

Conference

Government Transparency During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Good Information Governance?

Lina Miftahul Jannah^{1*} and Muhammad Yasin Sipahutar²

¹Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Administrative Sciences, Universitas Indonesia

²State Administrative Law, Faculty of Law, Universitas Indonesia.

ORCID

Lina Miftahul Jannah: 0000-0002-0827-0369

Abstract. The Government is required to provide open access information to the public in cases such as when the COVID-19 pandemic occurred in Indonesia and affected many aspects of life. Transparency in the provision of public information is an important part of good governance. The Government must build trust by being open and transparent about the information. Transparency is key to the success of the response to the pandemic. This study aimed to explain the need for transparency, especially in public information disclosure, during the handling of the pandemic and after; the strategies that need to be carried out to realize good information governance; and the challenges faced. Qualitative methods were used with secondary data. We argue that adjusting the disclosure of information according to the elements of good governance must be followed by a policy of providing information that is integrated, systematic, accurate, and clear.

Keywords: good information governance, government transparency, information, public policy

Corresponding Author: Lina Miftahul Jannah; email: miftahul@ui.ac.id

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1. Introduction

Government transparency has now become an unavoidable necessity. Government agencies are required to disclose as much information as possible because disclosure of information can encourage public participation in decision making, encourage community compliance in carrying out their obligations, and increase public trust in the government. Transparency opens up opportunities for the emergence of alternative ideas and solutions to the problems faced, including when the government faces the massive impact of the spread of Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). In COVID-19 pandemic is no reason for restrictions on freedom of information. (1)

The process of formulating and making public policies, in a pandemic situation, cannot be equated with normal conditions. A fast and precise decision process is needed to overcome the various problems caused by the spread of COVID-19 because, in fact, it has impact of COVID-19 on lives and livelihoods. For example poverty and employment. Data from the Central Statistics Agency shows that when compared to the number of

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poor people in September 2020, the number of poor people in March 2021 did fall by 0.01 million people. However, when compared to March 2020 (the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia), the poor in March 2021 was 10.14 percent, which means an increase of 0.36 points from March 2020 (9.78%). The pandemic has also affected the business sector. 6.78% of companies had to stop operating and 18.7% of companies decided to temporarily stop their operations. The total workforce increased by 1.74%, increasing the unemployment rate by 37.6% from 7.1 million in August 2019 to 9.77 million in August 2020. Of that number, 2.56 million workers were unemployed due to COVID-19. Not to mention that the impact of the pandemic has also been felt in other fields such as education and religion.

In government management, there is a paradigm shift, then incorporated into new policies according to health protocols. One of the most significant policies is the government's decision to allocate hundreds of trillions of state budget for the prevention of COVID-19. It is a directive from WHO so that every country must develop specific processes for allocating budget funds to the response. (2) The stimulus carried out by the Indonesian government in 2020 is in the form of the National Economic Recovery (NER) program with a budget of Rp. 695.2 trillion to maintain the level of public consumption during the pandemic. The government has increased the budget for handling COVID-19 and NER to Rp744.75 trillion from the initial set at Rp699.43 trillion. The government emphasizes the importance of reallocating and refocusing the budget to overcome the impact of the pandemic. Budget refocusing from Transfers to Regions and Village Funds in the Fiscal Year 2021 is one of the efforts that has been realized concretely using an optimized Profit-Sharing Fund to support health care, social safety nets, and economic recovery as well as the use of a minimum of 8% of the General Allocation Fund. for COVID-19 vaccination and incentives for regional health workers. This budget is used to finance various expenditures at Ministries/Institutions related to the handling of COVID 19, both for vaccination, testing, tracing, as well as for patient care costs, as well as health workers. Health care remains a priority for the government in suppressing the rate of increase in COVID-19 cases.

