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Non-Pharmaceutical Intervention Policies in Overcoming COVID-19 in Aceh: A Cross-Sectional Online Survey

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19, which transmitted rapidly from China, has crossed all the lands in the world, infecting people in every corner. This phenomenon has shocked the public on a large scale, ranging from the mass media; government; to individuals. This study seeks to assess the perceptions of the Acehnese regarding government policy in dealing with COVID-19 in the local realm, especially related to the implementation of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs). An online survey was conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire using a non-probability snowball sampling technique to answer the abovementioned problem. Finally, the questionnaire distributed online collected as many as 264 respondents. In general, the results of the study report that respondents have a high level of compliance with the policies taken by the government in fighting the Coronavirus. Most of them claim to be ready to help their neighbors who have problems with loss of livelihood during the implementation of NPIs that require people to work at home. Interestingly, even though the community has shown willingness to follow government guidelines on quarantine and social distance, most people reject the call to worship at home. Therefore, in formulating the best policy, a comprehensive socio-economic study and cooperation from community leaders, especially religious leaders, are needed to equalize the public's perception.

Keywords: Non-pharmaceutical intervention, public policy, Covid-19, Aceh

ABSTRAK

COVID-19 yang menular dengan cepat dari Cina telah melintasi seluruh daratan di dunia, menjangkiti manusia di setiap sudut. Fenomena ini telah menghebohkan publik secara besar-besaran, mulai dari media, pemerintah, hingga individu. Kajian ini berupaya mengkaji persepsi masyarakat Aceh mengenai kebijakan pemerintah dalam menangani COVID-19 di ranah lokal, khususnya terkait penerapan intervensi nonfarmasi (NPIs). Untuk menjawabnya, dilakukan survei online dengan menggunakan kuesioner semi terstruktur dengan teknik non-probability *snowball sampling*, dan akhirnya berhasil mengumpulkan sebanyak 264 tanggapan. Secara umum responden memiliki tingkat kepatuhan yang tinggi terhadap kebijakan yang diambil pemerintah dalam memerangi virus corona. Sebagian besar dari mereka mengaku siap membantu tetangganya yang bermasalah dengan hilangnya mata pencaharian selama penerapan NPIs. Menariknya, meski masyarakat telah menunjukkan kesediaan untuk mengikuti pedoman pemerintah tentang karantina dan menjaga jarak, kebanyakan orang menolak ajakan untuk beribadah di rumah masing-masing. Oleh karena itu, dalam merumuskan kebijakan yang terbaik, diperlukan kajian sosial ekonomi yang komprehensif dan kerjasama dari tokoh masyarakat, khususnya tokoh agama, untuk menyamakan persepsi masyarakat.

Kata Kunci: Non-pharmaceutical intervention, kebijakan publik, Covid-19, Aceh

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of 2020, the Coronavirus suddenly became a health terror for the world community; even the ferocity of this virus has claimed millions of human lives. Some experts claim that this new virus is still related to previously infecting viruses such as SARS in 2003 and MERS in 2012 (Giannis et al., 2020; Petrosillo et al., 2020; Prompetchara et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially named this new virus with the name Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) as well as stated that the crisis at hand is an international health emergency (Boelig et al., 2020; Filatov et al., 2020; Jiang et al., 2020). Furthermore, several conditions make the community of the world panic unlimitedly, such as there is no certainty about when the authorities can stop the spread of the virus (Graichen, 2020; Lombardi et al., 2020; McKee & Stuckler, 2020; Romagosa, 2020). In addition, there is no certainty regarding the discovery of an antidote vaccine (Brodin, 2020; Cunningham et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2020), even though the victims keep falling. Thus, all parties agreed that COVID-19 is a global pandemic because of its rapid transmission between regions and even countries. Also, it spreads so fast that it infects hundreds of thousands of people in parts of the world in weeks, then the figure swells to millions in a matter of months.

