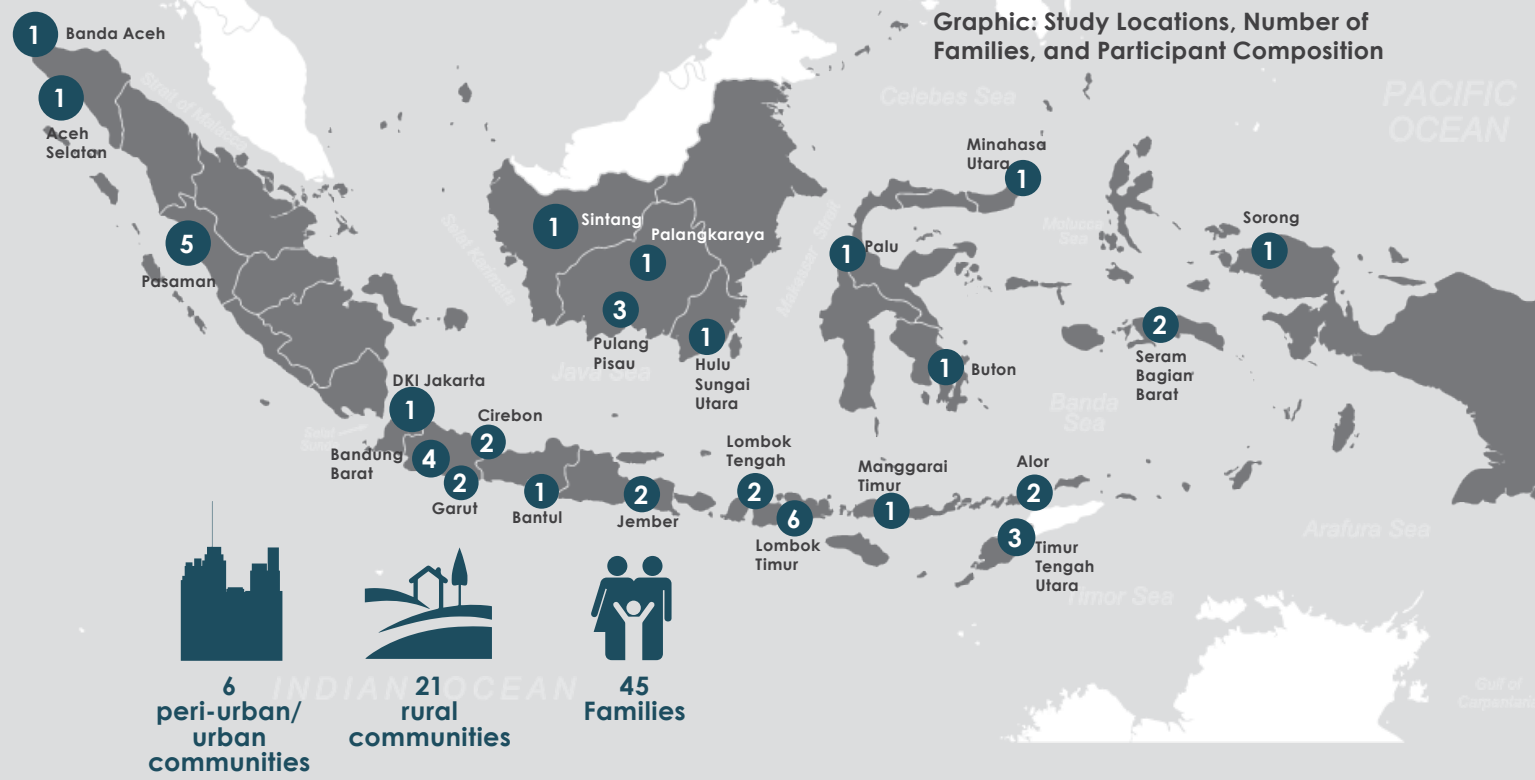
Consider targeted, non-cash support for families. Support could include expansion and improvement of government-provided Internet data or provision of Wi-Fi in villages for students, subsidized school costs (fees, uniforms, transport), free or subsidized COVID-19 tests for migrant workers and free agricultural inputs (seeds, fertilizer) for farmers.

Consider long-term financial and agricultural services for farmers. Provide support that enables small-scale farmers to access market price information easily, purchase farm-tailored insurance, distribute produce and store crops.



Pasaman. A family in Pasaman receiving in-kind social assistance. As most location tried to spread assistance around so that a single father wouldn't receive more than one type of assistance, for the COVID-19 assistance some families only received in-kind assistance rather than cash.

Introduction



23 Farmers	16 Informal workers	15 service providers	8 village officers	65 school children

In 2020, the COVID-19 impact on families' livelihoods was severe and widespread. This research brief examines those impacts through remote interactions and conversations with 45 families across Indonesia in early 2021. The findings present a number of implications for policymakers and development partners seeking to understand the changes in people's livelihoods and how to provide more effective support. Recommendations for more effective social assistance and other forms of support for families are presented.

The brief is part of a series of four research briefs looking at the multiple impacts of COVID-19 on families and children as part of a remote, longitudinal study held from May 2020 to February 2021.¹ Following an initial listening phase (May–August 2020), three priority themes were identified for further analysis: livelihoods and social assistance; health and health services; and learning and the social lives of children. Key findings and recommendations for this brief on livelihoods and social assistance are drawn from phone conversations, messaging, online group discussions and other digital interactions with families and other community members in January–February 2021.

¹ UNICEF and Empatika, 'COVID-19 in Indonesia: Children and Families' Experiences - Education, Learning and Social Lives of Children', Jakarta, 2020; UNICEF and Empatika, 'COVID-19 in Indonesia: Children and Families' Experiences - Livelihoods and Social Assistance', Jakarta, 2021; UNICEF and Empatika, 'COVID-19 in Indonesia: Children and Families' Experiences - Health and Hygiene', Jakarta, 2021.

How did we have conversations?

The research was carried out by Empatika, an Indonesian-based organization who specializes in people-centred immersion studies. Study participants were families with whom Empatika researchers previously lived with, or spent extended periods of time, during earlier research studies. These pre-existing relationships provided a strong basis for open and trusted remote interactions on how families coped with the loss in income; whose livelihoods are most and least affected; family spending choices; types and use of social assistance; and experiences of social assistance distribution. Insights were gathered through remote conversations and interactions with family members and others using mobile phones and messaging applications, photo and video sharing, and group discussions.² Conversation guides were developed around each theme to ensure consistency in interactions with families.