The large budget allocation for handling COVID-19, on a hand, shows the government's commitment to protecting the community, but on the other hand it could create moral hazard in the government. The act of corruption involving the Minister of Social Affairs, Juliari Batubara, is a clear example of how the COVID-19 handling policy is being undermined from within the government itself. The emergency has been used as a shield to close the process and access for the community. It is not surprising that law enforcement agencies such as the Corruption Eradication Commission are also

paying attention to prevent corruption in the budget for handling the pandemic by issuing Circular Letter Number 8 of 2020 concerning the Use of the Budget for the Implementation of the Procurement of Goods/Services in the Context of Accelerating the Handling of COVID-19 Related to the Prevention of Corruption. This attention shows a great desire for good governance to be carried out both during and after the pandemic.

The concept of good governance has long been a concern of state administration academics and practitioners in government. The National Institute of Public Administration Indonesia views good governance as the process of exercising state power in implementing the provision of public goods and services. (3) In terms of function, governance can be seen from the situation of whether the government has functioned effectively to achieve the goals that have been outlined or vice versa. The United Nations Development Program (2007) mentions the elements of good governance including participation, rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, consensus orientation, equity, effectiveness and efficiency, accountability, and strategic vision. (4)

Schiavo-Campo (2019) believes that good governance must be supported by four pillars to ensure that it can be implemented. The four pillars are accountability, transparency, rule of law, and participation. The accountability means that government officials must have the capacity to formulate, implement, and take responsibility for government actions in every situation. The transparency implies that the government must be run transparently, in the sense of opening wide access to citizens in accordance with the principle of maximum access limited exemption. The rule of law pillar means that good governance must be supported by clear and effective regulations when implemented, included the protection given to government administrators so that they do not feel afraid to make decisions. The participation means that good governance requires public involvement. It is important to note that each of these pillars is interconnected and becomes a support for the other pillars so that the building of good governance remains strong. Schiavo-Campo states, accountability demands transparency – you cannot hold people accountable if you don't know what they are doing; the rule of law demands participation – capricious rules are not voluntarily obeyed and enforcement is difficult. (5)

This study aims to elaborate three questions: (i) is transparency as part of good governance still needed in handling the pandemic; (ii) what policies were adopted during the pandemic that supported government transparency; and (iii) how to build a 'road' towards good information governance that is needed both during and after the pandemic.

2. Methods

Qualitative approaches to mixed methods (6) are used in this study, namely in-depth interviews and electronic data tracking. The data collected from official websites of the Indonesian Government, e.g. www.covid19.go.id, www.bps.go.id, and from mass media, social media, and any documents. To analyse field findings, this study uses the process of tracing method, “a research method for tracing causal mechanisms using detailed, within- case empirical analysis of how a causal process plays out in an actual case. Process tracing can be used both for case studies that aim to gain a greater understanding of the causal dynamics that produced the outcome of a particular historical case and to shed light on generalizable causal mechanisms linking causes and outcomes within a population of causally similar cases. Process tracing can be used both for case studies that aim to gain a greater understanding of the causal dynamics that produced the outcome of a particular historical case and to shed light on generalizable causal mechanisms linking causes and outcomes within a population of causally similar cases. (7)

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Transparency and Good Governance

Academically, there are many opinions and views on transparency and good governance, but in essence they agree that transparency is a key element of good governance. There will be no achievement of good governance without transparency. In other words, transparency plays a very important role in the administration of government, not least in a pandemic situation.

Sketchily, the view of Fenster (2006) about government transparency, can be used here. First, if a government is more open, it will become more democratic. This assumption relates to the opportunity for citizens to participate and be involved in formulating policies and implementing government programs. We can imagine the risks that might arise if in a pandemic situation, citizens are reluctant to participate. Second, a more transparent government will work in a more effective and efficient manner, and as a consequence the government can provide better services to citizens. (8) This assumption can be seen in several regions in Indonesia that have provided the best public services.

Transparency does not mean that all government affairs must be disclosed. Thompson (1999) makes this point: in even the most open national government in the world, there must be something to keep secret. Transparency provides enormous benefits in governance. (9) There are many positive consequences that arise from government transparency. How much money have been saved by the people if in public services they already know in advance the amount of fees that must be paid? On the other hand, how much money is 'under the table' if public service mechanisms are not disclosed publicly by government agencies? Remember that the complexity of our land issues, as an example, cannot be separated from the policy of closure.