All countries took various policy steps to secure their territories from the threat of COVID-19. Chen & Qiu (2020) stated that many nations chose to implement non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) as an initial response to the spread of COVID-19. While those included in the NPIs have travel restrictions, wearing masks, physical distancing, closure of public places such as offices and schools, border closures, centralized quarantine, etc. These steps aim to reduce direct community interaction; thus, it is expected to mitigate virus transmission. On the other hand, the prolonged NPIs has a significant impact on the decline in the level of economic and social welfare of the people (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2021); the worse things have caused an increase in unemployment and bankruptcy rates of several companies (Steinmetz et al., 2020). Apart from the good and bad effects produced, the government must take prevention policies to break the chain of virus spread. The results in the field must also be used as an evaluation guide for better implementation.

Many countries have adopted non-pharmaceutical intervention policies to control the spread of COVID-19, even with varying degrees of success. Many European countries are implementing non-pharmaceutical interventions such as school closures and national lockdowns; the results show that the central non-pharmaceutical interventions of the two agendas have a significant effect on reducing the transmission of COVID-19 (Flaxman et al., 2020). Furthermore, Yang et al. (2021) tested several NPI policies implemented in the United States and obtained different results in each program regarding virus transmission. They found that school closures had the most vital relationship with reduced

information (37%), followed by daycare closures (31%), prohibiting nursing home visits (26%), advising to wear face masks (18%) to stay at home (15%), and closure of recreational activities (14%). Meanwhile, Keykhaei et al. (2021) dissect the NPIs strategy packages to flatten the curve of the COVID-19 pandemic implemented by three different countries such as Iran, South Korea, and Turkey. As a result, the application of social distancing methods, rapid testing, intelligent contact tracing, and adequate personal protective equipment is a suitable combination of NPIs to stem the spread of disease.

The implementation of NPIs policies in each country certainly has its characteristics and uniqueness. NPIs in Indonesia are known as Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB); later, there has also been a similar policy called the Enforcement of Community Activity Restrictions (PPKM). The legal basis for regulating PSBB, namely Law Number 6 the Year 2018 on Health Quarantine, in the legal regulation, is explained that further provisions regarding the criteria and implementation of PSBB are regulated by Government Regulation (PP) as a derivative regulation. For additional derivative rules, the government finally issued Government Regulation Number 21 in the Year 2020 concerning Large-Scale Social Restrictions in the Context of Accelerating the Handling of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). Unfortunately, the central government has not granted all regions to implement PSBB. For example, the central government rejected PSBB requests from seven regional governments because they did not meet several requirements consisting of epidemiological data and budget allocations. (Prasetyo, 2020). According to the latest data obtained from the National Disaster Management Agency (BNPb), as a task force for accelerating COVID-19 handling in Indonesia, only 26 regency/city areas were granted licenses to implement PSBB by the central government (Utomo, 2020).

The non-pharmaceutical policy is the most likely option when a pandemic hits, considering that virus identification takes a long time to find a vaccine, let alone manage it to become endemic. Each country has its own choice and method in formulating the NPIs as an effective prevention policy, but the level of success obtained will be different (Alfano, 2021). Thus, it is inevitable that the implementation of NPIs will be a challenge for the Indonesian government as an archipelagic country whose reach between the central government and regional governments is relatively far from each other. Therefore, the way and level of handling COVID-19 in each region will be different.

As the westernmost region of Indonesia, the province of Aceh should be the area with the lowest rate of spread of the virus, considering that it is far from Jakarta as the center of government and the center of the reach of COVID-19. However, it seems that the corona does not know the distance between regions, so the handling of COVID-19 entirely depends on the capacity and capability of the government in formulating the best policies it has. The Aceh government has stated its readiness to implement the PSBB to counter this corona outbreak (CNN Indonesia, 2020b). However, as discussed earlier, implementing

PSBB is not an easy matter; readiness from the local government is not enough because it requires direct permission from the central government. Nationally, the development of COVID-19 in Aceh at the beginning is the slowest, where the number of positive cases and deaths from the virus is still deficient. Besides that, are the people of Aceh ready to face this extreme policy? Therefore, researchers are interested in discussing the development of PSBB policies that might be applicable in Aceh Province.

