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*Published in:*  
Human Security and Empowerment in Asia

*DOI:*  
[10.4324/9781003430742-3](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003430742-3)

Published: 26/10/2023

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Lassa, J. (2023). COVID-19 impact on the most vulnerable communities in Indonesia. In M. Caballero-Anthony, M. Yoichi, & S. Ishikawa (Eds.), *Human Security and Empowerment in Asia: Beyond the Pandemic* (1 ed., pp. 50-77). Taylor and Francis AS. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003430742-3>

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# 3

## COVID-19 IMPACT ON THE MOST VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES IN INDONESIA

*Jonatan Anderias Lassa*

### 3.1 Introduction

This article aims to understand the devastating effects caused by COVID-19 and its impact on the food security of vulnerable populations in Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia. This exploratory study examines the protection and empowerment dimension of the COVID-19 response by the government, local governments, and non-state actors in Indonesia. It asks: (1) What are the impacts of COVID-19 on food access, especially for vulnerable groups in disaster-induced displacement communities? (2) How have social protection measures taken by the government helped to avoid hunger and famine during COVID-19 in Indonesia? (3) How do government and NGO interventions to address COVID-19 empower affected communities living in transitional shelters?

This study also looks at the impacts of COVID-19 on displaced and disaster-affected populations, with a geographical focus on Central Sulawesi and East Nusa Tenggara provinces. The former was hit by tsunamigenic earthquakes in 2018, while the latter was hit by tropical cyclone Seroja in 2021. The earthquakes, followed by tsunamis and liquefactions that rocked Central Sulawesi on September 2018, caused 2,081 casualties, with a further 1,075 people missing, about 211,000 displaced, and 68,000 houses damaged (BNPB 2018). The total economic loss was estimated to be USD 910 million (IDR 13.8 trillion) (BNPB 2018), or about 350% of the entire development budget of the province in 2019 (Pemda Sulteng 2019).

Tropical Cyclone Seroja hit East Timor and Indonesia's East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) province. NTT Province experienced a total loss of and damage to about 52,800 houses and monetary losses of USD 243 million (Ama 2021). The cyclone destroyed 88 dams and 11.7 km of water-pipe networks in the Kupang district

alone. NTT is one of Indonesia's poorest provinces and has often historically faced food insecurity and malnutrition. In NTT, this study focuses on the uprooted communities from East Timor that have resided in West Timor since 2000. Some of these communities were still in transitional shelters and living in marginal conditions when they were hit by Cyclone Seroja in 2021.

## 3.2 Research Framework

### 3.2.1 COVID-19 Impact on Human and Food Security

Pandemics create system-wide risks, leading to cascading and unprecedented effects in many sectors at many levels (Renn 2020). Nevertheless, pandemics—including COVID-19—do not strike society randomly (Whitehead et al. 2021). The impact of COVID-19 on human security can be amplified by pre-existing unequal vulnerabilities and residual risks in low-income food-deficit countries (LIFDCs), including low- to medium-income countries (LMICs). Residual risk can be exemplified by risks originating from past events such as tsunamigenic earthquakes, soil liquefaction, landslides, and long-term partisan conflicts (Triyanti et al. 2022).

COVID-19 has emerged as a worldwide threat to non-traditional food security, such as undernutrition and obesity. Restrictions on mobility are likely to undermine the global fight against obesity. They can increase the risks of obesity as children and parents remain at home more, with fewer opportunities to burn calories (Woertz 2020). Thus, even though changes in global food prices during 2020 remained tolerable in many countries (Devereux et al. 2020), the global climate crisis raises new risks of losses and damage to production and supply chains on top of such residual risks and vulnerabilities originating from ongoing deficits in human development and resilience.

The United Nations General Assembly Plenary 31st Special Session Meeting in December 2020 raised concerns over potential famines in the near future (United Nations 2020). COVID-19 will likely continue to be an ongoing threat to global society for many years. Despite the possibility that the world might contain COVID-19 in the future, the actual cost of COVID-19 on human security, including food security, is likely to be significant.

The COVID-19 virus transmits along social-economic fault lines, namely the social and economic inequalities in many local communities, including those in the developed world (O'Hara and Toussaint 2021; Gundersen et al. 2020). Vulnerable groups include people in risky, low-income, manual jobs in almost all sectors that 'have been more exposed to covid-19 as their face-to-face jobs cannot be done from home' (Whitehead et al. 2021). Impoverished communities with limited access to health services pre-COVID-19 have also been more vulnerable to severe disease once infected because of higher pre-existing illness levels (Whitehead et al. 2021). Such groups are likely to be pushed back into poverty sooner or later.

### 3.2.2 Linking the Food System with Human Security Frameworks

Food security is situated among the seven dimensions of the human security framework (Caballero-Anthony 2016; King and Murray 2002; UNDP 1994). This chapter views food security under COVID-19 through the lens of interdisciplinary human security. While the concept of holistic human security is briefly outlined in the UNDP's Human Security Report 1994, some scholars have creatively advocated 'system thinking' to reinforce 'integrated security' as the 'best model' of human security (Cook 2021).

Unfortunately, most governments are not operating based on a systems approach. Such scholarship efforts are more of a hypothesis of what should be and are less empirical. Therefore, the author offers an alternative analytical framework that cross-breeds human security, non-traditional security (NTS), and state security approaches to understand the responses to COVID-19 by states and civil society actors (Figure 3.1). This chapter proposes a middle way to solve the tension between human security, non-traditional security (NTS), and the broader state security agenda. Figure 3.1 presents the possibility of interpreting food security as a subset of human security and NTS and state security. Figure 3.1 also suggests a shared space between human security, NTS, and state security.

Figure 3.1 suggests that food security is a triple-helix security phenomenon naturally anchored in all forms of security. The context in China (Project 1, HSSEA) indicates that human security is often part of non-traditional security, including food security issues. One recent empirical study on East Asia maintained the view

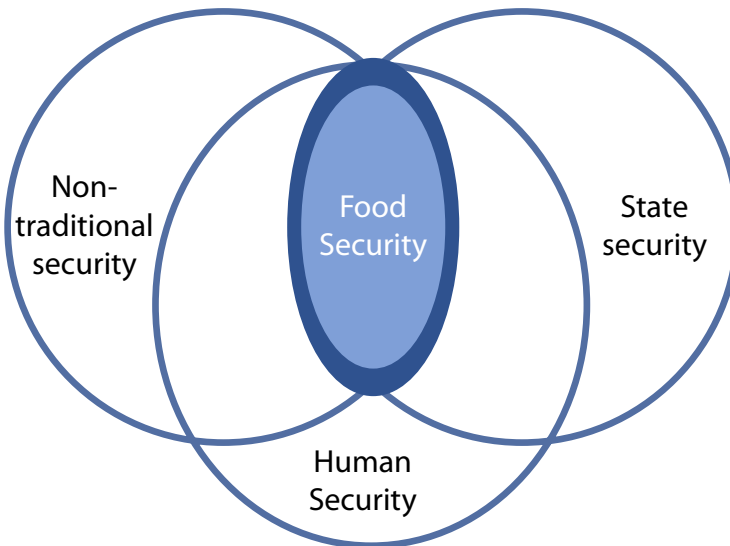


FIGURE 3.1 The framework of food security as a shared human security governance framework (source: author)

that state security contributes to human security. Nevertheless, human security does not equal state security, as people should not be sacrificed to serve state security agendas because human beings are not the means but the ends in themselves (Mine, Gomez, and Muto 2019).

