



Agile in the fight against the COVID-19 Pandemic: lesson learned from Aceh's readiness and acehnese's local wisdom dealing with the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract. *The Acehnese have a long history of disaster preparedness due to their experience with natural disasters, including tsunamis and epidemics. Aceh province was the first province to respond and anticipate the spread of COVID-19 in early 2020 before other provinces in Indonesia responded. During the COVID-19 outbreak, Aceh has benefited from many lessons from collaboration at the central, regional, and village/gampong levels by the government and PENTAHHELIX actors such as communities, academics, religious leaders, mass media, entrepreneurs, philanthropy, and local wisdom combined with modern technology for cross-border mobility. This study was cross-sectional with a qualitative approach. Collecting data was conducted by interview, observation, and documentation, with a purposive sample. On June 9, 2020, in-depth interviews were done online with the head of the Aceh Agency for Disaster Management (BPBA) via Zoom meeting. The presentation of the data was done descriptively. The regional government and Ulama in Aceh collaborated to accelerate the handling of covid-19 and followed up at the gampong/village level by forming a gampong/village on COVID-19 alert, and each gampong set up a shelter for guests from outside to self-isolate for 14 days and carry out the local wisdom of the Acehnese people which has been done for a long time to deal with COVID-19. Acehnese's local wisdom is salt, water in the jar (le lam guci), henna on fingers (pakek gaca), chewing betel leaf (pajoh ranup), burning rice (tuet leumang), isolation of the sick, and hold a prayer, is obtained from the plague experience in the past.*

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INTRODUCTION

Aceh located in the westernmost part of the archipelago had a strategic position as a gateway for trade and cultural traffic which became a stopover and trading place for Arab, Chinese, European and Indian traders. Aceh's population is ranked fifteenth in Indonesia and ranked sixth on the island of Sumatra after the provinces of North Sumatra, Lampung, South Sumatra, Riau, and West Sumatra (BPS Aceh 2022). Aceh is a disaster laboratory in Indonesia and a province that has experienced several important and major events, such as armed

conflicts between Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), the 2004 earthquake and tsunami, and other disasters based on historical records that have occurred in Aceh so far, among others, floods, landslides, abrasion, volcanic eruptions, and other disasters, and other factors besides race, geography, and climate. Aceh has faced some conflicts and natural and non-natural disasters. It makes them have high resilience and strong will BNPB 2021. The tsunami earthquake in 2004 was the most memorable disaster event owing to the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives and enormous material losses that occurred in Aceh (BPBA 2021).

Aceh was hit by a cholera epidemic at the end of the 19th century brought by Dutch soldiers from Batavia (Jakarta). The Acehnese refer to disease outbreaks as "*taeun*" or "*taeut*" which was adopted from the Arabic "*thaun*" and outbreaks in poultry in 2008 as known as *Ta'eun Manok* (avian influenza) (Jalil and Nur 2020; Saputra and Zuriah 2020). Being affected by an epidemic undoubtedly led to the creation of new information (local wisdom), which was then passed down to the following generation. At the end of December 2019, the WHO China Country Office reported a case of pneumonia of unknown cause in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. On January 7, 2020, China identified the case as a new type of coronavirus. On January 30, 2020, WHO declared the incident a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC), and on March 11, 2020, WHO declared the COVID-19 pandemic (Domenico and Vanelli 2020; WHO 2020). The increase in the number of cases was very fast and spread to various countries in a short time. As of July 9, 2020, WHO reported 118.422,60 confirmed cases with 545.481 deaths worldwide (fatality rate/CFR 4,6%) (WHO 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic is happening globally, including in Aceh. The Aceh government has special privileges and autonomy that implements Islamic law in religious life, customs, education, the role of the ulama in regional policy making, and the Sharia Court makes the Acehnese people more obedient to the rules (Diskominfo Aceh 2020a). The first positive case of COVID-19 found in Aceh in March 2020 was a patient under surveillance (PDP) who died at the Zainoel Abidin Hospital (Dinas Kesehatan Aceh, 2020). 13 of 63 Acehnese students in China were isolated in Wuhan since the lockdown policy was enforced January 23, 2020, by the China Government (Diskominfo Aceh 2020a). Before other Indonesian regions responded, Aceh province was the first to react and predict the spread of COVID-19 in early 2020. This research was conducted to determine the actions and local wisdom carried out by the local government and the people of Aceh at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

METHOD

A qualitative study approach was used in this study in Aceh Province. A cross-sectional design with a purposive sampling technique was used in this study. The Aceh Province was chosen as the research location because Aceh province was the first province to respond and anticipate the spread of COVID-19 in early 2020 before other provinces in Indonesia responded. Primary data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews on June 9, 2020, online using the Zoom Meeting application. The informant was the Chief of the Aceh Agency for Disaster Management (BPBA). An interview guide was sent one week before the interview was conducted.