In addition, the policies issued by the government must also get support from the community, such as a high level of compliance. If this is not met, it will be challenging to succeed no matter how good the policy is. Teasdale et al. (2014) argued that society evaluates policies in several aspects, namely necessity, efficacy, acceptability, and feasibility. So, it is interesting to see to what extent the non-pharmaceutical policies in managing COVID-19 issued by the Aceh government can be well received by the people of Aceh. Then it is necessary to pay attention to whether the efforts made under current conditions will effectively break the chain of spreading the corona pandemic.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research is in the form of a cross-sectional, observational study conducted in Aceh, Indonesia. As for the sampling technique with the Snowball method, the online semi-structured questionnaire was developed using the google form application. The language used is Indonesian, then translated into English for journals publication. Questionnaire links were sent directly to respondents through social media, especially WhatsApp. Participants were encouraged to spread the survey link to relatives, acquaintances, and each contact and group. Thus, everyone will forward the link to different people from the first point of contact onwards.

Because this is an online survey, only respondents who have internet access can participate in this study. Participants are over 17 years old, understand, and use the internet properly. When receiving and clicking on the link, participants will automatically open information about the research, which at the same time has an informed consent form there. After they were sure to participate, they filled in general details of their data, such as age, gender, etc. Then a series of core questions from the research that the participants must answer emerge sequentially, and the given answers are graded on a 5-point Likert scale format. Data collection was carried out for more than one week, from April 20, 2020, until April 28, 2020. Then, for the distribution of regional origin of respondents, this study succeeded in collecting respondents in a representative manner, where each district/city sent their voices to be heard.

In addition, to strengthen the degree of reliability of the data found in the field, the authors decided to use data triangulation by utilizing several secondary data from reputable national and international scientific journals. The data does not stand alone to minimize the resulting bias.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The online research conducted for more than one week managed to collect 264 respondents; the study ordered diverse and balanced respondents across genders, ages, educational backgrounds, and areas of residence. To analyze the data obtained in the field, the researcher uses the conceptual framework of Teasdale et al. (2014), who argued that non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) offer a simple, inexpensive, and effective way to minimize transmission in both pandemic and non-pandemic contexts. Based on their observations, society tends to evaluate non-pharmaceutical interventions in several aspects, namely, necessity, efficacy, acceptability, and feasibility. It is argued that the findings of Teasdale et al. (2014) felt similar to the phenomenon of acceptance of the Acehese people towards non-pharmaceutical policies in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Necessity

Implementation of NPIs or the like in Indonesia is better known as the large-scale social restrictions (PSBB) and Enforcement of Community Activity Restrictions (PPKM). However, not all regencies/cities implement the PSBB it is only 26 local governments were granted licenses to implement PSBB by the central government (Utomo, 2020). Aceh is one region that wants to implement PSBB but has not received the central government's blessing. Then what about the people of Aceh themselves? Are they ready to face these super-strict rules?

Regarding the closure of the residential environment, most of the people of Aceh responded positively to the possibility of temporarily closing the residential area, strongly agreeing (22.73%) and agreeing (38.26%). A few of them stated neutral (9.85%), and not a few showed adverse reactions, disagree (24.62%), and strongly disagree (4.55%). Then enter at the higher level, namely the temporary cessation of activities outside the home, meaning that the entry and exit of the residential environment become tighter. Respondents' reactions showed almost the same results as before, where most of the people of Aceh responded positively to the prohibition of activities outside the home, strongly agreed (24.24%), and decided (37.50%). Some people showed unwillingness, disagree (23.48%), and strongly disagree (4.17%). Then, the remaining 10.81% stated neutrally.

