

Closing the COVID Accountability Gap:

Indonesia's Use of Information Technology

By Lukman Hakim



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In 2021, the International Budget Partnership published an assessment of 120 countries' management of COVID relief, which found that too many governments were using the excuse of urgency to avoid being as transparent, accountable or inclusive as they could be. These shortcuts and limitations, however, are neither necessary nor inevitable. IBP's report showcased notable instances in which governments acted swiftly to put in place adequate transparency around their policy responses, where accountability institutions — such as legislatures and supreme audit institutions (SAIs) — stepped up to provide effective oversight, and civil society organizations contributed information on the needs of the most vulnerable. In a series of briefs, we have taken a more in-depth look at these good practices — delving into government objectives in implementing the practices, the impacts achieved, and lessons that can be drawn from these practices for their replication in other countries. The main goal of these briefs is to provide governments with information on good practices in fiscal openness and accountability that they can incorporate into their own policies, to be implemented during periods of crisis and beyond.

To mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic, the Indonesian government proactively relaxed the budgeting process and doubled the fiscal deficit to more than 6% of GDP, among other budget-related policies. The government's action to address COVID-19 centers on the National Economic Recovery (PEN) program, and the progress of its implementation and spending is announced on a weekly basis.

Severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread lockdown, Indonesia used information technology to describe measures it was taking to tackle the crisis, provide periodic updates and deliver emergency services to the public. Frequent sharing of information related to the government's emergency services suggests the intention to maintain transparency and information flow to citizens during a crisis. This is in contrast with the approach that governments can sometimes take to limit information that is shared with the public with the goal of not causing panic. This brief describes the transparency measures adopted by the Indonesian government regarding its public financial policies during the emergency and focuses on the three web portals used to communicate its policies. The communication measures taken by the government have helped offset the intense criticism it faced for its handling of the pandemic.

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¹Enacted through Law No. 2 of 2020.

²*Indonesia Economic Prospects (IEP), June 2021: Boosting the recovery.*

³The PEN program is an acronym for “Pemulihan Ekonomi Nasional” which directly translates to National Economic Recovery. It is based on Government Regulation No. 23 of 2020 and No. 43 of 2020.

⁴<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2021/07/19/trust-in-president-jokowis-handling-of-pandemic-falls-lsi-survey.html>

Summary of information dissemination

Throughout 2020 and 2021, the government's data and information on policies and on progress related to COVID-19 were made available through the creation of several web portals and an increased media and public presence. These efforts were in line with the president's instruction to provide effective, detailed and transparent information for the public,⁵ specifically regarding financial information on PEN programs; announcements were made weekly, usually accompanied by infographics for easy reading, and were promoted heavily on the government's many social media channels.

The *go-to portal* for public-facing COVID-19 information is managed by the Committee on Covid-19 Handling and National Economic Recovery (KPCPEN). For fiscal policies, the Ministry of Finance managed two additional portals: the Covid-19 portal, established in 2020,⁶ and the PEN portal,⁷ established in mid-2021. All three portals include numerous infographics and news.

In addition to the three main portals, other ministries and local governments have also established numerous portals and applications for a variety of purposes, such as sharing information on the situation in a particular area or providing public services in place of in-person administration⁸. Despite the pandemic being one of the most catastrophic events in Indonesian history, it also brought hope for the future as it accelerated the promotion of information technology for governance, information dissemination and public service⁹.

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⁵<https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/04/27/21355201/presiden-instruksikan-pusat-dan-daerah-transparan-soal-data-covid-19>
⁶<https://www.kemenkeu.go.id/covid19>
⁷<https://pen.kemenkeu.go.id>
⁸<https://blogs.adb.org/blog/how-indonesia-s-local-governments-are-getting-vital-covid-19-data-people-who-need-it>
⁹<https://blogs.adb.org/blog/your-service-indonesia-s-government-agencies-look-digital-innovations-amid-covid-19>

Timeline of information dissemination

Prior to the first two budget stimulus packages in Q2 2020, there had been no specific government-operated portals to comprehensively explain government fiscal policy. After the budget stimulus was announced in April 2020, the Ministry of Finance established a COVID-19 portal explaining policies regarding specific groups, but the information was limited and the Ministry of Finance did little to promote it other than making it the subject of the largest banner on the ministry's site, the first thing users see when accessing the site.