Around 178 people from 45 families in 23 districts (including 21 rural and 6 urban communities) took part in the study (see Annex for full list of districts). Nineteen districts were classified as orange or red COVID-19 zones at the time of these interactions with families.³ The study families were from a diverse range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Participants were parents, but also neighbours, village officials and other community members.



Jakarta Timur. A video shared with our researcher from a father who works as a garbage scavenger about some of his thoughts related to social assistance. This included the hope that the government could make a better effort to visit communities directly to see and understand the real situation so that assistance can be properly targeted.



Timor Tengah Utara. The daughter in this family sent this photo during the village's local election day. At the time, the village still had no confirmed COVID-19 cases.

² Tools also included 'complete the story' prompts and audio/video prompts. Researchers used different combinations of these tools opportunistically with families and other study participants

³ Indonesian Government's COVID-19 zones are determined from a combination of epidemiological, community health surveillance, and health service provisions indicators. For more details see: <https://covid19.go.id/peta-risiko>.

Findings

CHANGES IN INCOME AND LIVELIHOODS

Three-quarters of families had two or more sources of income, including agriculture and at least one other activity.⁴ Family members from 17 families worked for governments, village councils or held other public roles. Five relied on occasional labour (construction, mining, agriculture) and 11 owned small shops, kiosks or worked as street vendors.

Table 1: Income sources for study families

INCOME SOURCE	NUMBER OF FAMILIES BEFORE COVID-19 (MARCH 2020)	NUMBER OF FAMILIES JANUARY 2021
Farming	23	23
Local council, village officers, or other public roles including <i>posyandu</i> cadres ⁵	14	17
Teachers, midwives	7	7
Occasional labour (construction, mining, agriculture)	8	5
Small shops, kiosks, street vendors	8	11
Remittances	7	3

Nearly all families in the study suffered reduced incomes due to COVID-19. Income was many families' primary concern. People attributed financial difficulties to the lockdown and travel restrictions that followed the beginning of the pandemic in March and April 2020.

Informal workers and low-skilled migrants were the most affected. Impacts have persisted for many migrant workers, vendors, informal workers and those relying on remittances. Civil servants and people with salaried jobs were the least affected, although some civil servants said that their salaries had been delayed for a number of months (Garut, Pasaman).⁶

Table 2: How different livelihoods have been affected

LEAST AFFECTED	Salaried employees, civil servants, people who farm for own consumption, farmers who farm their own land and can store surplus crops.
SOMEWHAT AFFECTED	Farmers who farm their own land with no surplus crops, farm labourers, high-skilled migrant workers and people relying on remittances.
MOST AFFECTED	Informal workers, low-skilled migrant workers and people relying on remittances.

Informal labour opportunities in agriculture and construction contracted due to travel restrictions, reduced family spending and shift in the use of village funds for COVID-19 relief. Families with kiosks and small vendors were also affected by reduced movement and traffic, though many shifted to new

⁴ The number of income sources for families is specific to the study period, but almost all had multiple income sources prior to the pandemic. Some families did shift to new sources of income due to the pandemic.

⁵ *Posyandu* is a monthly clinic for children and pregnant women.

⁶ Throughout this brief, locations of study families are referred to using the district name.

forms of selling. Low-skilled migrant workers who returned home often found little to no work in their villages, although those with skills or living closer to urban/periurban areas had more opportunities.

FAMILIES AND AGRICULTURE

Families working in agriculture were affected by lower prices for crops early in the pandemic. Farmers felt that reduced crop prices were a temporary result of COVID-19 transport restrictions and loss of bargaining power, as they were unable to transport their crops outside the village to sell them and relied on a small number of traders who visited the village.

Many farmers said they generally learned about market prices by word of mouth and had to accept lower prices offered by traders (between May and August 2020). One mother in Bandung Barat also complained that rice prices dropped from IDR 4,000 to 3,000 per kg, and attributed this to the rice provided as part of sembako (basic food) assistance. Some also noted that exceptional flooding in 2020 harmed their income more than COVID-19 due to crop failures (Buton, Lombok Timur) or increased transport prices due to washed-out roads (Pulang Pisau).

Table 3: Some of the price drops for Crops sold during COVID-19

	PRE-COVID (MARCH 2020) MARKET PRICES (IDR/KG)	MID-COVID MARKET PRICES (IDR/KG)
Chillies (Pasaman)	40,000–90,000	12,000 (September 2020)
Lemongrass (Bandung Barat)	200,000	100,000 (January 2021) ⁷
Cloves (Seram Bagian Barat)	100,000	50,000 (August 2020)
Maize (Pasaman)	5,000	3,600 (January 2021)
Rice (Bandung Barat)	4,000	3,000 (December 2020)

It was noted that now travel restrictions in most areas have been lifted or relaxed, prices for produce have rebounded and some were higher than before the pandemic.

Farmers who own land or those in rural areas with access to small plots of land were considered the best off as they could grow their own food. Farming provided a safety net, ensuring a basic level of self-sufficiency, even when no cash is available.

“At least farmers always have food to eat.”

– Father in Pasaman

Only ‘better off’ farmers could wait to sell their harvests for a higher price. Although farmers knew they might be able to sell at a higher price if they delayed sale, few had a system for doing this. The capacity to store crops relates not only to farmers' skills and the need for adequate storage facilities, but also their financial capacity to postpone selling the crop. Most farmers said they sold their crops on harvesting and accepted lower prices.



Pulang Pisau. Flooding in this village, caused by a broken dam, affected people's harvest in 2020. Farmers in some locations like this one told us that weather problems were a bigger impact than changes resulting from the pandemic.

⁷ In late February 2021, chilli prices had risen to IDR 60,000/kg

Study families said that 'better off' farmers were those with sufficient savings, who were able to take a loan, worked as traders themselves or had enough money to hire others to plant and harvest crops. For example, one family in Pasaman lived on their savings in order to delay the sale of dried betel nuts by three months during which time the price doubled from IDR 5,000/kg (June) to 10,000/kg (August).