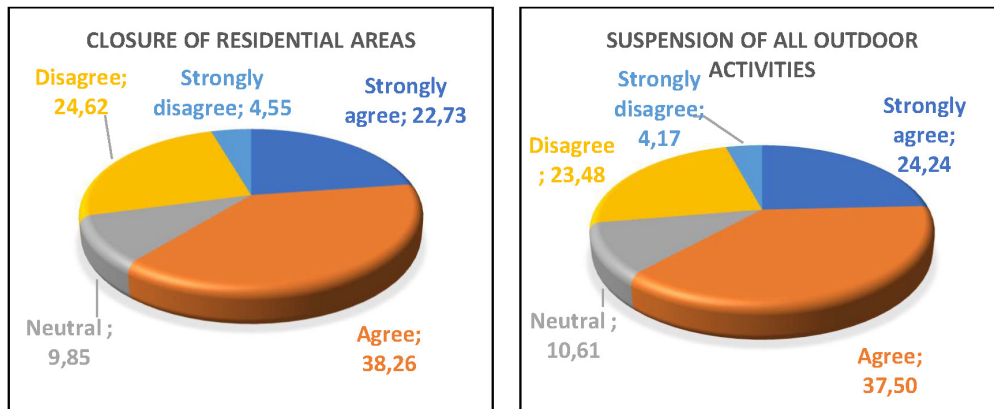


Figure 1. Closure Areas and Outdoor Activities

Although it did not specifically implement the PSBB, the emergency anticipation implemented, such as physical distancing and curfew by the Aceh government last March 2020, meant that the community did not travel much, which indicated the level of compliance was considered relatively high. Implementing the curfew in Aceh raises pros and cons in the community. On the one hand, there is support because the public feels that the policy is an excellent solution to anticipating the spread of COVID-19; on the other hand, others do not support it because it is detrimental to the community in terms of income (Aminah & Muliawati, 2021; Ulfa & Safirussalim, 2021).

Efficacy

Since implementing the corona emergency anticipation in Aceh last March 2020, government agencies have encouraged their communities to learn and work from home. There are community groups who support the government’s appeal and there are also groups who refuse because they are not ready for the new habit.

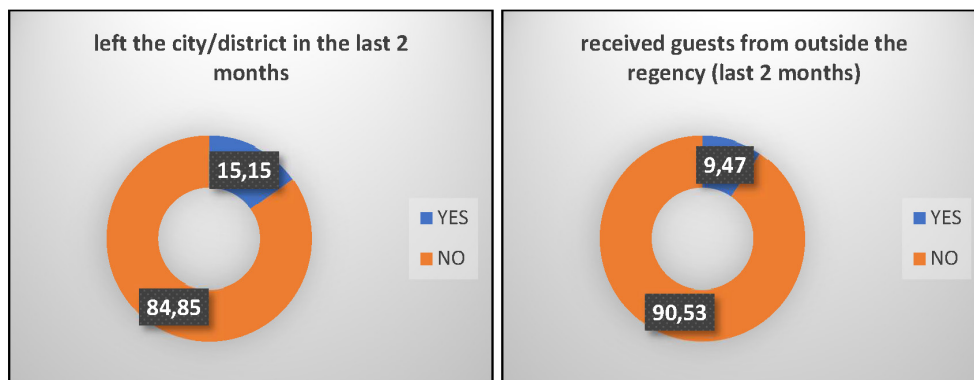


Figure 2. COVID-19 Reactions

The community stated that the regulation made them unwilling to travel (84.85%) from the domicile area; only a few still ventured out of it (15.15%). The public was motivated by various rational reasons such as work, medical treatment, picking up children or siblings. In addition, the level of public awareness is also higher by not receiving guests (90.53%) from outside the region, and the rest (9.47%) still accepts guests from outside the area. Looking at the two statements above indicates that the community feels compliant and obedient to the appeal from the government. They are also more aware of various possible ways of transmission, so try not to leave the area and not receive guests from outside the area during the appeal not to leave the house.