The Chief of BPBA prepares the data and displays it in the form of a presentation, such as pre-disaster (conditions before the COVID-19 pandemic, contingency plan, regional capacity, and pandemic chronology (start, formation, response, post estimate), institutional and crisis leadership, public health, law, social and cultural, science and technology, information, and communication technology, support, coordination, and cooperation, community engagement, community-based prevention, and volunteers, etc. The interview recording was used to create a transcript, which was then subjected to content analysis. Additionally, a matrix is used in this study to account for all the question's components. The results of in-depth interviews were supported by secondary data searches in Aceh, such as the activities of the Aceh task force team, and the Aceh government's reports and news.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Aceh, the Veranda of Mecca

Aceh province is located at the western end of the Republic of Indonesia, which borders Singapore, Malaysia, and North Sumatra Province. Aceh was the first area where Islam entered Indonesia. In addition, it is the site of the founding of the first Islamic kingdoms in Indonesia, namely *Peureulak* and *Pasai*, in the 9th century (Pemerintah Aceh 2019). At the beginning of the 17th century, the Sultanate of Aceh experienced the peak of its glory during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda. At that time, the influence of Islamic culture was so great in people's lives. Aceh's location is very strategic in the Malacca Strait, so it has an important role in spreading Islam in the Aceh region and Southeast Asia. Since then, Islam has significantly impacted Acehnese culture, social life, and activities (Pemerintah Aceh 2019). Aceh was a stopover place for pilgrims who were in the archipelago before leaving for Mecca. Traditional houses in Aceh have *Seuramoe*. *Seuramoe* is a temporary stop before entering the house. That philosophy then made Aceh known as *Serambi Mekah* (Veranda of Mecca) (Pemerintah Aceh 2019).

Aceh's privileges and special autonomy were legitimized by Laws No. 44/1999 Regarding the Implementation of the Privileges of the Province of the Special Region of Aceh, and No. 11/2006 Regarding the Government of Aceh, which are implementation of Islamic sharia law, or *Jinayah* law. This law includes religious life, customary life, education, the role of ulama (Islamic scholar) in local policymaking, and the Sharia Court. Implementing this law has made Acehnese more obedient to the rules (Pemerintah Aceh 2019).

Aceh Early Response to Anticipate the Spread of the Corona Virus (January-April 2020)

Indonesia reported its first case on March 2, 2020. Cases are increasing and spreading rapidly throughout Indonesia. As of July 9, 2020, the Ministry of Health reported 70,736 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 3,417 deaths (CFR 4,8%) (Kemenkes RI 2020). The Government of Aceh took the advice and knowledge-based recommendations from WHO with due observance of statutory rules and regulations. Therefore, the roadmap for the prevention and handling of Covid-19 in Aceh was a collaboration between the government and the community. Evidently, Aceh managed to contain the number of positive cases of Covid-19 in Aceh in the first three and the second three months. As a result, the Indonesian Government expressed its praise for the community's compliance with regulations, guidelines, and directions presented by the Aceh Regional Leadership Communication Forum (FORKOPIMDA) and Regency/City *Forkopimda* (BPBA 2020; Diskominfo Aceh 2020a).

In January 2020, an Alert Post at the Aceh Social Affairs Office and at the Aceh Government Liaison Agency in Jakarta was established to provide aid to Acehnese students/residents who were isolated in Wuhan. The Aceh Government has appointed *Zainal Abidin* Hospital in Banda Aceh and *Cut Mutia* Hospital in *Lhokseumawe* as the referral hospital for COVID-19. Aceh became the first province in Indonesia to make preparation to deal with the COVID-19 outbreak since January 2020 (BPBA 2020; Diskominfo Aceh 2020a). In February 2020, Indonesian citizens, including Acehnese residents and students, were evacuated from Wuhan by the Aceh Government, and The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia sent to *Natuna* Island for quarantine for fourteen days and then returned to Aceh (Kominfo RI 2020; Diskominfo Aceh 2020a). Meanwhile, The Aceh Government established a COVID-19 alert Post at the Aceh Health Office (BPBA 2020; Diskominfo Aceh 2020a).