Loss of income made planting and harvesting unaffordable for some families. Costs of farming inputs, in particular fertilizer, remained mostly constant, leaving some with little profit or at a loss for the season (Bandung Barat, Lombok Timur, Pasaman). For one family in Pasaman, the price of maize seeds and fertilizer had risen. For a family who grew rice in Bandung Barat, this calculation meant that it made more sense to consume their harvest rather than sell it at a loss. In Lombok Timur, the price of chillies was so low

that it was not practical for a family to pay the cost of hired labour to harvest the whole crop. They decided to only harvest chillies needed for their own consumption.

INFORMAL LABOUR

Reduced number of construction projects and reallocation of village funds (dana desa) from infrastructure to COVID-19-related assistance continue to limit local employment opportunities. Many people identified those working in informal construction projects to be severely affected by the pandemic, particularly low-skilled workers who are normally employed in local, small-scale projects (Lombok Timur, Bandung Barat, Cirebon, Timor Tengah Utara, Pasaman, Alor). People attributed this to a reduction in the number of construction projects, as families had paused construction plans such as home building or



Palu. This mining company in Palu laid off many workers in May last year including 'our' family here. In January though, the father heard that they will be reopening and want him to return to work.



Sintang. Some men in this village work at a palm oil plantation located around 3 hours away. Like plantations in other areas along with mining, these had closed or paused work early on in the pandemic but had begun to restart towards the end of 2020.



Bandung Barat. A family here runs an electronic repair shop, but with less customers during COVID-19 the father has closed the shop while still serving a small number of customers by visiting them directly at their homes.

STRUGGLES OF AN INFORMAL WORKER FAMILY

A father in Bandung Barat works as a construction labourer in and around the village but since the initial lockdown in April he has had almost no new work and their family is struggling. They have now sold all their goats and some chickens to support their lives. To try and make some money, the father sometimes helps his neighbours to pick and sell bananas or coconuts. He has become a casual labourer in order to survive. The mother is also tightening the family's daily meals and spending. In the small yard, she has planted chillies, tomatoes and cassava for their consumption. When she can't afford to buy eggs, they eat only rice with vegetables. The mother also said she sometimes substitutes sweet tea instead of formula milk for her 18-month-old baby. They have only received one distribution of social assistance (IDR 600,000).



renovation in order to conserve cash and other resources. The reallocation of dana desa from infrastructure to COVID-19 social assistance or health measures also meant there were fewer projects. One father in Jakarta said that he now earns less than before the pandemic because his company "almost went broke" due to fewer construction projects in the city.

Construction work has increased in only one of the Timor Tengah Utara communities, where some people had received aid from *dana desa* to buy building materials for new homes or renovations and hire construction labour.

Restrictions on travel and gatherings led to job losses and reduced working hours in mining, factories, palm oil plantations and other forms of labour. Many workers at palm oil plantations in Sintang were laid off from April until October 2020. Some are now back at work but others do not know when they will be rehired. Similarly, one father in Palu was laid off from his factory job from June 2020 to January 2021, and work hours reduced for other employees. Restrictions on gatherings also meant that people were not able to work in mines. After being laid off, men in Pulang Pisau resumed 'illegal' mineral mining in August. By early 2021, some were able to travel and return to work in reopened mines. A father in Aceh Selatan who relies on mining to supplement his barbershop income returned to the gold mine in January 2021.

MICROBUSINESSES, KIOSKS AND STREET VENDORS

Reduced income persists for families who own kiosks or sell snacks. The demand for snacks and other takeaway food from street vendors and kiosks has shrunk across the study locations as fewer people travel or hold public events, schools are closed and spending declines (Palu, Lombok Timur, Bandung Barat). Many parents tried to give less pocket money when their children did not attend school (Aceh Selatan, Banda Aceh, Bandung Barat, Pasaman, Timor Tengah Utara).

Some street vendors continue to operate but many others have shifted to other sources of income. In contrast, some repair shops and kiosks located on main roads said their business had picked up once the travel restrictions were relaxed (Pasaman).

REDUCED INCOME FOR KIOSKS AND STREET VENDORS

One woman in Lombok Timur explained in detail how their income has declined since the pandemic. Her husband used to sell meatballs around the village, earning IDR 400,000–500,000 every day. During travel restrictions, his income declined significantly and has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels. She also operated a canteen in front of the school, but has switched to selling satay in front of her home, as the school is closed. She earns about half her usual income, around IDR 100,000–200,000 per day.

Another woman in Cirebon shared that income from her kiosk has declined by more than half, from around IDR 700,000 to 300,000 per day. She explained that people have less income and less capacity to buy since many of them stay at home. She also felt that the current situation is getting worse compared to three months ago. Most people in her neighbourhood typically work in construction projects and many projects are still postponed. She tried to get specific social assistance for small businesses, but failed. This family used to be quite well off compared to others, but now things have changed.



Palu. This is a new street market that opened since the COVID-19 pandemic in an empty seaside area. A father here said that he believes many of the sellers had lost their jobs and are now trying to sell here to make money.

MIGRANT WORKERS

People frequently identified domestic and international migrant workers as the group who continue to be most affected. Most migrants returned home to their villages around April and May 2020.⁸ Some people working in Malaysia and Brunei were sent home by the respective governments (Pasaman). Some did remain in urban areas but struggled to earn enough.

“My son in Jakarta needs to pay for everything, in a village you don’t need to pay for anything.”

– Father in Pasaman

Low-skilled migrant workers struggle to find work, as fewer opportunities for construction or agricultural labour are available. These workers were described as among the most negatively affected, having lost jobs, having nothing to do and being less accustomed to seasonal incomes that farmers accept. Some parents (Pasaman and Lombok Timur) worried how the long period of unemployment affected young men in particular, many of whom have young families to support. Workers in Alor who had returned from Jakarta shared that they were bored as they “have nothing to do in the village.”

Higher-skilled migrant workers found it easier to find work, particularly near urban areas. Those migrant workers who had moved back to a village near a subdistrict or larger town often found it easier to find work. This was particularly true for those who previously held skilled jobs or had training (Manggarai Timur, Lombok Timur). The oldest daughter in a Manggarai Timur family who had returned from Bali was eventually able to find a job in a pharmacy in a nearby town as she had completed two years in a university pharmacy programme.

⁸ None of the study families have members working as international migrants but some shared stories of other families in their communities who did.

“They are just sitting around drinking coffee, waiting until jobs are open in the city.”