There is a solid justification for such a combination of frameworks because mitigating potential food crises during COVID-19 demands multi-pronged security approaches, while narrow security thinking is unhelpful given the catastrophe. In the previous HSSEA project, there were cases from the Philippines where government respondents believed poverty, lack of food, and lack of education were the root causes of human insecurity (Atienza 2019).

Furthermore, policymakers in East Asia generally cite food security as one of the threats to state security. Some countries have used various pathways to frame food security as a human security variable (Atienza 2019). For example, in Thailand, food security is included in the Human Security Index (HSI) institutionalized by the Thailand Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (Jumnianpol and Nuangjamnong 2019). In contrast, Vietnam ensures that food security is treated as one of the highest national security priorities mandated by Resolution 63/NQ-CP to provide short- and long-term security and development agendas (Pham et al. 2019). Food safety is also related to and is part of Vietnam's food security agenda.

The author is mindful that the various analytical means by which COVID-19 impacts food security should be understood to lie outside the security paradigms above. The long-standing variables are the FAO's four dimensions of food security: availability, affordability, quality, and safety. Sen's entitlements framework helps us to understand how COVID-19 impacts household production, labor, trade, and transfer-based entitlements to food (Sen 1999; Devereux et al. 2020).

Suppose development can be defined as an opportunity to expand human freedoms (Sen 1999). In that case, as argued by Lassa et al. (2022), 'disasters and pandemic events, on the contrary, can be defined as a direct threat to development through compromising human freedoms and human insecurity. Furthermore, deprived freedoms and capabilities can lead to different human insecurities, including food insecurity and hunger'.

The extent to which a person can cope with insecurities triggered by catastrophic events depends on the 'entitlement basket', ranging from producing food (production-based entitlement), buying food (trade-based entitlement), working for food (labor-based entitlement), and receiving food aid (transfer-based entitlement). This suggests that the potential impact of COVID-19 on food security can be explained by classical food entitlement theory (Devereux et al. 2020; Sen 1983).

### ***3.2.3 Cash Transfers Offer Protection against Food and Human Insecurity***

COVID-19 and its interplay with existing risks might pose severe consequences for food insecurity, including a potential increase in hunger and undernutrition

due to increased local and global food ‘system’ disruptions. However, food security can be restored by a robust cash-transfer program in light of the food entitlement theory (Sen 1983).

The literature often sees a cash-transfer protection strategy (Slater 2011), paid by either the government or NGOs to poor households (Miller 2011), as a way of offsetting shocks from natural hazards (such as droughts) and pandemics by reducing the risks and vulnerabilities of affected families (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2008; Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux 2010). In many cases, the initial objective of such cash transfers is to enable low-income families to sustain their access to food (Slater 2011) in times of peril, including during droughts and pandemics.

Lack of robust social protection policy, vigorous state-led transfer programs, and limited labor markets compromise food access in many pockets of poverty in Southeast Asia. While necessary, lockdowns and extensive mobility restrictions have led to large-scale declines in labor incomes. As a result, four million migrant workers’ families in Myanmar are at risk of income shocks (Diao and Wang 2020) due to lockdowns in the countries in which they work. The low-income families in Southeast Asia from Indonesia and the Philippines, who often benefit from international remittances, now face prolonged income losses that might last longer than anticipated.

Nevertheless, disaster-response and pandemic cash transfers can protect and empower vulnerable groups to comply with COVID-19 mitigation measures. Conventional post-disaster relief distribution in the form of commodity transfers (e.g., food and non-food items) is grounded in paternalism’s moral imperative, whereby external actors decide what is best for survivors of disasters and conflicts (Lassa et al. 2022). On the other hand, cash assistance—as a form of basic income—can be seen as a more flexible and relatively less-intrusive type of aid rooted in the ideology of libertarian paternalism (Thaler and Sustein 2008). This is because people’s choices in relation to emergency aid are not decided in a top-down manner by central governments or ‘coercively enforced’ but are, rather, creatively embedded in a new practice, whereby people affected by disasters can experience a higher degree of agency and dignity (United Nations 2016).

This chapter argues that cash transfers offer broader spaces for state and non-state actors to exercise protection and empowerment of COVID-19-affected populations.

### 3.3 Data Collection and Research Methods

This explorative study adopts qualitative research and consists of a two-stage research strategy. The first stage consisted of desk research, during which the author examined governmental and non-governmental responses to the dynamic context of COVID-19 from 2020 to 2022. The content analysis examines the policy documents published between March 2020 and December 2021. The initial result of Stage 1 can be seen in Lassa (2021).

The second stage comprised field data collection completed by a research assistant from Indonesia who received ethical clearance from Atmajaya University (Clearance No. 0030J /III/LPPM-PM.10.05/10/2021) on October 12, 2021. The fieldwork in NTT Province started on November 15, 2021 and was completed on January 14, 2022. The fieldwork in Central Sulawesi commenced on January 14, 2022 and ran until February 6, 2022. Table 3.1 summarizes the stakeholders interviewed in selected districts in both provinces. There were 48 qualitative interviews with members of the affected communities using the COVID-19 protocol, with safe physical distancing, and 20 interviews with aid providers, including local governments and NGOs (Table 3.2). This suggests that plain language statements and interview approval were all recorded instead of signed. The age range of the respondents was between 22 and 65 years old. Out of the 49 members of affected communities, 30 were women. Out of the 20 aid provider respondents, two were women.

The author used NVIVO-12 to process the qualitative data coding and analysis. The policy-related coding is based on the policy information provided in Tables 3.3 and 3.4. Each respondent’s transcript is assigned a specific code number, from R1 to R68. The list is provided in Annex 1.

