

# Preventing COVID-19 pandemic outbreak: physical distancing and the socio-economic wisdom of local community in Aceh, Indonesia

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**Abstract.** Human as a social being have an instinct to live together and interact with one another. Nevertheless, COVID-19 has significantly limited face to face interaction. In a local community such as Aceh, Indonesia, such situation makes the community somewhat indifferent as their traditions carried out so far are actually interacting closely with each other as a form of intimacy. This research aims to explore the problem of physical distancing based on local wisdom in Acehese society. Qualitative approach was utilized with data from field study and library research. This study found that there still exist various local wisdoms in Aceh community which are parallel in the current recommended mechanism in avoiding the spread of COVID-19. The socio-economic ties are also still strong among the local population who believe in tradition which prevent the COVID-19 outbreak. This study implies that local wisdom which have been applied by Acehese for years could be one of solutions to mitigate the COVID-19 outbreak.

## 1 Introduction

In the beginning 2020, the world was shaken by the presence of a deadly virus named severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-Co V-2). Its spread was uncontrollable, crossing national borders quickly as the incubation period for this virus to be transmitted from human to human is within 14 days [1]. Since this virus is very difficult to predict, even its existence is the scariest killer, it only took five months for this virus to infect millions of people around the world. Hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives, and there are still millions of people in care, although it cannot be denied, many of the infected patients have been declared cured. The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared the new terminology for this pandemic and become well known in today society as COVID-19 [2].

COVID-19 pandemic has become a global problem and WHO has declared this to be a pandemic, and requires all countries to work together to overcome this pandemic. Certainly it is not easy to explain how to break the chain of transmission of this virus, especially for people who still cannot fully accept the outbreak. Various attempts were made so that the virus did not spread more and people who were infected did not spread the virus to other parties quickly.

Various bodies such as US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and including the WHO have issued the preventing advice for the further spread

of this virus [3], and one of the efforts made is to forbid people from crowding and carrying out activities involving many people. People are encouraged to do social distancing and physical distancing, as WHO has declared regarding to suppress the further spread of this virus, maintaining the distance among other people or more known as physical distancing is crucial to be done [4]. Besides that the cardinal features of the response to COVID-19 is that people are required to remain enhanced the practice of hygienic such as frequent handwashing and avoiding touching the face, and also to wear masks. All of these are important part of breaking the chain of virus spread [5].

However, these appeals made some people confused as some have no proper understanding of the rationale for such new normal. This is due to the lack of information and education. In addition, the government policy in managing COVID-19 rarely take into account the local wisdom or tradition. Hence, there are some resistance to follow the instruction of the government. This paper aims at elaborating the Acehese local wisdom in mitigating the impact of pandemic COVID-19 through various local wisdoms.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 The emergence of physical distancing norm

Prior to the introduction of the term “physical distancing” by WHO, Ibn Sina (980-1037 AD) an

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Islamic philosopher, known in the Western world by the name Avicenna, had printed his exemplary history as the "Father of Modern Medicine" and was able to fight the virus at that time, where conditions were almost the same as the condition of COVID-19 pandemic. Ibn Sina ordered the people not to gather in the streets, markets and places of worship as he asserted that a person infected with a virus can spread to hundreds of other people. Ibn Sina who was born in Afsana (Uzbekistan) could be the first person to practice social distancing, psychological distancing and no social panic in fighting the virus that caused the death of "*al-maut al-aswad*" in the past ten centuries. To anticipate the virus, Ibn Sina advised people to use vinegar and gargle with water mixed with *apsitus* /wormwood (*artemisia absinthium*) leaves [6].

According to the authors of the book *al-Syifa* (Healing) and *Qanun fi al-Tib* (Qonun Medicine), the small size of the virus cannot be seen with the naked eye if it is spread will cause people to contract various symptoms such as coughing, shortness of breath and can even lead to death sudden. The virus can spread through hands (shaking hands), face, hair and even through clothing worn by people exposed to viruses such as corona today. Because the distance recommended by Ibn Sina was also conveyed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and all world governments in line with what Ibn Sina had done. At this time, especially in Indonesian society, it is not uncommon to have suspicions among people caused by the corona virus. In fact, the fear of being close to anyone and trying in all activities to stay away from others as experienced by the author himself.

Physical distancing or physical distance limitation is a substitute term for social distancing, which both aims to prevent the corona virus. Physical distancing refers to making changes in one's everyday routines, minimizing close contact with others which includes avoiding crowded places and non-essential gatherings, common greetings (hand-shakes), and limiting contact with people at higher risk such as older adults and those in poor health. Not only when outside the home, has the government even recommended that this method is also done when inside the house. When undergoing physical distancing, a person is asked not to travel to crowded places, such as markets, places of worship, schools, marriages, and other crowded places. As much as possible avoid too crowded public transportation.

