

Unveiling the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic (2019-2021) on Inequality, Poverty, and Food Security in Indonesia

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Abstract:

This study analyzes the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on increasing poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition in Indonesia. Specifically, the paper focuses on the effects of COVID-19 from 2019 to 2021 on poverty levels and access to food. The pandemic has emerged as a potential cause of food insecurity in the country, primarily due to the decline in purchasing power among individuals facing unemployment or income losses, particularly affecting the middle and poor classes. In response to these impacts, the Indonesian government has implemented various policies, although their success in addressing the issues has been varied. This paper is based on desk-based research, utilizing existing published literature on the topic. The literature has been thoroughly reviewed and analyzed to provide insights into the observed points that require attention. The primary factor driving the rise in food insecurity is the increased costs of basic food items resulting from the pandemic. Drawing from the social inequality Marxist theory and the theory of capabilities proposed by Amartya Sen, this paper examines how the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to increased injustice, poverty, and inequality. Furthermore, it explores how these issues have been exacerbated by deeper-rooted factors associated with legal and economic policies in Indonesia.

Keywords:

Indonesia, Poverty, Food Security, Politics, COVID-19

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Introduction

This paper focuses on examining the issues of inequality, poverty, and access to basic necessities and food in Indonesia. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Indonesia experienced significant economic growth, emerging as one of the fastest-growing economies in Southeast Asia. This growth trajectory had been sustained over recent decades following the economic contraction triggered by the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998. The country's continued stable growth positioned it as a prominent economy in Southeast Asia, playing an increasingly influential role in global policy-making as a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Group of 20 (G20). Furthermore, it ranked as the fifth-largest economy in Asia after China, India, Japan, and South Korea. However, the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on Indonesia's economy. The shock-waves of the pandemic severely affected the lives of many individuals, particularly those in the middle and lower socioeconomic classes. In response to the pandemic, most countries in Southeast Asia implemented strict lock-downs and restrictions. However, the Indonesian government opted for partial lockdown measures and movement restrictions, which unfortunately proved insufficient to prevent a significant downturn in the Indonesian economy and other Southeast Asian countries (except for Vietnam). This downturn has resulted in a substantial economic crisis comparable to the financial crisis 1998. According to the Indonesian Central Statistics Agency (BPS, 2020), implementing COVID-19 restrictions has led to an economic contraction, increasing 24.54 million individuals affected by poverty. Additionally, the World Bank reports that the poverty rate in Indonesia has risen to 10.19%, compared to 9.78% prior to the pandemic. Job losses in both urban and rural areas across Indonesia have contributed to heightened levels of poverty and inequality (Brata, 2020).

This economic shock is expected to have significant long-term consequences, particularly for vulnerable groups, as it is anticipated that inequity and social inequality will continue to rise (Oliva et al., 2020). The escalation of poverty and unemployment has affected people's access to food, with decreased income and reduced food stocks exacerbating the situation. The impact on food security varies across different regions. However, concerns are growing, specifically regarding the range, accessibility, and availability of food commodities and the associated nutritional quality (Global Nutrition, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has increased food supply insecurity due to the adverse effects of rising unemployment and poverty on individuals' purchasing power (Reardon et al., 2020; Ihle et al., 2020; Akter, 2020). In 2022, Indonesia officially recorded over 6 million infections and 150,000 deaths from COVID-19, although official figures are believed to have underestimated the actual number of cases (Massola, 2020). Limited data availability makes it challenging to fully comprehend the true extent of the COVID-19 situation in Indonesia. Food

security has also been negatively impacted by disruptions to the government's health and nutrition programs, such as the integrated health service known as Posyandu (Pos Pelayanan Terpadu), which was initiated in 2014 to monitor the health of fetuses and infants (Rokx et al., 2018). UNICEF reports that 64% of Posyandu programs were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic (SMERU 2020), further contributing to data deficiencies that hinder a systematic assessment of the pandemic's complete impact on food security and its consequences for population health.