– Father in Pasaman on migrant workers who returned to the village

MIGRANT WORKER STORIES

In Jakarta Timur, some informal workers have come back to Jakarta, after returning home in April and May 2020. They said there was nothing to do back in their villages, “at least in Jakarta, no matter how bad work is, we can still earn enough to eat (IDR 25,000-35,000).” When they went back to their villages, they thought this would bring security but not everything was ‘smooth’, with family conflicts from time to time. They explained that while their income in Jakarta is now around just 40 per cent of what it was pre-COVID-19, they said, “in the village it also wasn’t good for us.”

In Timor Tengah Utara, the older daughter in one family was planning to look for work in Kupang, but due to the increasing number of cases, travel restrictions and COVID-19 testing requirements, she decided to take a job as a cashier at a building supply store in the neighbouring district. She explained that she doesn’t make much money and is mostly stuck at the store since she also sleeps there, but said, “it’s better than sitting around in the village and doing nothing.”

In Pasaman, one of the older sons in a family was working at the Tanah Abang market in Jakarta and sent about IDR 500,000 per month to his family to help pay school fees for his younger siblings. He came home in March 2020 when the government closed the market and has been helping his parents work in their fields. In the meantime, the mother said that she asked for an extension in paying the school fees. Around October last year, the son went back to Jakarta after the market reopened and he has now started sending money again. However, he can only send IDR 300,000 because the market is less busy.



Jakarta Timur. ‘Our’ family in Jakarta Timur who own a small trash collection station said that during the pandemic they have had to more frequently borrow money from the father’s boss, including for personal needs.

Uncertainty about job availability, travel restrictions and the cost of living, including the cost of COVID-19 testing, were barriers to returning to work. While some migrant workers had returned to work between Lebaran (late May 2020) and August 2020, others were still considering their options. Uncertainties regarding the volume of work available and travel restrictions, combined with the need for cash to pay daily expenses and housing when living away, made many workers hesitant to return.

Many said they would need to re-establish networks to look for new jobs (Lombok Timur, Manggarai Timur). The cost of a COVID-19 rapid antibody test (IDR 150,000–300,000) was a deterrent to making the journey for some, making nearby towns where a rapid

test is not required more attractive (Pasaman, Timor Tengah Utara). Most workers who had returned from abroad were not yet able to return to work due to border restrictions (Pasaman). One woman in Pulang Pisau said those working on plantations were the first to return, while those in tourism and working as urban street vendors were still in the village.

COPING AND SPENDING LESS

Families with multiple sources of income and those who relied less on cash for daily needs coped best, although COVID-19 reduced the range of income sources. Farming provided the biggest safety net for families in rural and periurban areas, enabling them to sell crops or consume themselves when prices were low. People said they were accustomed to the need to be flexible on how they fed their families and earned income. Some civil servants shared that they also rely on farming for food staples and sometimes sold produce when their salaries are delayed (Pasaman). Families who normally rely on informal labour opportunities in agriculture or construction for additional cash had fewer ways to replace lost earnings.

“The best off are farmers who own land.”

– Father, Lombok Timur



Palu. When this father temporarily lost his mining job, he started a business making shelves and cabinets. He learned some of the techniques on YouTube and his son helped him to promote the business on Facebook. The father shared that he felt very proud after successfully delivering his first order.

MULTIPLE AND SHIFTING LIVELIHOODS

A father in Jakarta Timur identified two main factors that reduced income from his trash collection business. Initially, social restrictions made many of his collectors unable to work and later many decided to return to their home villages. Less collectors means less trash to be resold. In addition, there was a fall in prices for plastic, paper or metal-based trash since September 2020 and decreased demand for recycled products. “This corona has hit my business from every corner. Initially due to the social restrictions, and now it's the prices!”, he said. He relied on social assistance for a few months (IDR 600,000 each time), education assistance (IDR 2 million per quarter) and income (IDR 10,000 per day) from a small food stall his wife opened during the pandemic.



Banda Aceh. This family worked as trash scavengers, collecting trash at the city's collection center but with this being closed during the pandemic, they have tried to adjust by taking on a variety of other jobs, including peeling onions. The father has also started doing some small construction work, although it makes less money than his trash work, and their older son has opened a cellphone credit stall.

Urban families struggled to cover expenses and supplement income. Urban and rural families described urban areas as more expensive, requiring regular cashflow to cover all basic needs. People contrasted this with the relative ease of living in villages, where housing was taken care of and most food could be derived from harvests. These factors drove many migrant workers to return to their home villages.

Families replaced lost income by taking on new or additional work, although usually earning less money than before the pandemic. Many people who previously operated a kiosk have switched to selling other goods, such as mobile phones, while others opened a kiosk in a new location. Some are working as waged construction or agricultural labourers, though this work has been scarce. However, in almost all cases, these new jobs paid less. A father in Banda Aceh who used to work as a trash collector making around IDR 300,000/day is now earning IDR 100,000/day as a construction labourer. The trash facility is now closed, possibly “until the pandemic is over.” In Palu, a man who had lost his mining job was earning IDR 500,000/month doing odd jobs in the village, compared to IDR 1.8 million at the mine.

As restrictions on travel and social distancing were lifted, families had more options for how they could earn money. Most people said that they were able to travel more within their



Bandung Barat. One family here decided to use their paddy field just for family consumption this season, as rice prices (to sell) had gone down while fertilizer prices increased.

subdistrict by August 2020, which allowed them to return to mines and plantations, start a new business or pursue informal labour opportunities.

Some adolescents worked but were rarely expected to contribute to the family finances.

Before and during the pandemic, adolescents commonly helped with agricultural work and chores in the home. Some adolescents also worked for small amounts of money outside the family, including harvesting at palm oil plantations (Sintang), harvesting and planting in other people’s fields (Sintang, Lombok Timur), or scavenging and other forms of labour (Jakarta Timur). These earnings were generally used for pocket money and most parents did not see their children’s earnings as a source of income. However, some families in Lombok Timur and Jakarta Timur knew some adolescents who contributed money to their families each month.

Distance learning afforded adolescents more free time, enabling some to work or pursue other interests.

While none of the adolescents in the study families had left school, distance learning left them with more free time and diminished their motivation to participate in learning.⁹ Some adolescents, boys in particular, found daily work or joined their parents at work to fill their free time and stay busy, while others used this opportunity to pursue interests such as internships in farming or motorbike repair (Lombok Tengah, Manggarai Timur). Adolescents in urban areas had more access to job opportunities than those in rural locations, and were also more commonly

MAKING UP FOR LOST INCOME

One father in Aceh Selatan had worked occasionally in a gold mine before the pandemic, earning between IDR 1–1.5 million per visit. Police and army enforced the closure of the mine in 2020 to reduce crowding, due to the many workers who camp and work onsite. In January 2021, he returned as soon as the mine reopened, selling his mobile phone to cover transport costs and food expenses for three weeks. He needed the money to help send his son to university.