**TABLE 3.1** Respondents by administrative area

<i>Province</i>	<i>Administrative Area</i>	<i>Stakeholders</i>	<i>Interviews</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
East Nusa Tenggara	Kupang	Affected community and cash transfer beneficiaries	20	Kupang District (Raknamo—Amabi Oefeto) Manusak (Kupang Timur)
	Belu		9	Fatukbot, Manuaman (Atambua Selatan); Manleten (Tasifeto Timur); Dualaus, Kakuluk Mesak)
	NTT	Aid providers	13	Government and NGOs
Central Sulawesi	Donggala	Affected community and cash-transfer beneficiaries	9	Boya (Banawa), Wani 1 (Tanantovea) & Marana (Sindue)
	Palu City		5	Panau (Tawaeli)
	Sigi		5	Pombewe and Lolu (Biomaru)
	Central Sulawesi	Aid providers	8	Government and NGOs
<b>Total</b>			<b>69</b>	

**TABLE 3.2** Respondents by type of cash-transfer beneficiary and gender

<i>Province</i>	<i>BST</i>	<i>PKH</i>	<i>BLT</i>	<i>SMEs</i>	<i>PIP</i>	<i>NGOs/Other</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
NTT	8	10	5	1	1	0	4	29	8	21
Central Sulawesi	1	7	3	1	0	6	1	19	5	14
<b>Total</b>								<b>48</b>		



**TABLE 3.3** Key regulations related to food security in Indonesia, February 2020–March 2021

<i>Date</i>	<i>Issuing agency</i>	<i>Title of regulation</i>	<i>Reference</i>
February 28, 2020	BNPB (National disaster management agency)	Declaration of Special Emergency Situation of the COVID-19 Epidemic Disaster in Indonesia	Directive of BNPB Head 9A/2020
March 13, 2020	President of Indonesia	Task Force for Rapid Response to COVID-19	Presidential Decree ( <i>Keppres</i> ) 9/2020
March 14, 2020	Ministry of Finance	Distribution of Special Grant Allocation for Infrastructure in the Health Sector and Grants for Health Operation for COVID-19 response	Decision of MoF 6/KM.7/2020
March 16, 2020	Ministry of Finance	Distribution and the use of shared income grant, fiscal allocation, general allocation grant, special allocation grant, and regional incentives for 2020 fiscal response to COVID-19	MoF Regulation 19/PMK.07/2020
March 20, 2020	President of Indonesia	Revision of Presidential Decree on Task Force for Rapid Response to COVID-19	Presidential Decree ( <i>Keppres</i> ) 9/2020
March 20, 2020	President of Indonesia	Refocusing of activities, fiscal allocation, and procurement of goods and services for the acceleration of COVID-19 response	President Instruction ( <i>Inpres</i> ) 4/2020
March 21, 2020	Ministry of Finance	Tax incentives for Compulsory Tax Holders affected by COVID-19	MoF Regulation 23/PMK.03/2020
March 23, 2020	Ministry of Communication and Information	Acceleration of socialization of COVID19 Prevention at Provincial and District/ City levels	Circulated letter SE 2/2020
March 24, 2020	Village, Regional Disadvantage, and Transmigration Minister	Village Response for COVID-19 and Cash for work in Villages	Circulated Letter SE 8/2020

(Continued)

TABLE 3.3 (Continued)

<i>Date</i>	<i>Issuing agency</i>	<i>Title of regulation</i>	<i>Reference</i>
March 31, 2020	President of Indonesia	National Budgeting Policy and the Stability of Budgeting System for COVID-19 Pandemic Disaster and/or Managing Threats for National Economy and/or the Stability Budgeting System	Government Regulation in Lieu of Law 1/2020
March 31, 2020	President of Indonesia	Declaration of Community Health Emergency Situation for COVID-19	President Decree 11/2020
March 31, 2020	President of Indonesia	Big Scale Social Restriction for Accelerating COVID-19 Eradication	Government Regulation 21/2020
April 16, 2020	Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA)	Implementation of Food and Cash Transfer Support for COVID-19 Pandemic	MoSA Decree 54/HUK/2020
July 10, 2020	Ministry of Workforce (Menaker)	Time adjustment for social security protection benefits for pre-posting migrant workers during non-national disasters, i.e., COVID-19	Permenaker 10/2020
July 8, 2020	Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA)	Implementation of Food and Cash Transfer Support for COVID-19 Pandemic	MoSA Degree 86/HUK/2020
August 11, 2020	Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA)	2nd Amendment of Implementation of Food and Cash Transfer Support for COVID-19 Pandemic for Fiscal Year 2020	MoSA Decree 100/HUK/2020
August 14, 2020	Ministry of Workforce (Menaker)	Government Assistance Guidelines for Wage/Wage Subsidies for Workers/Workers in handling COVID-19 impact	Permenaker 14/2020
December 30, 2020	Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA)	Implementation of Cash Transfer Support for COVID-19 Pandemic 2021	MoSA Decree 161/HUK/2020

(Continued)

**TABLE 3.3** (Continued)

<i>Date</i>	<i>Issuing agency</i>	<i>Title of regulation</i>	<i>Reference</i>
February 15, 2021	Ministry of Workforce (Menaker)	Implementation of wages in specific labor-intensive industries during COVID-19	Permenaker 2/2021

*Source:* Author, modified and updated from Djalante et al. ( 2020).

**TABLE 3.4** Social protection via cash transfers as proxy to ensuring food access

<i>Agency</i>	<i>Type of Protection</i>	<i>Amount and Scale</i>	<i>Food Security Dimension</i>
MoSA	PKH Program (Family Hope Program) long-term social assistance for poor family Food aid packages namely BLT Bansos	IDR 600k (USD 42) per month paid for four months IDR 300k (USD 21) per month paid for four months	Access to food; availability at consumers' level
MoLa	Incentives for workers with a salary below USD 350 per month	Rp. 600k (USD 42) per month for four months	Access to food; availability at consumers' level
Ministry of Village and Disadvantaged Regions Development and Transmigration (MoVDRT)	A maximum 40% allocation of Village Fund for cash transfer prioritizes basic needs (incl. food) and health-related spending	IDR 600 (USD 42) per person for three months	Access to food; availability at consumers' level
Ministry of Agriculture (MoA)	Cash-transfer program for 2.7 million vulnerable farmers	IDR 600 (USD 42) per person for three months	Production to ensure availability
Ministry of Maritime and Fisheries	Cash-transfer program for 1.1. million vulnerable fishers	IDR 600 (USD 42) per person for three months	Production to ensure availability

### 3.4 Findings 1: COVID-19 Impacts on Food Security

This section is based on a literature review combined with results from the qualitative interviews.

#### 3.4.1 *Normalizing the COVID-19 Crisis*

Normalizing suffering is one way to cope with uncertainty during COVID-19. For some of the former refugees in West Timor, life has been hard for almost two decades. Reflecting on her life, R05 said, 'If some people said that COVID-19 is hard, yeah, certainly. But for us, this is a normal life; our life has already been tough, and COVID-19 makes no difference'. For most respondents in Timor, tenure security and housing access are their primary concerns, not COVID-19 (R11).

R45 lived in a transitional shelter in Boya, Donggala, together with ten other families, for almost three years before receiving her permanent shelter assistance from the government recently. There are 70 new permanent shelters in her new neighborhood, with 30 families already occupying the newly built shelters. By contrast, R47 in Wani remained in her transitional shelter. R60 also said that, out of 287 families that lost their houses in Panau, Palu City, 57 were still waiting for a permanent shelter, which the government had promised would be completed four years ago. Some of the delays were due to land ownership issues and the communities' decision to wait for a signal from the government to rebuild in the red zone, which is tricky and unlikely (R60).