In practice, physical distancing can also be done in several ways namely do not leave the house, except for important matters, such as buying basic necessities or getting treatment when sick, greeting others with a wave of a hand, not by shaking hands, working or learning from home, using the telephone handheld or video call to stay connected with relatives and coworkers, buying necessities through online platform when ordering food or other items.

Previously, efforts to limit the distance with others was known as social distancing. However, some time ago, WHO recommended replacing the term with physical distancing. The reason, the use of

the term social distancing was feared to be misinterpreted by cutting off communication or social interaction with family and relatives. In fact, social interaction also has an important role in efforts to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. By maintaining communication with others, people can give each other news and enthusiasm, so they do not feel lonely, sad, or alienated. These negative feelings can trigger stress and depression, and weaken the immune system [7].

WHO in their press briefing said "We started saying physical distance because we want people to stay connected. So, find ways to stay socially connected, through various social media to stay connected with others because one's mental health is just as important with their physical health". The government and WHO hope that this change of terms can make it easier for the public to understand that the effort needed to prevent the spread of the Corona virus is to maintain a safe physical distance, not to cut off social contact [8].

Physical distancing is essentially effective enough to prevent the spread of the Corona virus. However, this certainly needs to be accompanied by other preventive measures, such as wearing a mask when leaving the house, diligently washing hands, cleaning the house and eating utensils properly, and strengthening the body's resistance by consuming foods that contain protein and vitamins. More importantly everyone is expected to avoid the crowd, if you have to be there because it is very urgent, then keep a minimum distance of 1 meter to 2 meters.

## **2.2 Physical distancing and socio-economics changing patterns of community life**

Humans are social creatures (*zoon politicon*) that live in community life and interact with each other in the form of social framework of a society. Human being as a social creatures does not mean to show the nature of humans to socialize with each other, but the idea of social beings is primarily intended to point directly to the perfection of human identity which means sociality is human nature and identity because humans cannot live alone [9].

Humans need each other for their live and they will grow to develop tradition and civilization. By nature, humans are creatures who have a tendency to live together with others, to learn to live as humans. Humans are creatures who seek perfection in the order of living together. Humans are born, grow and become adults because of and with other humans. Then the definition of humans as social beings directly intends to emphasize that only in the sphere of shared living order will human perfection find its perfection. Human life and development, even what is called the meaning and value of human life is only possible in the context of being together with other humans. The meaning and value of life will be manifested when humans agree and acknowledge the existence of their fellow human beings. Also the division of a personality will reach its perfection if humans are able to accept the presence of their neighbor [10].

Humans as social beings have an instinct to help one another, to be loyal, friends and tolerance, as well as to have sympathy and empathy for each other. This condition can make a good and harmonious society, so that there arises norms, ethics, and traditions adopted by the community. If the things above are violated or ignored, then there is what is called social deviation.

A survey was conducted by Snap cart to see how much impact the corona virus has had on Indonesian lifestyles. Conducted from 17-28 March 2020, a survey involving 2000 men and women aged 15-50 years in 8 major cities in Indonesia (Jakarta, Bandung, Semarang, Surabaya, Medan, Palembang, Makassar, and Manado) showed that a virus pandemic corona has the greatest impact on people's social lives. Followed by career or work factors and changes in travel plans or vacations due to the corona co-19 virus. The most disturbing impact of COVID-19 is social life, ranking highest at 48%, followed by career and work concerns 44%, then vacation and travel plans 39%, furthermore concern about the limited religious activities 31%, and not being able to do shopping habits 24% [11].

As in the current condition, where the impact caused by COVID Pandemic 19 has a considerable influence on the rate of social change. Social change caused by the COVID Pandemic, is one of the changes that are not desired (unintended change). This concept of undesirable change includes changes that are not expected by the community itself. For example, much local wisdom in Acehese society must be replaced because of the presence of COVID-19, maintaining physical distance and not shaking hands, two things must be done, but changes along with the presence of adaptation of new habits (new normal).

In addition, the influence of the media today is very determining one's mindset in responding to the corona virus outbreak. With various issues from the news on social media and television related to this corona virus made people more confused. Actually the virus is really dangerous as it was given before or just a strategy of world politics to frighten people for the needs of certain groups. Sometimes afraid of a lot of sudden death, but there is a feeling that the virus is like a common cold virus that does not need to be afraid to be free to move and hang out with friends.