⁹ UNICEF and Empatika, ‘COVID-19 in Indonesia: Children and Families’ Experiences - Education, Learning and Social Lives of Children’, Jakarta, 2020.

engaged in distance learning. One father whose son had started working with him to collect trash said that he would prefer him to go back to school full time and do less work. The son said he could not imagine going back to school as it used to be (Jakarta Timur).

SPENDING LESS

Most families reduced spending on food and simplified their diet. For most families this meant buying more basic ingredients for meals, substituting animal proteins with cheaper proteins such as tempeh, making more soups and eating more cassava leaves (Lombok Timur, Bandung Barat, Jakarta Timur, Palu, Pasaman, Sorong). Some families shared that they are also eating saltier food, by replacing more expensive spices with salt, consuming more instant noodles, and replacing fresh fish with salted fish (Alor, Jember,

Palu). Most families said they consume the same amount of rice. One family now eats two meals per day rather than three (Bandung Barat). While these changes did not have a direct impact on breastfeeding mothers, one mother in Bandung Barat said she now often gives her two-year-old child tea with sugar as she can no longer afford the formula milk.

"Now we eat more soup and cassava leaves, these are cheaper and make you feel like you have eaten more."

– Mother, Cirebon

Even families with little to no income changes in 2020 reduced spending on food, citing that it is better to be careful with money when things are uncertain (Pasaman). People noted that market price fluctuations were exceptional for parts of 2020.

Reducing pocket money for children helped families cope. Many parents reduced or stopped giving pocket money as children were less frequently or not attending school. One mother in Banda Aceh shared that she tries to distract



Jember. This family has coped quite well during COVID-19 with their multiple sources of income. In addition to their tobacco, paddy, and chili fields, the father also raises ducks and catfish, and is able to rent out some of their land to other farmers.



Pasaman. Volunteer construction labour at a local mosque has recently restarted. One father felt this was an indication that things were starting to get back to normal, as it also meant that some families were able to contribute money to the mosque again.

her children when food vendors come by so they are not tempted to ask for snacks. She became emotional when explaining the need to reduce pocket money from IDR 5,000 to IDR 2,000/day. Other mothers told their children directly that they do not have cash for pocket money, which they said their older children (in secondary education) understand (Pasaman, Manggarai Timur). However, families whose cash income had not been affected by COVID-19 continued to give pocket money (Buton).

Many families struggled to cope with costs of distance learning, although some found creative ways to share costs with neighbours.

The costs of Internet data and smart phones for distance learning are considered to be the largest additional expense associated with the pandemic, particularly for secondary school students. Some families estimated they spent between IDR 50,000-100,000 more per month on Internet costs, although exact estimates were difficult as they often went without data if they did not have cash available (Jakarta Timur, Lombok Timur, Palu, Manggarai Timur).

Families shared innovative ways to reduce these costs. For example, one father in Jakarta Timur pooled cash with neighbours to purchase an Internet service and modem with larger data packages. Shared between families, this data was cheaper to buy than individual phone-based data. Some children in other locations could access free Wi-Fi from better off families or the village office.

Families delayed large expenses, where possible. People postponed house construction/renovations and new businesses to conserve finances (Pasaman, Aceh Selatan, Lombok Timur). Some people did not attend weddings, which meant fewer obligations to give gifts or money. Many family members living away did not attend family weddings, saying that they had only enough money for wedding gifts, but not to travel (Buton). Large expenses that could not be postponed such as school and university fees or transport costs to return to work in a mine or plantation were paid by selling assets (gold jewelry in Pulang Pisau, Cirebon) or mobile phones (Pasaman).



Pulang Pisau. The family's typical daily meal, consisting of vegetables and dried fish. Like families in many locations, this family said that during the pandemic they are purchasing less proteins and relying more on dried rather than fresh fish.

“What will [my son's] future look like now?”

- Father in Palu sharing concerns about his adolescent son's declining motivation

Some adolescents delayed university enrolment.

While no university students in the study families left university for financial reasons, three families delayed their children's enrolment (Aceh Selatan, Lombok Timur, Timor Tengah Utara). One woman in Lombok Timur said that sending her son to university now seems “impossible” but she hoped circumstances will change in the future. Most students said they planned to delay enrolment by only one year but one boy working in a barbershop enjoys his work and now questions whether he will go to university at all (Aceh Selatan).

More families preferred to reduce spending rather than borrow to cover household expenses, although some borrowed from mobile lenders and family.

Most families viewed borrowing money to cover household expenses as a last resort. Asking relatives for money is considered to be both embarrassing and risky, in the event that they cannot repay the loan. As before the pandemic, families commonly take basic

household items on credit from local kiosks, which does not carry stigma and high risk, due to the smaller sums borrowed.

Families in two locations commented that more people were taking loans from bank keliling (mobile lenders) and some are struggling to repay loans (Pasaman, Bandung Barat). In only two locations families shared that they rely on borrowing from family and friends to cover cashflow shortfalls (Garut, Alor).

“This is our first time we have borrowed from a bank.”

– Mother, Lombok Timur

There was increased borrowing for agricultural costs. Reduced profits from 2020 harvests led many farming families to borrow in higher sums than usual. One Pasaman farmer who normally takes an IDR 5 million loan from a produce buyer each year to cover the cost of fertilizer and seeds was only able to repay half the loan due to losses on their chilli harvest. He increased his debt to IDR 7 million to replant his crop. One family in Lombok Timur shared that some farmers have borrowed from the bank for the first time due to drought and failed crops, rather than the pandemic.

EFFECTIVENESS OF SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

PEOPLE'S USE OF SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Around three-quarters of families received some form of social assistance for COVID-19 in 2020. Out of 36 families, 28 received social assistance for COVID-19 in 2020.¹⁰ The COVID-19-related support includes *Bantuan Sosial Tunai* (BST), centrally allocated through the Ministry of Social Affairs, and *Bantuan Langsung Tunai* (BLT), allocated by village officials using local village funds. Families did not always know from which source they received funding but it was understood that each family should receive only one source of assistance. Civil servant families were excluded from receiving social assistance and three other families did not receive any assistance.