Amidst the anxiety and uncertainty about the antidote to COVID-19, taking precautions is a must, and non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) are the most effective steps in addressing this. Peak et al. (2017) argued that the best strategy in anticipating outbreaks of infectious diseases when drugs or vaccines for pathogens do not yet exist or are not yet available are non-pharmaceutical interventions. A similar statement was first expressed by Martinez & Das (2014), who said that non-pharmaceutical interventions offered a viable alternative when the availability of pharmaceutical interventions might be inadequate during the initial stages of a pandemic. Some experience shows how the steps of NPIs succeeded in solving the pandemic problem of influenza. For example, when dealing with an influenza pandemic, experts believe non-pharmaceutical interventions are practical, feasible, and socially and politically acceptable (Aledort et al., 2007). Moreover, non-pharmaceutical interventions are an exciting approach to complement vaccination in preventing and reducing influenza (Reiman et al., 2018). Thus, current conditions based on experience make it possible to implement NPIs as the best alternative prevention in the COVID-19 era.

Exploring further the effectiveness of the implementation of NPIs on COVID-19, some countries have implemented and received direct benefits from NPIs policies. In response to the COVID-19 attacks, many European countries have implemented the NPIs to reduce the number of cases, and things are done such as school closures and national lockdowns. Flaxman et al. (2020) studied the effects of massive NPIs in 11 European countries, and the results concluded that NPIs, particularly lockdowns, have had a significant impact on reducing transmission. Moreover, Imai et al. (2020) examined the adoption of NPIs and their effects on COVID-19 in several countries such as China, South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Italy. The results show that NPIs such as travel restrictions have slowed the geographical spread of COVID-19 and reduced the number of initial cases.

Furthermore, particularly the application of NPIs in China, the country of origin of COVID-19, also showed a positive reaction. NPIs deployed in China appear to stem the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak effectively. Even if NPIs could have been enforced a

few weeks earlier, cases reduced from 66% to 95% (Lai et al., 2020). Looking at the track record of NPIs policy implementation in several countries, the conclusion is that NPIs have effectively reduced the number of cases so far, with the same virus characteristics. In addition, NPIs can also be applied in different countries with different regional and community attributes, especially in Indonesia.

Acceptability

Rassanjani et al. (2022) revealed that there are a number of policies for handling COVID-19 by the Aceh government that have full support from the community and there are also programs that lack support. Seeing the development of COVID-19 cases that have not shown a decline, the people of Aceh at the time tend to support the PSBB policy. This statement reflects on the government's call to carry out Work from Home (WFH) for office workers in the early days of the pandemic, which they very well received because, with this appeal, those who have been struggling with office hours have more time to spend with their beloved family. Lades et al. (2020) found that many people spending time at home during the COVID-19 outbreak was associated with significantly increased positive influences and reduced negative emotions. Not only that, Hutajulu (2021) reported that working from home was also able to improve the performance of employees. Moreover, Fessell & Cherniss (2020) argued that paying attention to the good things can help bring balance and calm, thus helping us survive. The condition means that WFH helps workers be closer to their families, and more than that, the positive energy generated from WFH can be one way to minimize the increase in the spike in COVID-19 cases.

Although formal sector workers expressed their readiness for directives from the government to work at home, this was difficult for informal workers to accept. It was a tough choice for those dependent on livelihoods and income outside the home. The International Labor Organization (ILO) announced a sharp reduction in working hours globally for 1.6 billion workers in the informal economy, which means that nearly half of the global workforce is at risk of losing their livelihoods. The ILO added that the decline was due to "lockdowns" imposed due to the Coronavirus outbreak (Kenny, 2020). Narula (2020) viewed informal workers in developing countries as an influential group, in contrast to developed countries with fewer informal groups and are easy to get emergency assistance from the government. The worst conditions experienced by several regions when implementing the NPIs to fight the COVID-19 outbreak have caused considerable job losses (Rassanjani et al., 2021). Therefore, the government needs to find a way out so that cessation of activities outside the home is not life-threatening, leaving the house then dying of the corona or staying in the house dying of starvation.