In West Timor, COVID-19 is not the only risk that affects people's livelihoods. African swine fever (ASF) killed almost all pigs, first in East Timor and later in West Timor, in early 2020 at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The former East Timorese refugee respondents in both Kupang and Belu experienced the catastrophic effect of the ASF equally, with many losing all of their pigs (R10, R31). Belu is also known as a 3T region (underdeveloped, poorest, and outermost). As of June 2020, damage from ASF amounted to at least 33 billion Indonesian Rupiah (IDR) (USD 2.4m), equivalent to 3.6% of the district's annual budget. In the Malacca District of NTT, the total direct losses reached IDR 95 billion, or 11% of the 2020 Malacca APBD (Lassa 2020). In Kupang, a similar story emerged of ASF losses. For example, R03 from Rakanmo in Kupang lost all her five pigs during the ASF epidemic of 2020.

In April 2021, R03 also lost his livestock (goats and chickens) and most of the harvest during Seroja. R03 and her neighbors often suffer from water shortages. She added: 'All my groundnuts were swept away by the floods; all my corn harvest was damaged and blown away by the storm'. R04 from Manusak in Kupang also suffered as a result of Cyclone Seroja: He lost seven dogs, nine pigs, and all of his chickens, as well as the harvested corn in a small warehouse. R11 lost the roof of her house. R10 lost his livestock and harvests. R8, R10, R13, and R15 all experienced the pain of Seroja.

### 3.4.2 COVID-19 Impacts on Vulnerable Households

Some families were relying on remittances from family members working as migrant workers in palm oil companies in Papua (R18). R36's husband, who worked as a domestic worker in Bali and often sent her USD 35–45 a month, returned home without a job. R10 relied on remittances from her younger adult daughter, who worked in Bali as an employee of a family business. The daughter had to return home after the tourism sector collapsed in Bali. This created severe shocks to her household income and spending plans.

The impact of COVID-19 on economic access to food has been a growing challenge. In the context of vulnerable groups that live in near-displacement conditions, access to everyday basic needs, such as water, food, and energy, can be the most challenging experience during COVID-19. Some family members need to go out to collect water from public taps, so procedures for social distancing are hard to follow. R16 shared her story in Manusak Village: 'We had to get the water. But we had to observe how many people were there. If there were more than six, we had to wait until some left the place. In 2020, it was pretty strict'.

Not all stories described negative experiences. For example, R57 in Wani, Donggala, Central Sulawesi, shared her story of how her husband got his new job in the solid (metal) renewable business. Before COVID-19, while living in the transitional shelter, her husband could get IDR 100,000 a day (USD 7 a day); this increased to USD 14 per day. One of the reasons is the shortage in labor supply for specific skilled jobs.

Most of the former East Timorese relied on diversified off- and on-farm activities. For example, R17 combined motorbike taxis with cash crops such as cassava leaves, bananas, papaya, and corn. The sales revenue from these crops is often used to procure rice for their children. Some families relied on remittances from family members who worked as migrant workers in palm oil companies in Papua (R18). For example, R36's husband, who worked as a domestic worker in Bali and often sent her USD 35–45 a month, returned home without a job. R10 relied on remittances from her younger adult daughter, who worked in Bali as a worker in a family business in the tourism sector. The daughter had to return home after the tourism sector collapsed in Bali. This created severe shocks to her household spending.

R22 grows some strategic crops, such as green leafy vegetables, and he often benefits from their status as high-value crops. Yet they are also vulnerable to shocks in demand, which can be bad news for cash vegetable producers like R22. Lack of sales due to the disruption of vegetable supply chains caused him to worry about how to feed his children.

R51, who remains in her transitional shelter, said that when COVID-19 hit Central Sulawesi, her food security condition was just fine, despite the disruption to crop markets.

My family is lucky, as when we were displaced into a new place, we were given access to land for growing crops on a landlord's land, based on a shared benefit arrangement of 30:70. We practically grow almost anything, from rice to vegetables such as tomatoes and onions.

Their transition to a temporary subsistent strategy helped them to secure their food needs.

COVID-19 directly affected insecurities in disaster shelters. R49 from Sigi district in Central Sulawesi said that 'COVID-19 was hideous. Here, 5–7 people died every day [2020/2021]. Around these camps [transitional shelters], at least two people died because of COVID-19, while many became affected as well'.

R26 noted that purchasing power has decreased, so many small-holder farmers have switched jobs in West Timor. The local chicken slaughterhouses collapsed—perhaps 20% are still standing. In Tabean, most local industries almost stopped. There were demonstrations at the DPRD (district legislative) office as companies began downsizing and changing their workers' deals. In the fishery sector, the fishers were initially furious with the travel restrictions. When the restrictions were finally relaxed to allow local commuting, problems arose, as even when the fishers were able to catch enough fish, retailers could not guarantee full orders due to the lack of consumers.

R03 argued that COVID-19 impacts the local livestock industry due to a lack of demand and the supply of animal feed, which is often imported from outside the district or the island. Therefore, they had to lay off staff and reduce their businesses by more than 60%.

In Central Sulawesi, large-scale restrictions pushed fishers to stay home. As R46 narrated,

We often sell our fish inter-island from Central Sulawesi to East Kalimantan. Now the destination regions have refused traders from outside. Here, the raw fish price is IDR 12,000/kg and IDR 25,000/kg. Bontang was a red zone, and we couldn't go there for six months.

Meanwhile, there is a flood of fish supplies here due to supplies from nearby fishers. But the price dropped. The capacity of our ships is up to 7 tons. The price went down to IDR 5,000/kg. While we hold onto the fish, then what do we do? We finally buried them. We have 14 workers to pay. It was terrible in 2020. Now [end of 2021] is a bit better because, since there is vaccination, it's a relief because it's free to go here and there after vaccination.

Some of the findings above are consistent with findings in studies on urban settings by Hidayati et al. (2020) and SMERU (2021). Hidayati et al. (2020) found that most respondents change their consumption patterns and menus according to their economic conditions (49%). Other efforts include using savings (34%), continuing

to work even though most of one's salary/wages have been deducted (31%), borrowing money from family/relatives (15%), selling goods (14%), and going into debt at small shops (4%). SMERU (2021) found that the loss of earnings for many households was not the only challenge: Almost a quarter of respondents (24.4%) said their expenses had also risen, with the increased cost of groceries and other essentials being the main contributors. Moreover, a significantly higher proportion of households with children (65%) had been spending more on the internet or mobile telephone charges than those without children (28.9%) (SMERU 2021).

R25, a trader at the local market in Atambua, survived COVID-19 by using his savings from the bank. R35 sold strategic assets such as cattle to buy food. R35 received IDR 600 from JPS Kabupaten once. She sold some savings, such as gold, in April 2021 when her father, who shared a house with them, died.