People received between IDR 300,000 and IDR 1.8 million from BST or BLT in 2020. The first disbursements began in June 2020 and continued until November (Bandung Barat). In most cases, multiple payments were made, ranging from IDR 150,000 to 600,000 in value.

BLT disbursements took different forms depending on the decisions of village officials. Some people received BLT payments monthly, totaling IDR 1.5 million (Timor Tengah Utara), while others received a one-time payment of IDR 600,000 (Pasaman) or two payments of IDR 150,000, combined with a pack of groceries (Bandung Barat).

BST recipients most commonly spoke of two to three disbursements, which began at IDR 600,000 and then lowered to IDR 300,000 (Pasaman, Lombok Timur), although in Cirebon the payment remained at IDR 200,000 throughout 2020. People in some locations noted that the number of recipients, timing and value of payments changed over time without warning or explanation.

Most families used social assistance to supplement daily costs of groceries, Internet data and pay off small debts. The cash was particularly appreciated early in the pandemic (July–September 2020), when many people were unable to work or sell their crops (Pulang Pisau, Pasaman, Hulu Sungai Utara). As market prices rebounded and people established new sources of income, it became less important.

¹⁰ Seven families not receiving social assistance included four civil servant families; a Manggarai Timur single mother-led family who works as a cook at the hospital; a Banda Aceh family working as garbage scavengers and may be living in illegal housing; a Jember family whose father manages community irrigation; and a Lombok Timur family whose father works at a power plant.



Jakarta Timur. A small food stall opened by the mother in Jakarta Timur at the end of November has helped the family deal with decreased income from their scavenging business. The mother said she saw an opportunity to open this as some of the other food sellers in the area had gone back to their home villages. Although the stall makes only a small profit, it has reduced their daily food costs as the family can also have their meals from the stall.

However, while the amounts given were considered sufficient to top up families' budgets, they did not replace lost wages. Uncertain timing and amount of payments also made it difficult for families to plan ahead, save or invest. People in East Lombok contrasted this support to the money disbursed by UNICEF (two disbursements of IDR 2 million each) as part of a post-disaster multipurpose cash assistance programme, noting that such an amount (and clear timing) could really make a difference.¹¹

"BLT is not enough for a family even with two children. Families [here] usually have many members, up to 12 persons."

– Subvillage head in Pasaman

¹¹ Five of the eight communities in the UNICEF programme received the first distribution in February and March 2020. Disbursements were then delayed due to COVID-19. The remaining three communities received their first distributions in July 2020, with final distributions from August to September 2020.

OPTIMISTIC PERSPECTIVES ON RECOVERY

Many families felt cautiously optimistic about their prospects moving forward. They considered the reduced travel restrictions, rebounding crop market prices and reopening of mines, plantations and other work opportunities indicated that the economic effects of the pandemic were subsiding. Those who were still struggling, migrant workers, vendors and informal labourers, hoped these changes would also benefit them. Conversations with farming families indicate that they are accustomed to income volatility due to bad weather, crop failures and natural disasters. A majority of families have always had multiple sources of income and are flexible in finding ways to make enough money to support their families. These realities may account for families' optimistic views.

ALLOCATION PROCESS FOR SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

BST allocations

The BST allocation process was not well understood at the village level and there was limited opportunity to provide feedback or appeal. As with other social assistance programmes, problems emerged regarding who is eligible to receive funds. Village officials explained that they received lists of people selected for BST support and distributed invitations to those listed to collect payments.

Most officials said they did not know exactly how the lists were compiled or why the list of beneficiaries changed each round sometimes (Pasaman). In almost all locations, there was no process to revise the list or provide feedback. In Garut, a village official wondered why 20 families received the first disbursement, no one received the second disbursement, and 181 families received the third disbursement.

In West Java, some officials and village council members shared that a new online platform,

Some people received the funds directly (Pasaman) but others complained that they needed to visit the subdistrict post office to collect funds by presenting the invitation letter, family card and identity card (Garut, Pasaman, Pulang Pisau, Timor Tengah Utara).

"I already try to complain, and people ignore me so it's hopeless now for me."

- Mother in Cirebon on trying and failing to receive social assistance

BST INFORMATION CHALLENGES FOR VILLAGE OFFICIALS

A village official in Pasaman shared that he is overwhelmed by questions regarding BST distribution. "Why the money was not disbursed yet, why one family received it and others didn't, etc." He asked other village officials and even the head of the village, but they were also confused, "We don't know how to answer people and we don't know where to find the information to answer it." He also tried to ask his second daughter to search for more information on the Internet, but still could not find an answer.

Many families did not consider the allocation of BST or BLT payments fair.

The assessment process to select recipients was not considered accurate as some people in need of assistance did not receive it, while others better off did receive payments. Most community members did not know the criteria used in selection, or when the data was collected and updated. One man in Lombok Timur noted that receiving BST depends "on your fortune", noting that people's circumstances change from month to month.

The lack of transparency and apparent contradictions in the allocation process led some people to question the integrity of the process, and whether those with more influence and money were able to be included in the list. Some people felt they had been excluded because they have full time employment, even though the job pays less than the provincial minimum wage (Manggarai Timur). Others felt that some people may be excluded simply because of the size of their house or other assets, irrespective of the family's current financial situation. One family in Pulang Pisau commented that some people who received assistance are "too rich to need this", citing their ownership of gold jewelry as evidence.

Sapa Warga, was making the process of updating lists easier and the number of people receiving assistance had grown.

Some village officials said that the centrally-allocated BST process is "less of a headache" as it protected them from direct criticism and was less open to corruption concerns from community members. People who complained about the allocation process were told that village officials have no control over the allocation nor could appeal on their behalf.

Many of these criticisms also extend to other social assistance programmes such as *Program Keluarga Harapan* and *Bantuan Pangan Non-Tunai*, but the sense of unfairness was highlighted when deserving people were also omitted from COVID-19 support.