Meanwhile, it turns out the number of people who do not support (disagree 32.95%, strongly disagree 13.26%) the call to stop worship activities outside the home is far more than the number of people who agree (strongly agree 9.85%, agree 25.38%) with worship at home along with the family member. And the number that stated neutral (18.92%) towards worship at home is also not small.

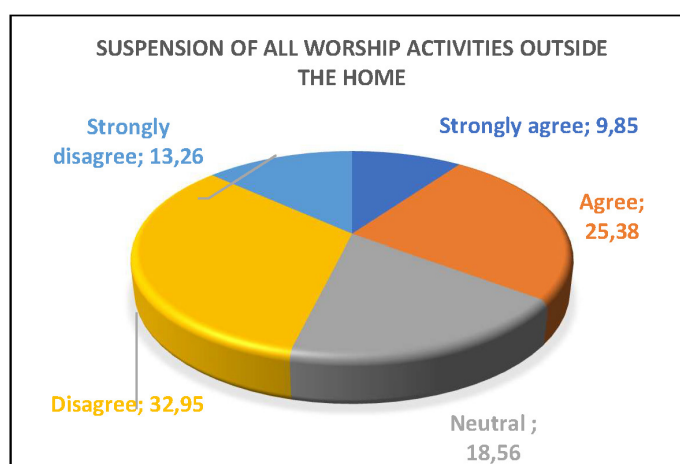


Figure 3. Worship Activities

The public response related to their disobedience to government directions not to go to places of worship is understandable. Remembering the character of the Acehnese community that has been formed and is bound by sharia values (Habiburrahim et al., 2020; Shanty et al., 2018; Zulkarnaini et al., 2019), where performing Salah at the Masjid is considered more important than at home. Spiritual needs are prioritized by the people of Aceh so that the level of community acceptance of the recommendation to worship in their respective homes is considered low and ineffective. During an escalating pandemic, most mosques in Aceh continue to sound the five daily Azans as an invitation to establish congregational prayers.

Provided worshipers can still pray at the mosque by implementing COVID-19 prevention protocols such as washing hands with soap, wearing masks, and keeping a distance. Thus, it seems that worship at the mosque is still possible. For example, this happened in one area in Bengkulu Province, where the congregation consistently maintains their safety in prayer because they are aware of carrying out Islamic religious orders. The community retains personal safety, hygiene, home and mosque environments, and togetherness in fighting the potential for COVID-19 (Dahlan et al., 2020). This fact supports the response of the Acehnese people. Moreover, the number of positive case reports in Aceh was the lowest in Indonesia at that time, and there have been no reports of someone contracting the Coronavirus from returning from the mosque.

Feasibility

The respondents were also asked about what made them feel cooperative in obeying the instructions given by the government. Whether because of fear of the security forces or the penalty given by the authority. The majority, very obedient (42.80%) and compliant (47.35%), said they were obedient because of the direction from the security forces. Only a handful (1.14% disobedient, very disobedient 0.76%) were not worried about actions by the security forces, then the rest (7.95%) declared neutral. Concerning the application of fines for violators, it turns out that the level of compliance is slightly lower than due to the reprimand from the authorities. As many as 42.42% stated that they were very obedient, and 37.88% said they were compliant, then the level of disobedience was even slightly higher than before, namely 4.17% disobedient and 3.03% very contrary. And the remaining 12.50% answered neutrally.