This analysis aims to investigate the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic on essential necessities, specifically food, as well as its effects on inequality and poverty in Indonesia. Further corroborating evidence from local sources highlights the exacerbation of malnutrition in the country due to the pandemic (Octavia & Rachmalina, 2022). The subsequent section summarizes the background literature review and methodology preceding the analysis of COVID-19 in Indonesia, with a primary focus on its influence on poverty, inequality, and access to food provisions. Section four delves into a comprehensive discussion on the impact of the pandemic on food supplies and food security, culminating in a reflective conclusion.

Studies on food security and hunger-related issues has long been a subject of scholarly interest, with researchers conducting numerous studies to unravel the underlying factors. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2006) has examined the evolution of food security studies, noting the changing and expanding theories surrounding this topic. Clay (2002), for instance, illustrates the shifting concept of food security since the late 1980s, delineating it into chronic and transitory forms. Chronic food insecurity is associated with persistent structural poverty characterized by long-term low income. In contrast, transitory food insecurity arises during periods of pressure caused by humanitarian crises such as wars or natural disasters, leading to economic shocks.

Sen (1986) contributed to the understanding of transitory food security by developing a famine theory that emphasizes the factors influencing an individual's entitlement to food access, including production, labor, and foundational resources. However, Deverux and Maxwell (2000) argue that the links between security, starvation, and economic failure alone are insufficient to explain the complexities of the food security problem. A comprehensive understanding necessitates consideration of the social and political constructs underlying the issue. Recent research by Drammeh, Hamid, and Rohana (2019) sheds light on the association between household food insecurity and malnutrition, particularly among children aged 0 to 5, in Sub-Saharan Africa. This study captures several contributing factors to food insecurity, such as gender, education, income level, poverty, and food pricing.

Indonesia has encountered previous food security challenges, such as during the 1998 Asian financial crisis, which prompted the government to actively address issues pertaining

to access to basic necessities (Gingrich et al., 2001). Additionally, as noted by Timmer (2004), food security policy in Indonesia is closely intertwined with food price levels, particularly the price of rice. The steep rise in rice prices following the financial crisis significantly impacted individuals living near the poverty line, greatly compromising the quality of their diet. Similar dynamics are being observed now, triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, Indonesia grapples with the compounding issues of high inequality and poverty, which have been extensively examined in various studies (Balisacan et al., 2003; Manning & Sumarto, 2011; Priebe, 2014; Booth, 2019). Hill (2021) delves into the policy history of poverty in Indonesia, tracing it from the colonial era to the Joko Widodo administration. The study highlights that the optimistic trajectory toward poverty reduction policies in Indonesia has been hindered by the economic shock brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (Hill, 2021). Inequality has persistently been a longstanding problem in Indonesia. Despite notable economic growth and a significant reduction in poverty levels by more than half (World Bank, 2020), the pandemic's adverse effects, as reported by the Indonesia Central Statistics Agency (2020), have rendered national targets for addressing nutrition unattainable. These findings are further corroborated by the Global Nutrition Report (2020). The economic crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic represents a novel and unforeseen challenge. Individuals living in poverty within low and middle-income countries, such as Indonesia, face significant disadvantages in both economic and social aspects. For instance, the disruption in food production and interruptions in cereal supply at the local level, observed in vulnerable countries, including Indonesia, emerged as one of the primary issues during the initial stages of the pandemic (Udmale et al., 2020). This problem was further compounded by the prevalence of transitory food insecurity experienced across numerous nations (Ma et al., 2021). Countries with high levels of entrenched poverty exhibit weak healthcare infrastructure, a lack of robust social safety nets, and widespread malnourishment. However, during the onset of COVID-19, pervasive poverty was not the sole concern to be addressed. Sereenonchai and Arunrat (2021) suggest that the economic shock induced by COVID-19 and the implementation of lockdown measures restricting people's mobility severely impacted the income of various business stakeholders, particularly those in the tourism sector. Consequently, this has led to a rising percentage of long-term unemployment, significant income reduction, and limited access to essential commodities, including food. The conditions imposed by lockdown measures have complicated interactions along the entire food supply chain, from processing to consumption (Galanakis, 2021).

This paper unpacks the connection between food security, poverty, and inequality caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Through critical literature review, an evident blind spot has been exposed, which is largely unaddressed in available studies: the long-term

reverberating damage of the economic shock on incomes created by COVID-19 and the long-lasting repercussions on the medium-low income population of Indonesia.