Thus the pattern of one's life depends on the mind set of seeing and digesting a situation for lifestyle changes. Through the optimal use of reason, humans can become more sensitive, smart, and able to think and act positively. These conditions can be said that a person already has common sense, good, and positive. Continuing education really needs to be given by the government, leaders of community, teachers, academics, so that people really understand and want to apply this physical distancing.

### 3 Research method

Due to the nature of this study, it is deemed that qualitative design based upon conceptual and interpretive approach is most suitable [23]. Prior literature were learned in depth to identify the root of new normal measures such as physical distancing and

hygiene propagation. Interview were conducted with local religious scholar (*ulama*), leader, as well local community members during May-June 2020.

## 4 Findings and discussion

### 4.1 Physical distancing and socio-economic changes in acehnese community

Local Wisdom is all forms of knowledge, beliefs, understandings, or insights as well as customs or ethics that guide human behavior in life in the community. Local wisdom is also defined as truth that has been directed or fixed in an area. From both definitions then local wisdom can be interpreted as a value that is considered good and right that lasts for generations and is carried out by the community concerned as a result of the interaction between humans and their environment [12].

Relationships or social interactions between individuals with one another, of course, be hampered in this condition of widespread pandemic. Individuals will be eventually feel their habitual activities have been changed. Social interaction is limited as a result of the friendship relationship decreasing. The notion of social change is the changes that occur in social relations or changes in the equilibrium of social relations [13]. This then explains that COVID's Pandemic actually has an influence or impact on social change itself. In this case, the reality that occurs shows that social conditions are declining. Various aspects of life became contaminated and suffered a setback due to the COVID Pandemic.

Changing a tradition that is ingrained in a society is not easy. Habits that grow from a child even become a character cannot be changed in a short time [14]. The traditions of the Acehese people, which are mostly colored by crowd activities called *kenduri*, clearly cannot be abandoned, even though this event is very unfriendly with the COVID-19 pandemic.

After the government officially banned the wedding party during co-19, the community only obeyed to follow the instruction of wearing mask, washing hand, and physical distancing, but the activities of commemorating death (*takziyah* and *samadiyah*), wedding celebration (*kanduri walimah*), *khanduri blang* (festivity in rice filed), festivity of *nisfu sha'ban*, and others, seems that it is still often done, but with less number of people. Likewise, the *meugang* tradition, where people buy meat to celebrate *puasa ramadhan* and *uro raya* ('*eid* festive), seems to keep going. It seems this is outside the control of the local government, and the community keeps carrying out this tradition by mutual agreement at the village level.

This is because according to Interviewee 1 (*Ulama* in Pidie) [15]:

*The Acehese community highly respect their tradition. If this tradition is banned there will certainly be upheaval and unwillingness from the community. For the people of Aceh who embrace Islam, their religion, culture and local wisdom are an inseparable part of their daily lives. The motto "Adat ngon hukom lagee zat ngon sifeuet (tradition*

*and law are like the body and soul)" is a reflection that for Acehese people, local wisdom and Islamic Shariah law are one, like substance and nature, inseparable and apply back and forth. In fact, there is also a belief in Acehese society that making visits to neighboring places or to family homes (silaturahmi) including attending various khanduri (festivities) gives benefits such as lengthened age and ease of fortune (interview in June 20, 2020).*

Therefore, when the prohibition of visiting each other comes, it must be accompanied by an explanation that is acceptable to the community that for the time being these activities cannot be carried out, when the pandemic ends, the activity can be done again.

The corona virus has restricted all community activities as usual. In order to prevent transmission of corona virus infection, many parties are calling for a social distance or social distancing appeal. However, the term is prone to misperceptions in the community. Social ties are actually needed, but not physically close together. Interacting with other people can create a feeling of security and happiness. However, with this corona virus, everyone must maintain distance or self-distancing and self-isolating at home. Although hospitality as a basic need for the people of Aceh, in these conditions can still be done by telephone, video calls, and using social media. If you meet you can do it by waving your hands and smiling without having to shake hands. But, for the people of Aceh, this new habit is not yet grounded. No matter how big the news about the dangers of shaking hands and hugging, there are still many people who do this activity, even when there are people who refuse to do these acts for security reasons and keep from transmitting COVID-19, this attitude is actually considered as being polite, lacking respect other people or relatives, even considered to have been arrogant and arrogant, which ended with social sanctions by the omission of other communities.