However, as Thompson said, in some cases the policy-making process must be temporarily closed, because if it is disclosed prematurely, it makes the policy and process ineffective at all. Law Number 30 of 2014 concerning Government Administration seeks to maintain a balance of interests. Article 51 paragraph (1) gives obligations to government agencies and/or officials to open access to government documents, as well as the right to access for citizens to obtain information. However, paragraph (2) and paragraph (3) of the same article provide clear guidelines. The first guideline is secrecy. If an information is expressly declared confidential, then citizens' access rights are restricted. The second guideline is should not misuse the information obtained. It is basically related to good information governance which will be discussed later.

The OECD has invited governments in countries affected by COVID-19 to work together and continue to build communication to foster public trust. (10) Regarding the implementation of good governance during the pandemic, the OECD has the view: "In times of crisis such as the current COVID-19 and its economic and social repercussion, public governance matters more than ever. Governance arrangements have played a critical role in countries' immediate responses and will continue to be crucial both to the recovery and to building a 'new normal' once the crisis has passed". Good governance is more important than ever and will remain important once the pandemic is over.

This article proposes three arguments to show the importance of government transparency during the pandemic. *First*, it relates to the Latin adage "*salus populi suprema lex*", as frequently stated by President Joko Widodo and several government officials. Its adage implies that the orientation of government policy in handling COVID-19 is the safety of the people and all citizens. For the sake of mutual safety, transparency in the administration of government is needed. *Second*, transparency is needed so that the government itself can manage effective structures for the public, private and community sectors. COVID-19 does not discriminate between people based on their background and activities; the evidence is that hundreds of medical personnel have also become

victims. Transparency between the central government and local governments is as important as government transparency to citizens. *Third*, government transparency can encourage the achievement of economic, social, and other field goals in accordance with the developing situation.

3.2. Information Access Policy during the Pandemic

A month and a half since the announcement of the first case of COVID-19 in Indonesia, President Joko Widodo has dismissed the government's closure in handling COVID-19. "No one thinks we're covering up anymore. Nothing from the start did we cover up existing problems," said President Joko Widodo. This President's statement responds to the differences in the data of residents exposed to COVID between central and local government. (11)

The most important element of the principle of transparency is the availability of information. Florini (2002) says that transparency is "the degree to which information is available to outsiders that enables them to have informed voice in decisions and/or to assess the decisions made by insiders". Florini links information with public needs (outsiders) so that they are heard in public policy making by government administrators (insiders). (12)

The basic question is whether access to information is really needed by the public when they are bound by restrictions in the form of physical distancing and social distancing. From the point of view of those who have been advocating for information disclosure issues, the answer is definitely 'yes'. Executive Director of Article 19, a London-based organization, David Banizar, stated emphatically that "during the coronavirus pandemic, access to information is more important than ever". Why? Banizar's answer is simple, because the public needs to know what the government is doing to solve the crisis. (13)

Public understanding of what the government is doing is very important for several reasons. They can avoid centre of the spread of the virus, so that directly or indirectly can reduce the potential for spread. If economically affected by the pandemic, they can find out about social assistance services and other policies if adequate information is available from the government. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the government has provided a special spokesperson, and then formed a task force which basically conveys information on the development of handling COVID-19 to the public. Communication is done every day. Apart from the pros and cons regarding the update and

validity of the information submitted, the presence of spokespersons and task forces shows that access to information is important in handling COVID-19.