### 3.4.3 COVID-19 Impacts on Existing Stunting Eradication Programs

R08 is a 32-year-old. She arrived in West Timor from East Timor when she was ten. For some time, she moved between different camps, but since 2005, she has been settled in Raknamo, Kupang District, West Timor. She had three children, but only one survived. The first one died when she gave birth at the local hospital. The third child was a miscarriage. R11 had four children. The first is now in Year 9. The second is now in Year 3. Her third child died due to miscarriage, and the last child died while still a one-month-old baby.

Raknamo is one of the hotspots of children with stunting (R05). Before COVID-19 in 2020, at least 64 children were registered as experiencing stunting. Unfortunately, due to the readjustment of the district government fiscal structure, the stunting budget has been shifted to invest in COVID-19 responses. For village budget allocations, priority must be given to providing cash assistance, COVID-19 intervention, and other social protection measures. One local pastor also highlighted that the villages host some of the most vulnerable families with stunting among children.

R20 stated that, 'Before COVID, this village hosted stunting-related activities. But during COVID, the activities stopped. The (village government's) focus is now on COVID. The order from Pusat (central) is to refocus the budget to tackle COVID-19'. R30 also articulated that,

Before COVID, stunting was a concern of local government and health ministries. They provided biscuits as supplementary feeding for children with stunting. Village governments could also allocate funds to pay for stunting eradication by recruiting cadres to deliver supplementary feeding to vulnerable communities.

The direct delivery of supplementary feeding is a crucial activity. Experience suggests that low participation in stunting eradication programs by vulnerable

families was partly due to the high cost of local transport to bring their stunted children to supplementary feeding distribution posts.

#### **3.4.4 COVID-19 Impacts on Education**

In Kupang, R17 often spent USD 7 weekly on her school children's transport before COVID-19. During COVID-19, the mother argued that they have to spend more money, as the cost of the online streaming of classes outweighs the traditional transportation fee, with three children using the online credit. R11 also mentioned that access to credit for online streaming is the most challenging problem, as online schooling is the only way for children to study. R41 added that,

during normal times, regular spending for the kids includes shoes, uniforms, school fees, books, and pocket money. The face-to-face classroom is sometimes done weekly, so the regular cost remains the same. Now we must add the cost of phone credits for online schooling.

### **3.5 Findings 2: Protection Measures and Empowerment Dimensions**

#### **3.5.1 Macro Protection Policy**

COVID-19 was declared a major emergency by Indonesia's National Disaster Management Office on February 28, 2020. The practice of declaring a national disaster is not uncommon in Indonesia's crisis management context, where the President often calls for a disastrous event to be designated a 'national disaster'. Nevertheless, the decision was later backed by Presidential Decree (Kepres 9/2020) on Forming a Task Force for Rapid Response to COVID-19 (13 March 2020). This Presidential Decree provided the basis for sectoral responses from national and local governments.

The government is conflicted about protecting the economy and preventing poverty (in all situations, including non-crisis ones) by saving lives during the COVID-19 emergency. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the government has been reluctant to put robust measures in place to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, including ambiguity in protection. Critical views of the government response have been recorded (e.g., Djalante et al. 2020).

Despite starting late and remaining indecisive in making crisis management decisions compared to many middle-income countries in Asia, Indonesia was 'fortunately' able to implement some 'knee-jerk' social protection measures to anticipate a food crisis and prevent hunger. The bigger picture of the macro-level policy pertinent to food security from March 2020 to March 2021 can be seen in Table 3.3.

The Indonesian President issued Directive 4/2020, specifically instructing ministries and local governments to readjust their fiscal priorities. This included the



**TABLE 3.5** Allocation of 40% of Village Funds for the cash-transfer program

<i>Year</i>	<i>BLT DD CTP via Village Funds</i>	<i>Target Villages</i>	<i>Targeted Family Beneficiaries</i>
2020	23.74b	74,593	8m
2021	28.80b	59,169	8m
2022	27.20b	n/a	8m

*Source:* Various media and <http://sid.kemendes.go.id/dana-desa>

need to reallocate budgets and procure goods and services to deal with COVID-19 (Table 3.5). Ensuring food security budget reallocation, strengthening health responses and services, and creating a national insurance scheme have been the four main agenda items of the Directive (Djalante et al. 2020).

The central government, led by the Ministry of Finance (MoF), adjusted its fiscal allocation. Two critical decisions by MoF in March 2020 included, first, the decision on ‘Distribution of Special Grant Allocations for Infrastructure in the Health Sector and Grants for Health Operations for the COVID-19 Response’, and second, the decision on ‘Distribution and the Use of Shared Income Grants, Fiscal Allocation, General Allocation Grants, Special Allocation Grants and Regional Incentives for the 2020 Fiscal Response to COVID-19’. The former aimed to control COVID-19 using medical and public health measures, while the latter aimed to create incentives that ensure social protection and access to food and other fundamental rights. Also, other notable key regulations aim to protect citizens by ensuring their access to food and other fundamental rights.

### 3.5.1.1 Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Protection

The Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) has been a national champion of social protection programs, including those most pertinent to ensuring food security access for the poor. Various social protection programs have been available to MoSA as part of both regular development and disaster response-related programs. Thus, MoSA remains vital in overall COVID-19-related protection, as it manages 62% of the 2020 adjusted budget: IDR 172.2 of 204.95 trillion (or USD 9.1 of 14.6 billion). Below are some examples of the use of existing programs to help the most vulnerable groups, as informed by MoSA and MOF: 1

- The number of beneficiary families (KPM) of the Family Hope Program (PKH) increased from 9.2 million to 10 million families in 2020. PKH had previously been disbursed every three months, but this was revised to monthly distribution from April to December 2020. From April to June, KPM received PKH twice.

1 See the details at: Policy for the Poor, accessed via [www.kemenkeu.go.id/covid19](http://www.kemenkeu.go.id/covid19).

- MoSA is responsible for distributing food baskets (Bansos Sembako) to 1.9 million beneficiaries and rice packets to ten million beneficiaries.
- The amount of PKH benefits per year for specific groups are as follows: (1) Pregnant women received IDR 3,750,000 (USD 260); (2) Children aged 0–6, IDR 3,750,000 (USD 90); (3) Elementary school children or equivalent, IDR 1,125,000 (USD 89); (4) Junior high school children or equivalent, IDR 1,875,000 (USD 135); (5) High school children or equivalent, IDR 2,500,000 (USD 178); (6) Severely disabled, IDR 3,000,000 (USD 214); (7) Seniors 70 years and over, IDR 3,000,000. PKH assistance is given to a maximum of four people in a family. The highest amount of assistance received was IDR 10 million per year, and the lowest was IDR 900,000 per year.
- The number of basic food card beneficiaries increased from 15.2 million to 20 million KPM. The primary food card nominal amount was increased from IDR 150,000 to IDR 200,000 per KPM over the nine months until December 2020.
- Village Direct Cash Assistance (BLT) was comprised of IDR 600,000 per KPM per month (April–June 2020) and IDR 300,000 per KPM per month (July–September 2020). BLT Desa is given to poor or underprivileged families in villages who do not receive PKH assistance, basic food cards, or pre-work cards. Data collection for KPM candidates incorporates the Integrated Social Welfare Data (DTKS) of the Ministry of Social Affairs.