In March, Aceh Government coordination meetings for handling COVID-19 became more intensive. The Aceh government ordered work and study from home and established the COVID-19 Task Force. The Aceh Regional Leadership Coordination Forum started a gauge for ruling against COVID-19 and began the campaign on precautionary and forecasting of the spread of COVID-19. The Aceh Government declared a provincial-scale emergency response status, allocated the first phase of incidental funds for unexpected expenses, conducted a health laboratory for swab testing, and closed public places temporarily (BPBA 2020; Diskominfo Aceh 2020a). Thirteen hospitals have been appointed to treat Covid-19 patients, disinfectants

spraying, and distributed PPE to the hospitals. The curfew time was announced to anticipate the transmission of COVID-19 until April and re-focused the Provincial Revenue and Expenditure Budget for dealing with COVID-19 (BPBA 2020; Diskominfo 2020b). In addition, the Aceh government received Health Operational Assistance (BOK) from the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Indonesia (Diskominfo Aceh 2020a).

In April 2020, the Aceh government handed over food packages for the medical team and families, inaugurated the COVID-19 medical team's lodging place, and inaugurated the special poly-infectious disease dr. Zainoel Abidin Hospital allocated second-stage contingency funds for incidental expenses and distributed 61.584 food packages for people affected by COVID-19 (BPBA 2020; Diskominfo Aceh 2020a). The chairperson of the Aceh Family Welfare and Empowerment Mobilization Team (TP-PKK) as the frontline team in overcoming the spread of COVID-19 in Aceh, carried out the mask-wearing campaign throughout 23 regencies/cities, 289 sub-districts, 3.883 mosques, and 6.497 villages (*gampong*). This movement itself aimed to break the chain of transmission of the Covid-19 virus by socializing the health protocol by involving community leaders and traditional leaders, integrated public health service posts (*posyandu*), health cadres, and the public health (Universitas Indonesia 2020; Iriansyah 2020; Diskominfo Aceh 2020a).

Synergizing Aceh's Local Wisdom and Technology to Deal with COVID-19

Aceh has a unique government institutional structure that is different from other provinces. The smallest unit of Aceh government at the village level is called a "*gampong*". Therefore, the *Gampong* becomes the spearhead of the government that directly interacts with the community. Since March 26, 2020, 4.181 *Gampongs* in Aceh have formed the COVID-19 Alert/Response Team. 1.467 *Gampongs* have made changes to the *Gampong*'s Revenue and Expenditure Budget for handling COVID-19 (Diskominfo Aceh 2020a). In early May 2021, there was a ban on vehicles and instructions for turning back travelers by the Aceh Police.

However, under certain conditions, there is a policy for travelers to enter Aceh with the recommendation of the village head or *keuchik*, and the *Keuchik* picks up the travelers directly at the checkpoint. After arriving at their hometowns, travelers are required to self-isolate and become the full responsibility of the village head or *keuchik*. The Regency/City Government also instructs the village head/*keuchik* to form a *Gampong* Task Force for Monitoring People to supervise people who enter an area and to carry out quarantine according to the health protocol and report it to the sub-district and district/city offices.

The travelers must fill in personal data, such as mobile phone numbers, ID cards, number of family members, transportation used, destination, and date of departure and arrival to the "*Sapa Mudik*" application, which has been constructed by The Aceh Transportation Service. After arriving at their hometowns, travelers are required to self-isolate and become the full responsibility of the village head, or *keuchik*. The Regency/City Government also instructs the village head/*keuchik* to form a *Gampong* Task Force for Monitoring People Under Surveillance (ODP). The *Gampong* Task Force must supervise people who enter an area and are required to carry out quarantine according to the health protocols and report it to the sub-district and district/city offices (BPBA 2020; Iriansyah 2020; Diskominfo Aceh 2020a).

In the past, disease outbreaks hit Aceh, although the rate of spread was not too fast due to the limited transportation technology factor. A cholera epidemic hit Aceh at the end of the 19th century, brought by Dutch soldiers from Batavia (Jakarta), leaving many people dead. The Acehnese then called the plague "*taeun*" or "*taeut*", which was adopted from the Arabic "*thaun*". The experience of the outbreak provided new knowledge that was passed down from generation to the next generation as Acehnese local wisdom (Zaenal 2020; Saputra and Zuriah 2020). The seventh pearls of wisdom of Acehnese, for example:

First, salt. Salt is believed to be a medium for the body's immunity. In the Acehnese tradition, salt is used as a "*peucicap*" (taste recognition) for babies as well as honey. Salt and honey are believed to be efficacious in strengthening the body's immune system and as an antidote to various viruses in the food served (Zaenal 2020). In addition, in dishes at feast events in Aceh, it is customary to provide salt on small plates as a flavour enhancer (Adhi 2021). Another tradition in Acehnese is sea bathing, where the body is soaked with salt water

(Zaenal 2020). Sea bathing in the month of Safar once a year, which is commonly called “*manoe rabu abeh*” or “*manoe safa*”, is part of the tradition of eliminating various germs and diseases in the body (Zaenal 2020). The Acehnese in the past believed that there was a correlation between sea bathing and body immunity in warding off disease, as there was a correlation between high tides in the sea and the movement of veins in the human body (Zaenal 2020).