Unfortunately, the information disclosure policy focuses more on the number of citizens affected by the virus, the number of those who have recovered, and the services of health facilities. Public is presented with 'scary' information every day, without being followed by disclosure of information about how the public can safely reach services from government agencies. It shows the other side of the government bureaucracy, which tends not to be fully prepared in the event of an emergency. The sluggishness of response and policy formulation is detrimental to citizens because at the same time there are restrictions on movement through various policies. The unavailability of information contributes to administrative violations of large-scale restrictions and restrictions on community activities. Lessons learned from the first six months of the pandemic show that trust in public officials is crucial for effective government-led responses that minimise the impact of COVID-19 on lives and livelihoods. This trust will be lost if governments do not openly share information with citizens, thereby undermining compliance with public health directives and other measures to stop the spread of the disease. (1)

It is important that social distancing policies cannot stop a person's adult status from requiring an identity card as a citizen; there are documents that have passed the expiration date such as a driver's license; there are students who need library services; the perpetrators of crimes must be tried in courts that bring together many people; etc. It means that there are government services that naturally must continue to operate. Whether you want it or not, the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a change in the paradigm of public service. Government administrators are encouraged to provide information that can be accessed remotely. The delay in responding to emergency conditions in the context of public services has the potential to create new problems. (14)

A month after the government announced the findings of the COVID-19 virus in Indonesia, the Central Information Commission (CIC) reminded government agencies of the importance of changing the information service paradigm. In essence, the CIC Circular Number 02 of 2020 asks government agencies to do things, including formulating policies, that are relevant to access to information during the COVID-19 pandemic. It can be a way to create good information governance.

No one can predict when the COVID-19 pandemic will end, and no one can accurately predict when the same emergency will arise again. What is certain is that there have

TABLE 1: Information Access Policy in a COVID-19 Pandemic Situation according to the recommendation of the Central Information Commission

Access to Information Related to Health Emergency Management	Access to Information Related to Public Services
<p>a. Strive for a data or information system related to COVID-19 to the public in real time. b. Have procedures for collecting data or information as a guideline with agencies for synchronization before being submitted to the public. c. Submit the status of the time for data or information that is disclosed to the public to prevent misunderstanding of the data or information. d. Ensure that data or information on the distribution and handling of COVID-19 can be accepted by the community in potentially affected areas. e. Ensure that the application or electronic system for prevention (surveillance) prepared by the government opens space for public participation to prevent neglect of the community's right to health.</p>	<p>a. Maximizing online-based information services. b. If it cannot be done online, the Public Agency is obliged to implement and prioritize a policy of limiting safe distances, using personal protective equipment, and health protocols in accordance with the instructions of the government and other authorized institutions. c. Prioritizing the delivery of information regularly and immediately online, especially related to public services during the health emergency due to COVID-19. d. Prioritizing the delivery of information on a regular basis and based on online or other media, particularly related to policy and budget plans, plans for policy and budget changes, and mechanisms for public participation in Public Agencies during the pandemic by considering social restrictions and safe distance</p>

Source: the CIC Circular Number 02 of 2020

been major changes in government services. Information and communication technology has become a basic need, and at the same time there will be a reduction in the need for human labour. It is in this context that administrative science has 'looked at' the issue of artificial intelligence in the administration of government.

However, we think the need to put forward another side of the policies taken by the government in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Unclear information in the use of budgets, philanthropy or third-party donations, distribution of social assistance, and procurement of government goods/services, especially in the health sector, can not only undermine trust in the government, but also raise public suspicion of corruption. This suspicion is not without basis, and there are examples of cases of corruption in social assistance to the poor. In this context, the government needs to pay attention so that public suspicion does not increase by disclosing information as widely as possible. One of the interesting developments in the CIC regulation Number 1 on the 2021 of Public Information Service Standards is that government goods/services procurement contracts are not exempt information.

3.3. Towards Good Information Governance

This section seeks to build an ideal 'road' to achieve or realize good information governance. The meaning of good information governance cannot be separated from the concept of good governance. Therefore, the idea of good governance rests on the elements of good governance that have been stated previously. In several previous studies, information governance is more related to the private sector, how to provide public services through e-government, or focus on the use of information technology. (15) (16) (17) (18) (19)

The main idea of good information governance is that currently government agencies are required to be open. Dunne-Howrie (2019) states effective management and organisation of information contributes to good information governance by making the information easier to access and, simultaneously, information governance requirements provide a good incentive for organisations to manage their information well. If information and data is well managed and organised, it is easier to retrieve for information governance and compliance purposes. (20)

In Indonesia, for the last ten years, the government has built an information disclosure infrastructure: starting from providing funds, establishing an organizational structure for services, establishing information commissions in all provinces, to developing the legal framework. Over the past ten years, many efforts have been made, as mandated by Law Number 14 of 2008 concerning Public Information Disclosure (PID Law) and other relevant regulations. Moreover, it should be noted that Indonesia is one of the initiators of the Open Government Partnership.