Throughout the first half of 2020, the public's primary information came from the media, rather than government's official sites or portals. However, the government was proactive in announcing fiscal and financial policies through press releases and by offering media interviews (which were available on the Ministry of Finance website). Official press releases from the ministry, especially those related to fiscal policies, were complemented with infographics. All infographics on COVID-19 and fiscal policies were developed in Indonesia's official language, Bahasa Indonesia, which most Indonesians understand along with their local language; some press releases were also available in English.

In the second half of 2020, the government improved the presentation of its fiscal policies and measures to combat the crisis. This was also when the government adopted the National Economic Recovery/PEN Program and enacted the second revision of the 2020 state budget. The health-related COVID-19 portal was upgraded to accommodate information on PEN. The Ministry of Finance also upgraded its COVID-19 portal by including more updated and comprehensive information. Aside from adding more recent data, documents and infographics, the portal also included a section on useful links to recent COVID-19 data, adjustments to government services and government pandemic guidelines. In July 2021, another portal was established, emphasizing PEN programs and their progress. By the time this brief was written, the three portals were being updated regularly and were filled with infographics.

Apart from the portals, representatives of the government, including the Ministry of Finance, have taken the step of appearing in public more than usual. Government social media accounts released more information, and the Minister of Finance attended numerous national and international events and publicly described the government's budget policies and progress throughout 2020 and 2021.

The primary COVID-19 portal

The COVID-19 portal organized by KPCPEN is the main website for the public regarding the government's pandemic efforts. It is also the source for information on health and social aids provided by the government. The website now has abundant useful information including news, mapping of COVID-19 spread, statistics on COVID-19, relevant regulation and guidelines, public education on surviving during the pandemic, FAQs and relevant links. The portal is mobile-friendly and includes many downloadable infographics. Useful applications available on the portal offer ways to search for vaccination locations, empty hospital beds, medicine stock status and more.

Many of those applications are not managed directly by KPCPEN but by other agencies. The KPCPEN team cooperates with nongovernmental entities when developing or populating the data in

its applications. For example, KPCEN worked with Halodoc, an e-commerce startup focused on health services, to introduce online health consultation (telemedicine); with Mafindo, a civil society group working to strengthen online literacy, and with UNICEF on Hoax Buster, a feature aimed at tackling misinformation during the pandemic; and with the volunteer organization Indorelawan to populate data on hospital bed availability. Hoax Buster allows the public to find out whether information related to the coronavirus, vaccinations and the government's handling of the pandemic are true or false. It was created to address the "infodemic" — a play on the words "information" and "pandemic" — because of the abundance of misinformation circulating on social media. Hoax Buster is now commonly cited in news outlets such as detik.com¹⁰, one of the largest online news portals in Indonesia.

¹⁰<https://hoaxorot.detik.com>

The Ministry of Finance portals

The Ministry of Finance managed two portals. The first, established in April 2020 and updated semi-regularly, consists of information on the policies that have been prepared for various sectors and impacted groups — central government, local governments, the health sector, business, the middle-class, poor people. It includes downloadable infographics, formal presentation materials and relevant regulations.

The second portal was established in July 2021 and is more focused on providing background on fiscal policies and PEN programs, as well as on progress achieved on program implementation¹¹. This portal also provides infographics and regulations related to COVID-19. This portal is an upgrade from the first portal and has a better layout and more comprehensive information, including weekly updates on PEN progress.

The second portal was established after civil society groups (including IBP's Indonesia office) recommended improvements based on a study that found that data and information on PEN programs were fragmented, typically delivered through infographics, presentation slides and press releases.¹² The PEN portal addressed this and includes information on future financial forecasts on the macroeconomic situation, the state budget and PEN programs.

¹¹Non-machine-readable pdf form.

¹²<https://internationalbudget.org/publications/budget-credibility-in-response-to-covid-19-in-indonesia/>

Lessons learned from the information portals

When the pandemic hit, the Indonesian government initially dismissed the severity of the virus. Further, the crisis came at a time when the president's reputation was declining due to the adoption of some unpopular policies.¹³ These unpopular policies and the lack of a strong initial pandemic response fueled the public's demand for more accurate, reliable and faster information from the government.