### 3.5.1.2 Ministry of Workforce (MoLa)

As shown in Table 3.4, the government's assistance via MoLa is comprised of subsidized salaries/wages of USD 42 per month for up to four months. The Ministry of Workforce issued Regulation (Permenaker) 14/2020 to implement government assistance through salary/wages subsidies given to workers. The beneficiaries needed to meet the following requirements. They had to a) be Indonesian citizens as evidenced by a population identification number; b) be registered as active participants in the BPJS Ketenagakerjaan, the current workers' social security program, as evidenced by a membership card number; c) be workers or laborers who receive salaries or wages; d) participate until June 2020; e) be an active participant of the social security program for employees who proportionately pay contributions on a salary or wage below IDR 5 million (USD 350), according to the latest salary/wage reported by the employer to BPJS Ketenagakerjaan and recorded in BPJS Ketenagakerjaan; and f) have an active bank account.

In addition, the Ministry of Workforce has also been administering a Pre-Employment Card policy as part of COVID-19 crisis management. The Pre-Employment Card Program is an incentive for laid-off workers, job seekers, and micro and small entrepreneurs who have lost their jobs and/or experienced a decrease in purchasing power due to the COVID-19 pandemic as workers who need increased competence. The pre-employment card program aims to develop

workforce competence, increase workforce productivity and competitiveness, and develop entrepreneurship.<sup>2</sup>

The government allocated an agreed budget that increased from IDR 10 trillion (USD 714 million) to IDR 20 trillion (USD 1.3 billion) for 5.6 million workers who had been laid off or sent home on unpaid leave, informal workers, and micro and small business actors affected by COVID-19. Beneficiaries receive training fees of IDR 1 million, post-training incentives of IDR 42 USD per month for four months, and job survey incentives of IDR 150,000 for three surveys.

### *3.5.1.3 Ministry of Villages, Regional Disadvantage Development, and Transmigration*

The people in remote and disadvantaged regions comprise some of the most vulnerable groups in Indonesia, living in areas where the health system and access to health services remain limited. In the last five years, the good news is that the central government has created a nationwide incentive for village development through ‘Dana Desa’ or Village Development (DD). As instructed by the President and administered directly by the Ministry of Village Development, Regional Disadvantage, and Transmigration, it allows village governments (c. 80,000) to shift existing funds to cash for work.

Village governments play pivotal roles in COVID-19-affected communities by drawing on existing Village Funds. The Ministry issued regulation 50/2020, setting out the imperatives that each village government should allocate 40% of the annual budget for cash transfers. The BLT DD 2020 allocation is based on PMK 50/2020. The regulation also states that village governments that do not comply by allocating social protection will be subject to sanctions and will not receive any funds for the next quarter. These sanctions will not be imposed if there are no vulnerable families based on village meetings that meet the criteria. Presidential Decree 104 of 2021 reemphasized that Village Cash Assistance (BLT Desa) needed to be included in the budget, comprising at least 40% of the village fund ceiling received by each village in 2022.

### *3.5.1.4 Multi-level Incentives for Food Production*

By financing farmers, the government expects them to remain productive. Through collaboration between the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Maritime and Fisheries, and the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA), the government financed a cash-transfer program for 2.7 million farmers and 1.1 million fishers. The registration system for social protection may have overlapped in many places, as the

2 See the full flagship program at [www.prakerja.go.id/](http://www.prakerja.go.id/).

hypothetically poor communities entitled to cash transfers were also registered as farmers and fishers.<sup>3</sup>

At the local level, there is a clear pattern of local media interest in Nusa Tenggara Timur and Central Sulawesi in exposing some of the stories in which local governments, along with police forces and local military leaders, send messages of hope in regard to food production at the district level.

COVID-19 exacerbated the suffering of the disaster survivors in Central Sulawesi, including those in rural areas dependent on agriculture. The earthquakes in 2018 claimed lives and caused widespread damage to agricultural infrastructure, such as irrigation channels. For example, in Sigli, a group of farmers in the Gumbasa irrigation area needed to shift to off-farm activities as they waited for their irrigation system to be reconstructed. During COVID-19, most of these farmers-turned-construction workers had to stay home and lost their income-generation activities.

### 3.5.2 Mainstream Government Cash Transfers

COVID-19 has presented a unique opportunity for Indonesia to experiment with one of the most extensive cash-transfer programs (CTP) in its modern history. This is built on the lessons of several post-disaster and emergency cash-transfer programs by both governmental agencies and NGOs. The CTP activities are regulated by the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) Regulation 5/2015 (KEMENSOS 2015). Traditionally, this regulation's intended targets are the MoSA and the local government Department of Social Affairs (DoSA) at both district and provincial levels. In a development context, MoSA has, over the last decade, been implementing several CTP-related programs that seek to alleviate poverty and ensure social development and protection in Indonesia.

The respondents did not indicate systematic exclusion from the social protection services in either province. However, in Central Sulawesi, there have been recent cases where vaccination has been used as a condition to accessing the unconditional cash transfer (UCT).

In Boya, we have IDR 800 million available for cash assistance. However, there was a case of a vicious circle, because to get the cash, one must have proof of vaccination; To get vaccinated, you need to have an ID card. While for you to get your ID issued, you must show proof of vaccination. As an RT (neighborhood chief), I am also confused, and so is my community.

(R48)

3 For example, a farmer returned the farmer cash assistance, as he had also received cash transfer for the poor. See: <https://regional.kompas.com/read/2020/05/29/10315941/cerita-petani-yang-kembalikan-blt-karena-sudah-terima-bantuan-lain>.

MoSA has recently been the leading agency for disaster-response-related cash transfers in Indonesia. It leads and coordinates local, national, and international humanitarian cash transfers through multiple platforms, including government cash-transfer systems and humanitarian cluster systems. With or without the support of other ministries, MoSA, in coordination with the DoSAs, often coordinates and/or facilitates the local-level arrangement of post-disaster-related cash transfers.

The key objectives of disaster-related CTP under MoSA are, first, to ensure that survivors' basic needs are met; second, to ensure well-targeted and efficient stimulus assistance for recovery and social protection; and third, to ensure effective survivors' rehabilitation, recovery, and relocation (KEMENSOS 2015). MoSA's CTP can be used as payment for building materials, living allowances, transitional housing, and death benefit for heirs. It can also be used to empower the economy of survivors, provide economic support for former combatants (in the context of post-conflict response), and support villages that have been displaced and where uprooted people are concentrated (KEMENSOS 2015).