Government agencies are charged with the obligation to publish information that must be announced and must provide certain information if at any time requested by the public. Even information regarding an emergency or disaster must be announced by the competent authorities immediately. In other words, the availability of government information is a necessity and an obligation, including when facing a pandemic.

The path must be built by a mix of elements of good governance. Take the example of good governance proposed by UNDP. The participatory element means that the public must be given access to information and with that information provide useful feedback for policy making. The rule of law element has the consequence that access to information is protected by law, both for the protection of government officials and the citizens who access it. The element of responsiveness is still an obstacle until now due to the slow response of government agencies to requests for information and the task of digitizing government documents. The consensus orientation element is very

relevant in a pandemic situation because the information disclosed is useful for the common interest, the safety of all citizens.

The element of equity implies that access to information is given to any citizen who has the right regardless of background. The government has an obligation to provide access to information for persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. Access to information during a pandemic must be directed at providing effective and efficient information, by utilizing facilities or channels that comply with health protocols. Another element, accountability, has the consequence that every policy taken must be accountable through strong arguments. Closing information is not wrong if it is clearly excluded, or based on a public interest test, it must be kept secret. The key is that the decision to open or close information during a pandemic is based on justifiable reasons. Finally, decision makers must have a strategic vision to realize good information governance.

However, looking at the elements of good governance alone is not enough to create a smoother path for good information governance. PID Law provides precise guidance that is contextual currently. Article 7 paragraph (2) states: Public Agency is obliged to provide public information that is accurate, true, and not misleading. 'Providing accurate, true and non-misleading public information' is a big challenge today amid the spread of hoaxes and fake news. Indonesia is one of the countries with the largest social media users in the world. In line with these conditions, the potential for spreading misleading information is very large. The government faces challenges in the form of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. Misinformation occurs when false information is shared, but no harm is meant, disinformation occurs when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm, and malinformation occurs when genuine information is shared to cause harm, of the by moving what was designed to stay private into the public sphere. Kruglinski (2021) states the consequences of viral misinformation are not limited to the digital sphere. When users encounter online hoaxes that they believe are true, they often share them with others in person, spreading fear, anxiety and false cures beyond social media. (21) In relation to a pandemic, it is often referred to as an infodemic. This infodemic leads to excess information about a problem, so that its emergence can interfere with efforts to find solutions to the problem. (22)

The government must also continue to fight to conqueror disinformation that can lead to chaos in society. The challenges do not only come from social media users, but also from the government itself. Conflicts of interest, application breaches, unavailability of data and information protection policies, and the use of information as the basis for evidence-based policies are some things that need to be taken seriously. We certainly

still remember the viral issue about the donation of entrepreneurs in Palembang for the handling of Covid-19 of 2 trillion rupiah. There are many other similar cases. The Ministry of Communications and Information Technology stated that at the end of July 2021, the Covid-19 hoax issue on social media reached 1,819 issues with the distribution on social media reaching 4,163 uploads. (23)

Need to be sure, the government do not allow to put forward sectoral egos to make a one-data program only a promising program in a policy letter. The existing data in every ministry or public institution should be integrated, systematic, accurate, and based on needed. However, the next question is when is this one data really managed properly and can be used as a basis for policy making? and which government agency will manage it?

4. Conclusion

The idea of good information governance refers to the elements of good governance. Basically, every government agency must be transparent and open wider access to the public in accordance with the principle of maximum access limited exemption, and this principle is also in line with the Government Administration Act. Realizing the idea of good information governance is not enough just to implement the elements of good governance, but also to provide information that is accurate, true, and not misleading. In the current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, accurate, true, and not misleading information is very important to build collaboration between stakeholders.

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