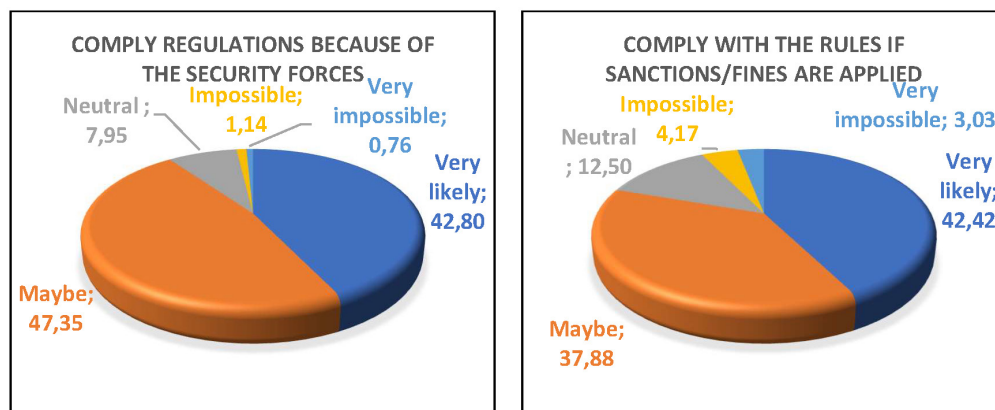


Figure 4. Compliances

When asked about the government's capability at every level in controlling the coronavirus outbreak, the assessment is given by the people of Aceh also varies. The central government's trust level was only 46.97%, the number of non-believers was relatively high at 30.68%, and the remaining 22.35% stated neutrally. The level of confidence in the performance of the provincial government was slightly higher (56.44%); only a few expressed pessimism (19.7%), then the rest expressed doubt or neutral (23.86%). Support for district/city governments was also as good as at the provincial level, where 50.76% put a high level of trust, although there were still parties who expressed a low level of confidence (21.21%). And the rest (28.03%) of neutral people also do not lose much. (see figure 5)

The government is constantly stepping up integrated measures to deal with the global pandemic from COVID-19, like forming a task force to accelerate the handling of COVID-19, which is commanded by the Head of the National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB). This task force has worked effectively in synergizing national troops both at the center and in the regions, involving all competent elements. Considering the vast distribution of Indonesian territory, an archipelago, the level of distribution of COVID-19 will also vary from one area to another. Here the regional head plays a vital role in examining every policy situation.