### 3.5.2.1 PKH Programs

R12 has been on the PKH list since 2017. 'We used the money for school-related expenses such as uniforms. Sometimes we buy food for them if they ask for it. I sometimes received IDR 1.2 to 1.4 million'.

R17 from Raknamo village said: 'Before COVID-19, I received IDR 800,000; and during COVID-19, I received the same, IDR 800,000. The money is used to buy internet credit as my kids attend online school during the lockdowns'. While the cash is supposed to be used for children's education, R40 argued that households must also 'refocus' their plans away from education to survival, meaning that food is a higher priority than education, as her work has been affected by COVID-19.

When R25 was asked about the impact of COVID-19 on her food consumption, she said:

We don't feel it that much because we have received PKH from Dinsos [Department of Social Affairs, or DoSA]. The PKH helps us buy rice (18 kg package), oil, and instant noodles. For sure, it is hard to get money. We have gotten the PKH since 2017. And it helps during COVID-19.

In general, the voucher is for 10 kg of rice plus eggs and other commodities.

The respondents sometimes mixed up their views of cash transfers and other social protection program with PKH only. For example, the PKH beneficiaries, R37 and R44, often received PKH with a food voucher. R44 was once on the PKH beneficiary list and is no longer on the list despite having two children still in school. However, she is still on the list for a food voucher.

### 3.5.2.2 Food Vouchers (BNPT)

PKH is combined unconditionally with a conditional cash-transfer program, namely BNPT, to help low-income families whose children are in Years 1–12. BNPT is literally translated as ‘non-cash food assistance’ and is basically a food voucher that uses a market mechanism. It is a digital card (some communities call it a ‘rice card’) containing IDR 200,000, but it can only be used to procure rice and eggs at designated traders who can cash out at designated banks. Each household beneficiary is paid IDR 600,000 every three months. The total number of beneficiaries at the national level is 18.8 million families.

R28 is a beneficiary of BNPT and believes that BNPT is issued to mitigate the impact of COVID-19-related lockdowns. In theory, PKH beneficiaries will most likely also receive BNPT assistance (R60).

### 3.5.2.3 Social Cash Assistance (BST)

BST is an unconditional cash transfer, a long-term social protection program. Every beneficiary is registered in the national database, namely [cekbansos.kemensos.go.id](http://cekbansos.kemensos.go.id). The list of beneficiaries is updated regularly. Not all members understood the difference between BST and other forms of cash transfer programs. What they understood is the guideline that no one should belong to more than one of the social protection schemes.

According to an RT (head of a neighborhood), not all of the most vulnerable can be covered by a BLT from village funds. In a way, it sounded like a lottery. Since there is a variety of schemes run by central governments, they have to decide which cohort will get BLT, while others receive BST (cash-based social assistance) from ‘Pusat’ (the central government). In Raknamo, 180 families received BST. There are 14 criteria for becoming a BST beneficiary. The beneficiaries must satisfy at least eight out of the 14 criteria. R60:

Yesterday, there was a meeting. We were invited by the RTs to discuss how to target the most vulnerable. Some have been affected by the earthquakes and now COVID-19. BST aims to cover the gap. IDR 300,000 is not enough, but it might help them out.

### 3.5.3 Re-orienting Village Funds for Cash Transfers

The government allocated a total of IDR 23.74 trillion (USD 5.1 billion), and subsequently 28.8 and 27.2 trillion, in the years 2020, 2021, and 2022, respectively, for the Ministry of Villages, Disadvantaged Regions Development, and Transmigration (MoVDRT) and village governments to target the poorest of the poor affected by COVID-19 that were not covered by existing MoSA social protection programs.

Each village establishes a committee responsible for selecting the most vulnerable households to be the recipients of the cash-transfer program through the Village Fund channel. During the first year of COVID-19, the agencies listed in Table 3.4 were not the only players that provided CTP to the affected communities. Several agencies adopted CTP to target vulnerable communities to cope with income losses and food insecurity. Fiscal readjustment was the key strategy at all levels of government in Indonesia. At district and village levels, the fiscal structure was readjusted to deal with COVID-19 (R26).

The allocation model in 2020 for Village Funds included the disbursement of IDR 600,000 per household per month for the first three months; and IDR 300,000 per household per month for the following months. By 2021, the allocation had shifted to IDR 300,000 per household per month for 12 months.

R26 confirmed that in all sub-districts in Belu (West Timor), the village governments have allocated ‘BLT dana desa—BLT DD’ (cash assistance from the Village Fund). The BLT DD results from annual budget refocusing, an imperative set by the MoVDRT. Each village will first establish the existing MoSA/DoSA’s social protection beneficiaries to exclude them from the list of BLT DD. The village government uses ‘Musyawarah Desa’—a community consensus meeting at which police and military often serve as the witnesses and endorsers. The list of beneficiaries proposed in community meetings is later endorsed by the head of districts and translated into the national database of beneficiaries.

Despite being almost indispensable and (therefore) undisputable to the beneficiaries and its proponents, some officials and NGO activists questioned unconditional cash transfers such as BLT DD. For example, R27 shares his views in a joke: ‘Our people are happy now as they receive their “salary” without working. Just sitting at home, they receive it every three months’.

R48 and R56 are aware of the Village Fund budget’s refocus toward allocating cash transfers (BLT). In Wani, Donggala, only ten people received BLT from the village fund, as others were already recipients of other MoSA/DoSA social protection programs such as PKH.

Due to the legitimacy of exclusion and inclusion consultation processes, most respondents trust their village governments. The BLT DD beneficiaries are not allowed to receive social assistance. R15, a neighborhood leader, said, ‘In this neighborhood, 12 people are PKH beneficiaries, one is BLT DD, and three receive other social assistance. This RW has four RTs, and the total number of BLT beneficiaries is only 12–15’.

BLT Village funds are distributed once every three months. Each family receives IDR 900,000 for three months (R08; R15). R27 received her cash from the nearest local bank. R28, R34, and R36 admitted that they also became BLT DD recipients soon after COVID-19. Throughout 2020 and 2021, they sometimes received their payments every three months, but more recently, they received them every two months. Interestingly, most respondents understood BLT as a safety net, a term popularized after the Indonesian crisis in 1999.

The 2021 Village Fund budget was IDR 72 trillion for 74,961 villages. The main focus of using the Village Funds in 2021 was to support Sustainable Development Goals activities in the village, the implementation of the Village Cash Work Unit (PKTD), and the adaptation of new habits after COVID-19. The Village Funds can also be allocated for cash for work. Unfortunately, our data found only one case of cash for work. R28 (Tulakadi, Belu, NTT) stated that they were required to clean up the roads and yards in their neighborhood in her village before receiving the money.