Second, *Ie Lam Guci* (water in a jar). Every ancient Acehnese house must have an urn (jug, pot) filled with clean water with a dipper in front of the house. People who want to enter the house must clean themselves first to be sterile from dirt or germs. Not only jars in ancient Acehnese houses, there was also a well (bathroom) at the front of the house, so people who had just returned had to bathe outside the house first. The movement of diligently washing hands and bathing after returning from the market that has been promoted by medical experts lately has actually been practiced by the ancient Acehnese (Zaenal 2020).

Third, *PakekGaca*, using henna on the fingers alternately, which always means "physical distancing" when the epidemic hits, such as do not gather or hang out in congregations in coffee shops, do not hold parties for a while, do not jostle at markets, buses, planes and so on (Panton and Basri 2020; Situmeang, 2016; Yusnita *et al.* 2018). Fourth, *Pajoh Ranup*. chewing betel leaf with areca nut and lime. Betel leaf as an antiseptic and antimicrobial can kill the sars-cov-2 virus. Betel leaf is owned by almost every Acehnese yard and is consumed every day (Afreni *et al.* 2018; Fathoni *et al.* 2019; Johan 2020; Zaenal 2020).

Fifth, *Toet Leumang*. Burning *lemang* became one of the habits of Acehnese when facing disease outbreaks and then passing it on to neighbours. *Lemang* is made from glutinous rice that is burned in bamboo. Acehnese households always have two types of rice on hand: plain rice and glutinous rice. When glutinous rice is used in an emergency, it indicates that the food stock in the family is running low. First, burning *lemang* from glutinous rice indicates that the person no longer has rice in stock as the main food in his home. Second, behind the action of burning *lemang* there is a message to get used to sharing (alms) even in difficult conditions. The burnt *lemang* is not eaten by a family alone but is distributed to neighbours. Burning *lemang* signifies that people who can afford it must help the poor, get used to sharing, and many other virtues (Panton and Basri 2020; Wahyudi *et al.* 2017).

Sixth, isolation of the sick. This tradition is usually carried out during the "*taeun*" epidemic that hit chickens (*manokkeunongtaeun*). Chickens that have signs of being infected with the virus must be immediately isolated in a separate cage from other chickens. Then the chickens are given a vaccine known as “*meuntrimanok*” (Zaenal 2020). Seventh, hold a prayer. Human limitations in dealing with the epidemic, the Acehnese believe that praying to Allah will provide protection, reading *qunut nazilah* in every prayer, and recommend reading the Qur’an, especially *Surah Al-Kahf*, *Surah Yaasin*, and *zikir* (Warsidi 2020; Zaenal 2020; Saputra and Zuriah 2020).

The upshot is that both national and subnational governments must create social protection programs to assist current and new poor people because of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact. In this situation, the Aceh Government had previously Integrated Social Welfare Data, which showed that the number of impoverished people in Aceh was roughly 15% of the overall population. The Aceh government quadrupled the number of poor people because it was believed that limited actions and mobilization of the people would result in new poor people. As a result, the expected number of persons and dollars spent on social assistance has increased to 30%.

CONCLUSION

The regional government and Ulama in Aceh worked together to hasten the handling of COVID-19 and followed up at the *gampong*/village level by forming a *gampong*/village on COVID-19 alert. Each *gampong* set up a shelter for visitors from outside to self-isolate for 14 days, and they carried out the traditional practices of the Acehnese people, that have been used to dealing with COVID-19 for a long time.

Cooperation and mutual trust occurred at the beginning of joint efforts to prevent and deal with the COVID-19 outbreak in Aceh. The Indonesian government also praised Aceh, and it became a learning center for other provinces. The Aceh government's quick response issued policies to deal Covid-19 outbreak, such as forming a Task Force Team, making regulations, and involving all elements (government, religious leaders, and scientists) in the context of accelerating the prevention of COVID-19 in Aceh, refocusing the regional budget for handling COVID-19, and implemented and disseminated health protocols in public areas.

To defeat the COVID-19 Corona Virus pandemic is an awareness that the task in question is not only the task of the Task Force for the Acceleration of Handling Covid-19 both at the central and regional levels and even villages/GAMPONG, but has become a necessity to be carried out collaboratively, both internally by the government and with PENTAHHELIX actors, namely the community or community, academics, mass media, and even the business world or philanthropy. The key to solving this problem is in the community, the government only makes guidelines, provisions, and recommendations, and this will have no result if the community does not comply.

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