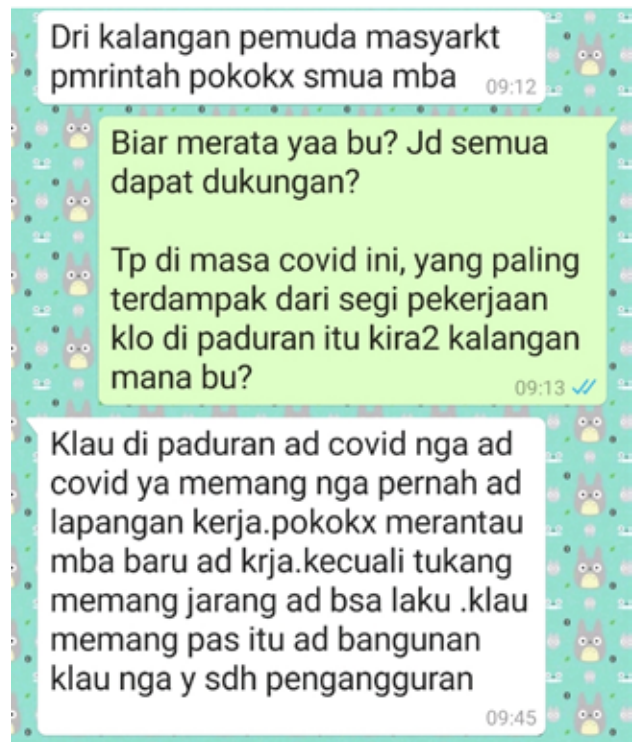
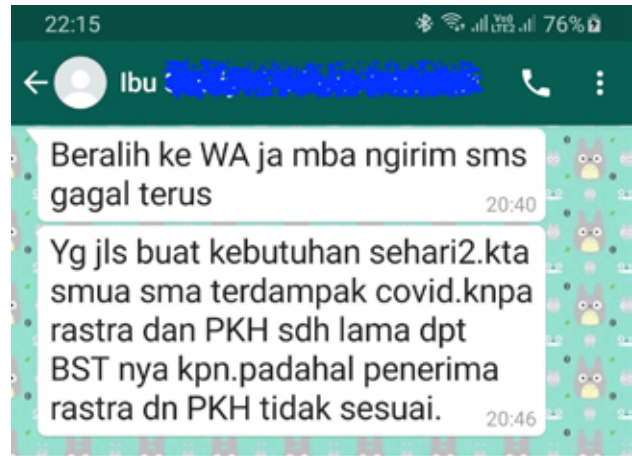
Alor. At the peak of every rainy season the river here overflows, blocking the main road for accessing the village for 1-2 days at a time. In many more remote locations people shared that issues such as bad roads remained their top concern or priority for the use of local government funds.

“There’s a young mother who is fit to work, owns a farm and has a husband who works and they can get PKH [Program Keluarga Harapan]. On the other hand, there’s people in less fortunate conditions that don’t get it.”

– Mother, Pulang Pisau

BLT allocations

Village officials allocated BLT payments in many different ways. Officials found the process of identifying beneficiaries to be complicated and unclear. In Alor, the village office said they managed the entire selection and distribution process. In Sintang, the village formed a special committee to make the final decisions about who would be receiving the assistance, with the village secretary as the focal point. In other locations, subvillage heads directly nominated people to receive support and shared the names



Pulang Pisau. A mother chats with a researcher about social assistance and government support. She shares that all families in the village have been affected by the pandemic, although she feels that ongoing social assistance like Program Keluarga Harapan, Hopeful Family Program, have not been well targeted. She then shares how she feels they need more support as they have little available jobs and the road is always in bad shape.

with village officials. Some followed specific criteria when making selections, others filtered the subvillage head suggestions in a special meeting (Sintang, Alor). Others noted that “we don’t follow any criteria because everyone is the same” (Hulu Sungai Utara, Aceh Selatan).

In most cases, village officials felt that BLT and BST payments should continue, but wanted clear guidelines for selecting beneficiaries and communicating the process with communities (Alor, Sintang).

Managing the BLT process provided flexibility for village officials but lack of guidance made the process more burdensome, discretionary and controversial. Placing allocation decisions with village officials allowed them to select people who were in most need (Timor Tengah Utara, Sintang) but others felt that the village head should have made a greater effort to understand each family's situation (Lombok Tengah). The process also led to suspicion of favouritism and corruption (Bandung Barat). In Lombok Timur, people complained that some families who were not in need received BLT support, while there were other families with small children or who lost jobs who did not receive it.

Given the controversy, a number of people and officials said it is easier to use village funds for community programmes (Bandung Barat, Alor, Sintang). In Alor, a village official said they chose to use their remaining COVID budget to buy banners and fund socialization activities rather than expand the number of social assistance beneficiaries. The process of selecting families and justifying each decision would only "give more headaches."¹²

Some people raised complaints with village officials and were subsequently added to the list but other families in need were hesitant to complain. One example included non-civil servants working in the village office, who felt they should receive assistance as other adults in their household have lost income (Pulang Pisau). One local council member in Bandung Barat who received these complaints commented that "those that complain are already better off." Although people knew that village officials had some authority to make changes to the list of beneficiaries, people in need were often hesitant to ask. A Manggarai Timur woman who works as a cook paying less than the minimum wage said that she does not want to seem ungrateful for having a job. Others were concerned that asking to be included in the BLT list would invite criticism or judgement from others, as they felt their situation was not as bad as other families (Pasaman).



Sintang. The head of village here established an ad-hoc body of community stakeholders to help oversee the allocation of village funds for COVID-19 response. He said he did this to help mitigate 'drama' around the social assistance distribution.



Lombok Timur. A mother waits to receive BST in early February 2021. She said that all *posyandu* cadres here got BST, despite having multiple sources of income.



Sintang. Here *posyandu* attendees and all pregnant women received in-kind social assistance as part of the village's pandemic response. The head of village said that they are also now allocating more village funds to ensure a 'more nutritious' feeding programme for the *posyandu*. This was one of two study locations along with Alor where families shared that village-level health services had improved since the pandemic with more attention from the local government.

¹² District governments were said to have given villages a percentage of the total village budget that should be used for COVID-19 social assistance and COVID-related programmes (50-60 per cent in one location and 35 percent in another). Limited additional guidance or details were provided.

EXPERIENCE OF A VILLAGE OFFICIAL IN ALLOCATING BLT PAYMENTS

My father in Sintang who is the head of the village wants to have a better understanding of funding possibilities and also to ensure what he is doing with social assistance distribution is correct. He hopes to have more complete guidance from the district on how to use dana desa and attended two workshops about COVID-19 responses (at district and provincial levels). But even in these workshops, the guidance was not very specific. He is wondering, for example, "How much percentage should we allocate for COVID-19 response? How to verify the beneficiaries? What should the indicators be?" He said that some indicators are not relevant, e.g., unemployment, as most people are unemployed in this remote village. Without guidance, he decided to create an ad hoc body to supervise and manage the budget allocation and distribution. He said, "Drama will come, but at least I won't be the main person that people blame."