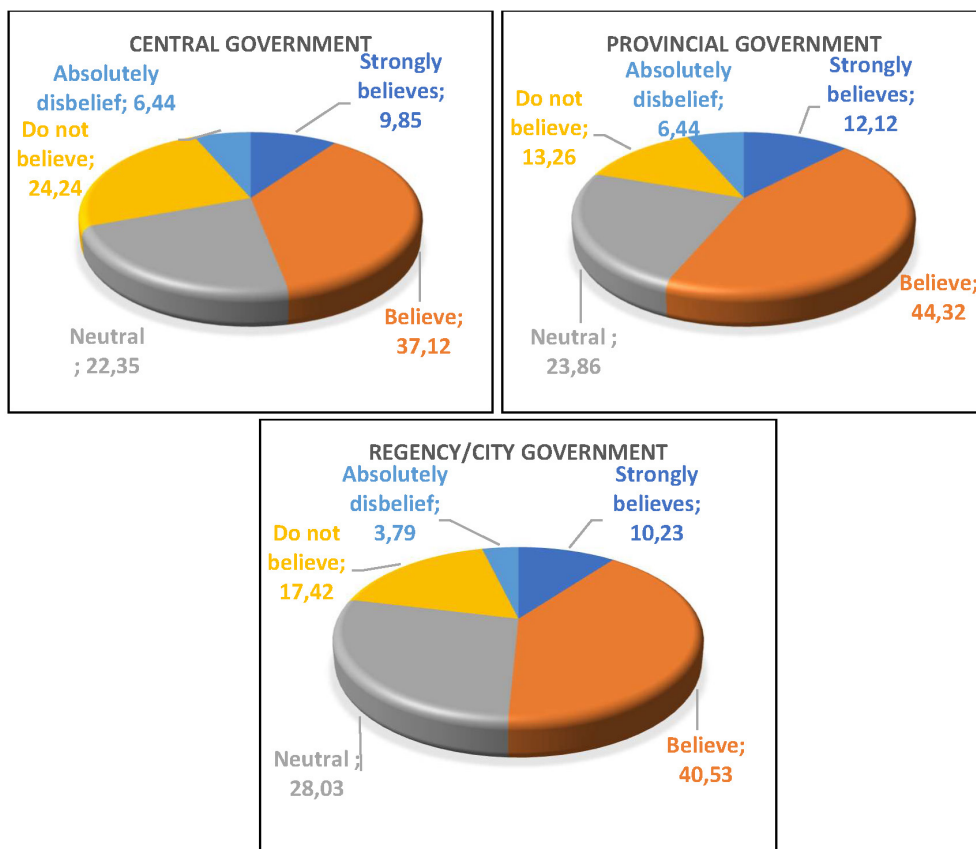


Figure 5. Governance Capacity

The higher level of public trust in local government than in the central government can be understood if judged by the initial anticipatory steps they have ever taken. The central government seems slow in reacting. It can be seen at the beginning of the emergence of this pandemic. The central government even underestimated by declaring Indonesia safe from the danger of corona. Instead of closing the airport but instead intensified tourism promotions. Before revealing the first positive case in Indonesia, the central government chose to increase tourism promotion to tourists who canceled visiting

some countries that are closing airports and borders and even prepared 72 billion to pay influencers to promote Indonesia as a tourist destination during the pandemic (Halim, 2020). The action shows that the Indonesian government prioritizes a sense of economic development in the face of the COVID-19 Virus (Almuttaqi, 2020). While other countries limit the number of visits, Indonesia has even opened up opportunities for tourists to visit, arguing to improve the economy. Later on March 2, 2020, the government finally was aware and determined because there were already citizens exposed to the Coronavirus.

However, it is different from the local government (Aceh), which is ready to take steps. Such as fast-moving in sending logistical assistance and evacuation of Aceh students studying in Wuhan - China. Then also in mid-March, when Aceh cases were still zero, the government did not wait for positive victims to take anticipatory steps. The Aceh government immediately issued a circular to stop all activities that gathered many people. Therefore, it is not surprising that the community has responded positively to the regional government rather than the central government.

CONCLUSION

The corona pandemic is becoming more and more violent and spreading to all corners of the world, and currently, there is no certainty regarding the termination of its spread. No one can guarantee that patients who have recovered are no longer affected. Evidently, after successfully recovering and returning the last positive patient of COVID-19 on March 12 (CNN Indonesia, 2020a), six days later, a 41-year-old Acehnese citizen from Gayo Lues Regency was tested positive for Coronavirus (Tim ACEHKINI, 2020). The evidence means that corona is still around us, ready to spread to anyone, anytime and anywhere. New varieties of COVID-19 types like Omicron are also growing. So, the government must re-arrange the strategy to prevent the spread of this pandemic from saving citizens.

Large-scale Social Limitation (PSBB) and Enforcement of Community Activity Restrictions (PPKM) seem to be alternative policies that the Aceh government can implement. The government itself said it was ready to adopt any Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions (NPIs), and the majority of the people seemed prepared to run the policy. Therefore, the government can use this short-term solution to reduce the spread of COVID-19, which is considered very alarming.

Recommendations that can be given relating to the handling of COVID-19 through NPIs in Aceh, namely: (i) Forming an epidemiology team to assess the potential and distribution patterns of COVID-19, the number of cases/number of deaths, and the epidemiological relationship with transmission in an area; (ii) Considering the application of NPIs, but limited to high-risk districts/cities based on epidemiological studies; (iii) Conduct a comprehensive review of the impact of the application of the NPIs on socio-economic conditions, and the readiness of the Aceh Government and district/city

governments to overcome them; (iv) Preparing all the necessary resources if NPIs is to be applied comprehensively in 23 districts/cities because epidemiological curves in various countries show that the trend in COVID-19 has not declined, and even many regions in Indonesia the trend of this case continues to increase; and (v) The need to unite perceptions among community leaders about the impact of implementing NPIs is for the common good, this is important to emphasize to avoid disputes that confuse the community.

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