The government also bungled its response to demands for information when the crisis began. For example, in March 2020 the government was heavily criticized for disclosing private data (name, age, address) of the first two people confirmed to have COVID-19.¹⁴ The exposure of these individuals by the government led to death threats and slander against the individuals and their neighbors¹⁵; they were denied service at commercial establishments, and some were laid off from their jobs. This disclosure of personal information made the public reluctant to be transparent about their COVID-19 status. It prevented an accurate assessment of the impact of COVID-19 in the early days and hindered the efforts of medical staff to track its spread. Subsequently, the government was more careful and more aware of protecting human rights and private data, and of being culturally sensitive.

Because the demand for information came from various parts of society, the Ministry of Finance adjusted its presentations to accommodate the needs of different audiences. Budget information on sites maintained by the Ministry of Finance typically contain detailed financial tables and use technical financial jargon that is hard for lay audiences to understand. Responding to inputs from civil society, the ministry adjusted its presentation and provided infographics and social media content suitable for a broader audience. It also relayed information through radio and television and used multimedia formats in cooperation with civil society.

For the last two years, the government has taken advantage of Indonesia's increasing internet penetration and its status as a country with one of the greatest numbers of social media and mobile users in the world. In addition, an environment with active civil society and government collaboration, combined with cheap mobile internet packages, made the government's COVID-19 sensitization efforts more effective and efficient. Meanwhile, in remote places with scarce internet, efforts were made not only by government agencies such as the Indonesian National Board for Disaster Management but also by other actors, such as students, the army and state-owned enterprises operating in remote places.^{16/17/18}

¹³<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/06/08/covid-19-leads-to-dissatisfaction-toward-democracy-govt-but-not-jokowi-survey-finds.html>

¹⁴<https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/03/02/indonesias-first-covid-19-patient-danced-with-infected-japanese-woman-before-contracting-virus.html>

¹⁵<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/online-hate-indonesia-first-3-covid-19-patients-open-up-762586>

¹⁶<https://www.antaranews.com/berita/2211854/di-desa-terpencil-sosialisasi-vaksinasi-covid-19-digencarkan-pt-timah>

¹⁷<https://www.kompas.tv/article/151270/babinsa-sosialisasi-covid-19-di-desa-terpencil>

¹⁸<https://www.liputan6.com/regional/read/4670570/cara-unik-mahasiswa-unisa-palu-sosialisasikan-prokes-di-dusun-terpencil-saat-kkn>

Another factor in Indonesia's success in managing information during emergencies was the government's advantageous situation related to technology and digitization of its governance and services. The pandemic came right in the middle of President Joko Widodo's strong push to modernize the government with data-driven decision-making. The government of Indonesia had already developed a number of initiatives to address opportunities and problems with emerging technologies. These initiatives have led to the hiring of many information technology personnel and communication experts, with the aim of transforming IT and communication from a support function to a core function. The pandemic simply accelerated the adoption of technological solutions already initiated by the government. This, combined with the government's unwillingness to compromise progress on transparency during emergencies, helped to improve the communication situation during the pandemic.

To maintain such a complex and feature-heavy portal, the government dedicated a portion of the PEN program to its management. In 2020 the government provided Rp320 billion, and that figure grew to Rp500 billion in 2021. Many features of the portal were developed with support from NGOs such as the World Bank and UNICEF and other development agencies. The primary COVID-19 portal is a collaboration among civil society and non-state actors, which made its management both more efficient and more complex. The two Ministry of Finance portals, however, are managed solely by the Communication Bureau at the Ministry of Finance's Secretariat General office.

The Ministry of Finance has been prioritizing good transparency practices for some time, and its public relations are considered one of the best in Indonesia. The ministry has also steadily upgraded its financial and accounting system, making data generation instantaneous. This means producing reliable data on a weekly basis is no longer a difficult task. But technological advancement in financial management and accounting in individual line ministries is uneven. So although financial data can be gathered instantly by the Ministry of Finance from another ministry, the numbers do not necessarily reflect the real data in the field. For example, a local civil society group, Seknas FITRA, noted that the Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises found it difficult to fulfill the Ministry of Finance's request for data at the speed requested because its financial and accounting systems were not advanced — some of its local offices are still updating their data on paper.

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