Therefore, interviewee 2 (one of the local community leaders in Pidie, Aceh) in our interview says there is a need to cultivate consciousness in Aceh society toward the effect of COVID-19 in order to prevent it. He advises his community by saying [16]:

*For people who are not busy with outside activities, it's better to just stay at home or don't leave the village because it's very vulnerable to the virus. To prevent this virus, we have to take care our self and family and always pray. The villagers also must remain cautious of foreigners coming from outside the city. The term new normal, as popularized by the government, does not mean that the community is free to move anywhere like before the emergence of this pandemic, the space is still tightened by always keeping themselves safe, keep a distance, wear masks, diligently wash hands and may not gather (crowding). If this is violated, it will be very dangerous, it could be like a time bomb when the virus is spread throughout the community. It should wait until the virus disappears 100% of this world (Interview in May 17, 2020).*

This corona virus has spread to almost all regions of Indonesia, including Aceh and therefore must be

cautious and obedient to the regulations set by the government. Deputy MPU (*Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama*) Aceh Province, Tgk. Faishal Ali (2021) told "even though people in Aceh can have a friendly relationship directly during *eid al-fitr* or *eid al-adha*, even in the midst of the outbreak of the corona virus, they are advised not to shake hands. Visiting each other during the festive can only be carried out by fellow citizens who are not exposed to the corona virus or are not undergoing independent quarantine" [17].

The Acehese call the disease outbreak as "*taeun*" or "*taeut*" which was adopted from Arabic "*thauun*". Some of Aceh's local wisdom is relevant in dealing with the "*taeun*" outbreak [18]. There are several Acehese local wisdoms that are relevant in dealing with the "*Taeun*" outbreak, namely:

- Using salt in various cooking and before eating. There is a tradition of there is a tradition of providing salt in a small plate at a feast at a feast in Aceh. It is believed a good tradition because salt besides functioning as a flavor enhancer, is also believed to be an antidote to various viruses for the food served.
- The tradition of "*manoe rabu abeh*" or "*manoe safa*" which means sea bathing to soak the body with salt water. This practice of bathing in the sea is believed to function as an effort to eliminate various germs and diseases that exist in the human body.
- The tradition of washing feet through "*ie lam guci*". Another local wisdom in Acehese society in dealing with disease is to always maintain cleanliness. Every house of the ancient Acehese would provide a jar (jug, urn) filled with clean water complete with a dipper in front of the house. This water is used to wash feet, hands, and even face by anyone who wants to enter the house. One must ensure that it is clean and sterile before stepping into the house.
- The tradition of "*pakek gaca*" or using henna using henna (*gaca*) on the fingers alternately, not on all fingers. This symbolizes that we should keep our distance when there is a *taeun* epidemic.
- The tradition of "*pajoh ranup*" The Acehese community is also having tradition of having *oen ranup* (betel leaves) to be tasted by visiting guests so that they are free from viruses when chatting. Betel leaves are recognized by health experts as an antiseptic and anti-microbial capable of killing the sars-cov-2 virus, the cause of COVID-19 disease.
- The tradition of "*toet leumang*". Another custom that the ancients did when a disease plagued the country was to burn *leumang* and then distribute it to neighbors. The philosophy of this tradition are, *first*, burning *leumang* from glutinous rice indicates that the person no longer has rice stock as the main food in his house, this indicates that the food stock in the family is running low. The message is that people who have the ability must immediately provide basic food assistance to the poor in their neighborhood. Second, behind the action of burning *leumang* there is a message to get used to sharing (*alms*) even in difficult conditions. The burnt *leumang* is not eaten by a family alone, but with the community.

- The tradition of “*manok keunong taeun*” whereby chickens that show signs of contracting the virus (such as shaking their heads or salivating) are immediately confined (isolated) in a cage so that they are separated from other chickens. After that, animal health officers (*mantri*) were invited to give vaccines to “*manok keunong taeun*” and also to chickens that had not been infected with the virus as a preventive measure. This is a symbol of isolation for victims of the pandemic and given drugs or vaccines to recover.
- The tradition of “*do’a let tauen*” or prayer to reject and stop pandemic to spread by reading a verse from the Qur’an: “*wa qul jaa-al haqqul wa zahaqal baathil. Innal baathila kaana zahuuqa*”. This is then followed by reading the Qur’an, especially Surah al-Kahf, Surah Yaasin, and others. Prayer is an effort to surrender oneself to the Creator. The Acehnese believe that humans have limitations so that sometimes they are unable to control the epidemic even though they have tried their best.

#### 4.2 The role of women in facing Covid-19 pandemic in Acehnese society

Women play an important role in the process of applying physical distancing through education and modeling provided in married life in the traditional system of Aceh local community.