### **3.5.4 Coordination with the Police and Military**

Coordination is multi-level. At the village level, village governments can access information regarding who gets what and when. This allows the village officials to exclude the existing beneficiaries of social protection programs from the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA). At the central government level, there are efforts to integrate the two largest social protection systems: the first from MoSA, the database CEKBANSOS—a database accessible to the public.<sup>4</sup> While the new database is organized and managed by the Ministry of Finance (MoF) and the Ministry of Village Development (MoVDT),<sup>5</sup> coordination at the village level is more complex. The inclusion of beneficiaries also demands the presence of police (Babinkamtibmas, police officers for security and public order), military officers (non-commissioned military officers at village-level Babinsa), and village facilitators at the registration and distribution stages (see Permendes 7/2021 on Village Fund Implementation Priority 2022).

Interestingly, for the village cash transfers, namely BLT DD, there is a village mechanism whereby decision-making is shared by community members and witnessed by grassroots-level state apparatuses, including police, military officers, and village facilitators (R22). Neighborhood leaders concur with the presence of police and military to ensure that local protests regarding cash transfers and food assistance do not lead to chaos (R15).

### **3.5.5 Social Capital**

Literature has often cited the anti-social behavior of cash-transfer programs. There is an assumption that cash transfer erodes social capital (Pavanello et al. 2016). Interestingly, the context of the former East Timorese during COVID-19 suggests that cash transfers can strengthen and maintain cultural bonding within such groups. Fortunately, social capital and social protection are not mutually exclusive. Their combination can help prevent hunger among the uprooted East Timorese households in West Timor.

4 See: <https://cekbansos.kemensos.go.id/>.

5 See: <https://cekbansos.kemensos.go.id/>.



Social institutions, including religious institutions that rely on the congregation's contributions, also exhausted their cash flows due to the length of the COVID-19 crisis. This caused their operational funding to dry up. Consequently, they could not provide adequate support for their vulnerable members. A pastor from a local church whose members are mainly the ex-Timorese refugees said that he must depend on commodity crops from the wealthier congregation members in the city, and he occasionally shares them with the most vulnerable families (R01).

During the early onset of COVID-19, the local church managed to link up with the more affluent traders from the Catholic Church network. The ex-refugee communities continued to look after each other, as they have been doing since they arrived in West Timor 20 years ago. While their social networks are more complex and layered due to their history with the military-sponsored militia, their livelihoods were already uncertain before COVID-19. Existing social protection combined with COVID-19-related social protection was the key to famine prevention (R01).

R27 viewed cash not as empowering the communities, instead as spoiling them and making them less productive. The respondent argued that cash for work makes more sense than unconditional cash transfers (UCTs). R39 perceived that UCTs would create an easy spending mentality and less investment in productive activities such as farm-based ones. R30 accepted that COVID-19 directly led to a nutritional crisis, including child malnutrition, at the household level but argued that the cash assistant beneficiaries did not necessarily buy the most needed nutrition.

### 3.6 Final Remarks

The cash transfers were only a tiny fraction of the communities' incomes in displacement contexts. They remained living in the transitional shelters in Central Sulawesi and West Timor. Despite only being equivalent to 10–30% of local minimum wages in both provinces, the cash programs served as a tool for vulnerable households to jump-start their communities' food and livelihood security during the COVID-19 crisis, especially during the lockdowns. This suggests that, generally, communities can utilize cash programs to help them complement their foods and livelihoods. However, this study did not examine the self-mobilization or community-based arrangements among the local communities to secure their food needs.

This research examines the COVID-19-related cash transfer in the context of the overlapping crises of COVID-19 and disasters (earthquakes and cyclones). Displaced farmers in Central Sulawesi who had access to land could produce their own foods while benefiting from the social protection program. Likewise, the uprooted communities in West Timor were able to rely on cash transfers as well as their leftover crops after Cyclone Seroja while dealing with the ASF outbreaks.

Although Indonesian social protection policy is becoming more mature, disaster- and crisis-related social protection remain nascent policy options. Since 2018,

governments and NGOs have implemented various cash-transfer programs that have emerged as solid methods of social protection to ensure access to food and broader human security in disaster response and pandemics. A solid social protection policy demands legitimate village governments as they play significant roles in excluding and including vulnerable groups in various social protection programs.

In principle, a basic feature of the Indonesian social protection policy is equality, not equity. The multi-level and multi-sector cash-transfer design is based on the weak assumption of targeting, whereby everyone categorized as vulnerable can be included as a beneficiary, and such vulnerability is treated as homogeneous. It is based on the premature concept of overlapping beneficiary targets. Nevertheless, most respondents were concerned not with overlapping policy but rather with how communities come to believe that no family should be a recipient of any two social protection policies, even in a crisis. Interestingly, this becomes an operational framework for local governments to launch an argument to support their selection of new families considered vulnerable and needing support. Such an approach could not be seen as empowering.

Local governments are more concerned with security (local protest) or conflict issues than actual empowerment. Therefore, the mechanics of cash transfer by the local-level government have been more about the smooth registration and inclusion of new beneficiaries. Therefore, it is no surprise to see the presence of police and military officers at distribution time. Observation from the field suggests that neighborhood leaders use such policy to defend formal social protection policy.

Village funds seem to serve as ‘superfunds’, as they can be adapted to tackle urgent problems at the grassroots level, such as disasters and epidemics. The decision on the allocation is made by involving wider stakeholders, from communities to state representatives. The village funds were also used to subsidize the poorest in Raknamo village (defined by those on the 450 kw Power Scheme).

Whether or not the cash-transfer program from NGOs is successful, these approaches are not straightforward. The empowerment approach to cash-transfer programs is more of an associated program of NGOs than the government. The findings suggest that the empowerment dimension of the government’s cash-transfer programs is partly achieved by default due to the embedded advantage for beneficiaries who exercise their agency but remain hidden. NGOs are more expressive in their empowerment-oriented cash programs. Cash transfers in the hands of humanitarian NGOs can mean benefits beyond financial transactions. Cash transfers provide an incentive for NGOs to deliver their empowerment agenda by opening up participation by the most vulnerable, creating spaces to shape and meet basic needs after disasters while facilitating capacity development on many fronts, such as empowering mothers feeding children under five with nutritional knowledge of how to prevent malnutrition, as well as business development skills for becoming small kiosk owners in camps.

Nevertheless, empowerment is layered at various levels. By itself, the cash program has been inherently pro-empowerment. However, it can be cultivated to expand the empowerment agenda at various levels. In West Timor, the government's stunting eradication program has been compromised by COVID-19. Therefore, undernutrition among children under five is likely to persist. Cash transfers can facilitate greater freedom, as the beneficiaries can use cash to obtain more choices or options. NGOs' protection and empowerment agenda has demanded some interventions regarding education and training of the most vulnerable communities relating to the use cash for improved nutrition in Central Sulawesi. Cash transfers as a protection measure can be engineered to create opportunity or 'an entry point' to ignite conversation around the more profound need for empowerment.

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