"Don't just give money, give them work to fix the road."

– Father, East Lombok

Some people preferred investment in community infrastructure to benefit all rather than cash assistance to some.

Some people felt that larger scale investments in the village would be more beneficial than cash assistance, particularly as their income had begun to stabilize after the initial pandemic shock. For example, *dana desa* investment in infrastructure benefited all people, not just those receiving the assistance (Lombok Timur, Bandung Barat).

Families in remote areas cited the importance of improving road conditions to reduce the cost of transporting agricultural produce (Pasaman, Garut, Pulang Pisau). One village official noted that construction work allows people to get cigarette money "uang rokok", which is much harder when funds are being disbursed directly (Pasaman). Others suggested investing in programmes to improve skills or businesses (Lombok Timur) or more targeted assistance for students who require Internet data and smart phones for distance learning (Aceh Selatan).

Implications for policy and programming

The pandemic impact on many families' livelihoods has been severe. People changed their income sources, taking on new, often lower paying work. Reducing spending had knock-on effects for families' diet and nutrition, university enrolment and other sectors of the economy, particularly construction. Both central and locally-allocated COVID-19 social assistance was welcome but the scale, frequency and unpredictability of payments meant that most people did not consider it a significant form of support or a driver of recovery.

The findings present a number of implications for those seeking to understand the changes in people's livelihoods and provide more effective support. Consideration should be given to the appropriate balance between providing universal emergency social assistance and more targeted social assistance that aims to support longer-term recovery.

Provide a safety net for workers especially those more vulnerable to economic disruptions. Those workers are likely to include migrant workers, workers in the tourism and hospitality sectors, informal/daily wage workers and kiosk owners. Worker support schemes could include work opportunities for low-skilled and informal workers, savings or insurance to cover temporary periods of unemployment, direct financial support to companies to retain workers, subsidized wages, and making it easier for microbusinesses to obtain emergency loans.

Review criteria for allocation of social assistance to reach more people in need. These people may include those without productive land, who are dependent on occasional/informal labour, who cannot work due to health or caring responsibilities, and who have no other income earners in the family. Reviewing the allocation criteria based on the Ministry of Social Affairs' Unified Database and ensuring that assessment

of people's changing financial circumstances are updated regularly will improve distribution of funds.¹³

Increase effectiveness and transparency of social assistance by providing more information on the scheduling of distributions and selection processes for beneficiaries. Understanding the forms of support that can be expected, selection processes, amounts provided, when and how often disbursements will be made will help families plan ahead and invest.¹⁴ A mechanism by which village officials (and community members) can suggest revisions to criteria, appeal decisions or nominate individuals for further assessment would help address community distrust of the system and motivate officials to improve targeting or expand assistance. The Sapa Warga application in West Java is a useful example of such a mechanism.

Consider targeted, non-cash support for families. This support could include reducing the costs of attending school (fees, uniforms, transport, etc.) and the expansion of government-provided Internet data or Wi-Fi in villages for students. For domestic or international migrant workers and other frequent business travellers, this might include free or subsidized COVID-19 tests. Farmers could receive free agricultural inputs (seeds, fertilizer).

Consider long-term financial and agricultural support services for farmers. Small-scale farmers may experience long-term problems post COVID-19, including increased indebtedness and reduced ability to cope with future shocks. Provide support that enables farmers to access

¹³ The Unified Database (DUB) is a social registry database that unifies information for poverty targeting across the country's largest social assistance programmes.

¹⁴ Empatika's 2020 study 'People's Perspectives of Multipurpose Cash Assistance in East Lombok: Endline Assessment' showed that when families were informed about the schedule for upcoming cash disbursements, it helped them plan for larger expenses and manage credit with kiosks.



Pasaman. This father started a motorbike repair business to help supplement the income the family gets from farming when the pandemic hit.

market price information easily, purchase farm-tailored insurance, distribute produce and store crops.

Support village governments with strategies for the use of village funds to support the pandemic response. This would include more detailed guidance on the fair and transparent allocation of emergency cash and other social assistance, identifying beneficiaries, how to make choices about public spending for local infrastructure (which can provide 'safety net' work opportunities) or other forms of COVID-19 relief (health, education). This would also help reduce the burden on village leaders. Consult with village officials to develop context-relevant guidelines.

Reduced consumption of snacks by children in some families is an opportunity to improve child health. The pandemic has forced some parents to find ways to reduce cash spending on snacks for children. Social and behaviour change interventions to reinforce the importance of this shift among both children and parents should be considered.

Provide guidance on healthy, inexpensive food and support protein-rich food assistance. Providing guidance to support people eating inexpensive but healthy food and to meet protein intake should be considered, tailored to local food availability and taste preferences. Food assistance should also provide protein-rich foods such as eggs, soy products, legumes and dried/preserved fish, rather than staple crops or products which people already purchase.

Annex: Study locations and COVID-19 zone status

DISTRICT	ZONE STATUS IN EARLY FEBRUARY 2021
Aceh Selatan	Yellow
Alor	Orange
Banda Aceh	Orange
Bandung Barat	Orange
Buton	Orange
Cirebon	Orange
Garut	Orange
Hulu Sungai Utara	Yellow
Jakarta Timur	Red
Jember	Orange
Lombok Tengah	Yellow
Lombok Timur	Orange
Manggarai Timur	Orange
Minahasa Utara	Orange
Palangkaraya	Red
Palu	Red
Pasaman	Orange
Pulang Pisau	Orange
Seram Bagian Barat	Yellow
Sintang	Orange
Sorong City	Orange
Timor Tengah Utara	Orange
Yogyakarta	Red

COVID-19 zones are determined from a combination of epidemiological (incidence rate of positive cases per 100,000 population, mortality rate of positive cases per 100,000 population, weekly increase or decrease in positive cases and hospitalizations, among others), community health surveillance (including the increase of diagnostic sample tests over the past two weeks and positivity rate), and health service provisions indicators (including the number of beds in the local referral hospital and the number of beds currently available). <https://covid19.go.id/peta-risiko>



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