Ibu Suryani, in Pidie region for example, continuously warn her children so they could keep physical distancing in the relationship with others beside giving good nutrition. During recent festival of *Eid al-Fitr*, usually Acehnese will visit their extended family, but, Ibu Suryani did not do that for preventing the spread of corona. She attempts to give logical reason for doing that and usually Acehnese will listen to the voice of mother. This shows the role of women is very significant in contributing to break the chain of distribution of corona in Aceh [19].

Women actually have a great power to be able to provide coercion so that their families or communities are compliant with a government policy especially on urgent matter such as health. Moreover, these women have the ability to speak, sit as community leaders, have more general and religious knowledge than the average woman, and of course have a high economy compared to other communities. This advantage is a bargaining value for women so that their opinions are heard and can be implemented. If all women in this category have the same voice, then certain physical distancing can be carried out properly.

The figure of women in the family has a very important role. The most important education is in the family environment which is played by a mother. The mother gives birth to intelligent children as the next generation of the nation. A housewife in Pidie, says [20]:

*To prevent the virus, we have to continuously maintain health by living cleanly, teaching children to stay alert to this virus. This "tauen" corona is like a disease in poultry, while corona in humans.*

#### *Religious Education and Approach in Mitigating the Impact of Pandemic*

Religion in Acehnese society plays an important role in eliminating excessive panic and worries. There is a wisdom in Acehnese tradition to return back anything happened in human life to Allah SWT (*pu wo bak Po*). It is believed that if someone can accept this situation and surrender all to Allah, then that person will get the strength and patient to deal with everything without any fear. However, if someone is restless, panics and worries because they are afraid of getting infected by the virus, it will certainly make their immunity weak, and eventually they will get infected.

This phenomenon has indeed become an inseparable part of the life of the religious community. Religion plays a role in providing an opportunity for the community that there is a source of strength and hope that is greater than human strength, as a helpless human being. The only hope is to depend on the best scenario outlined by God

The role of religion can be maximized in encouraging people to be able to prevent the transmission of this virus. The way is to encourage their respective adherents to be obedient to health experts, public security experts, as well as to the authorities authorized to maintain the security, comfort and safety of their citizens.

Moreover, the Acehnese has been known as a religious society that strongly upheld the principles of Syariah Islam and follow the instructions issued by their religious leaders. The religious leader (*teungku imum/Ulama*) in Pidie said [21]:

*to overcome the emergence of the corona virus, we have to follow the advice of the government by keeping the physical distancing and be aware of outsiders who enter the settlement. Regarding the procedure of worship is not a problem if there is no conflict with religious teachings, sufficient conditions and harmony. This is because, Islam has taught his people to always maintain good health both physical and spiritual health as in the teaching of thaharah (purification), which is the beginning of acts of worship even the first chapter in studying Islamic law, which must be done at any time not just when praying. This proves that Muslims should be clean because they maintain their ablution, therefore all diseases are not easy to attack. This has become clear evidence for previous scholars who rarely got sick. In handling the virus now related to the problem of worship in congregation there is little criticism with the protocol distance of one meter left, right, front and back. According to him it was wrong because it was not an alternative event to be able to pray in congregation in the mosque because it could not be seen by praying far apart. But it's better to pray alone at home to protect yourself from the corona virus.*

Another religious leader in Aceh also said that [22]:

*A Muslim life in the world does follow religious advice, but living in a country must first follow government regulations. In dealing with the*

corona virus, it must follow the direction of the government such as keeping a distance, wearing a mask, and limiting the usual business, but it must also be strengthened with religious advice such as increasing worship (ibadah), zikr, and praying (du'a). Good government regulations will not collide with religious regulations, they will strengthen each other to provide prosperity and peace.

## 5 Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has been significantly affecting all lines of life without exception in transforming people's lifestyle throughout the world, including small province like Aceh, Indonesia. The most striking change can be seen from the way people exercising their social role. With the restriction on social interactions, the society have been under pressure as their habitual activities have been limited unlike in the normal life situation. Many people have even objected when some preventive measures are taken such as on physical distancing policy.

Nevertheless, local wisdom that Acehnese have applied for years could be one of solutions to prevent the pandemic COVID-19 outbreak. The society have been following this tradition wisely in the past and the provision of a thorough education will be effective in ensuring the compliance towards new normal measures. This participation of the community from various elements is needed so that the implementation of a new life structure that is still very foreign to the people of Aceh in particular and the people of Indonesia in general can be carried out voluntarily without coercion. All people are expected to understand that implementing new rules such as physical distancing is only temporary, and people must be patient with this situation, when the pandemic ends and vaccines are given, then all these traditions can be re-established.

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