Research Method

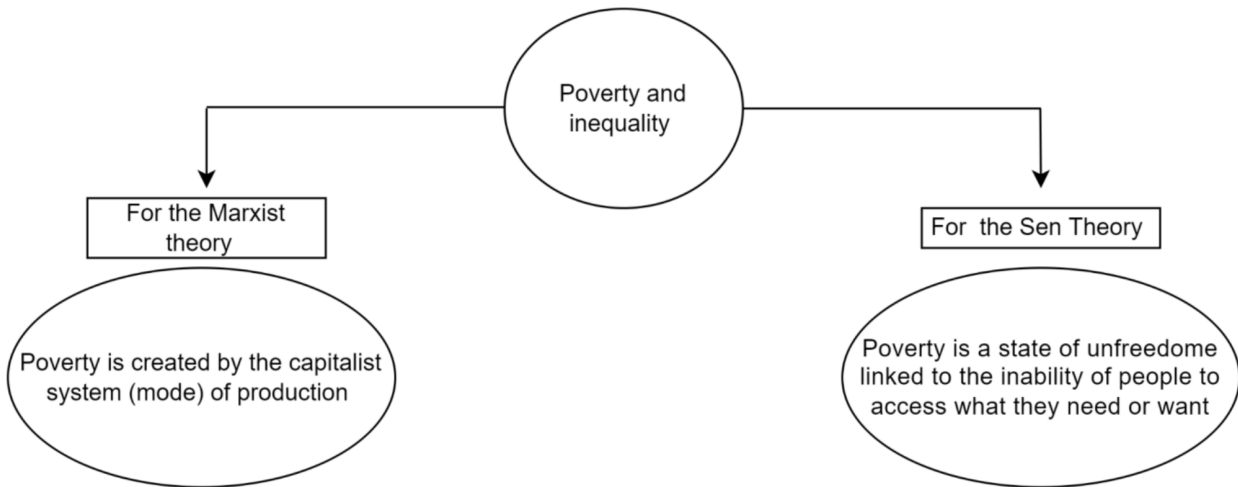
This research utilizes a combination of literature-based research based also from data collection from various databases and reports issued by institutions focusing on food and poverty-related matters, including FAO, WFP, UNICEF, World Bank, NGOs, relevant legislative regulations, and other papers pertaining to Indonesia's food security. All gathered data has been thoroughly reviewed and analyzed, incorporating sourced reports from Think-Tanks such as the Center for Indonesian Policy Studies. Secondary data is examined through pertinent library materials that shed light on Indonesia's food security policies concerning its poverty and inequality conditions, as provided by the Indonesia Central Statistics Agency (BPS). In understanding how the pandemic has magnified the challenges faced by Indonesia, the Marxist theory of inequality offers a suitable framework for analysis. It becomes evident that the pandemic cannot solely account for the exacerbation of inequality, poverty, and the unequal distribution of resources among the population.

Theoretical framework

According to Marxist theory, inequality and poverty are inherent features of the capitalist economy within the capitalist mode of production. Capitalist production systems generate unjust and unequal social structures, with social class corresponding to distinct structural positions (Wright & Perrow, 1977; Peet, 1975; p. 564).

According to traditional Marxist theory, social class in capitalist societies is determined by three criteria related to the mode of production: ownership of the means of production (capitalists), purchase of labor power from others (bourgeoisie), and sale of one's labor power (workers) (Wright & Perrone, 1977). A comprehensive understanding of the problem of poverty and inequality necessitates a thoughtful examination of these three factors. Likewise, Sen (1997) argues that inequality cannot be adequately analyzed by solely considering income levels. Inequality is the outcome of intricate intersections between socio-political elements. According to Sen, social well-being and welfare are intricately connected to the concept of freedom. In his theory of capabilities, Sen contends that in situations of poverty, it is insufficient to assess social well-being solely based on desires and pleasure, as advocated by utilitarianism. This is because individuals in poverty tend to suppress their notions of freedom due to their lived reality. For Sen, poverty represents a state of unfreedom (Sen, 2000), that results in a lack of well-being, as individuals cannot access the resources they need or desire (Sen, 1992, 1997, 1998, 1999)

Figure 1 : Theories on poverty



Source: the author

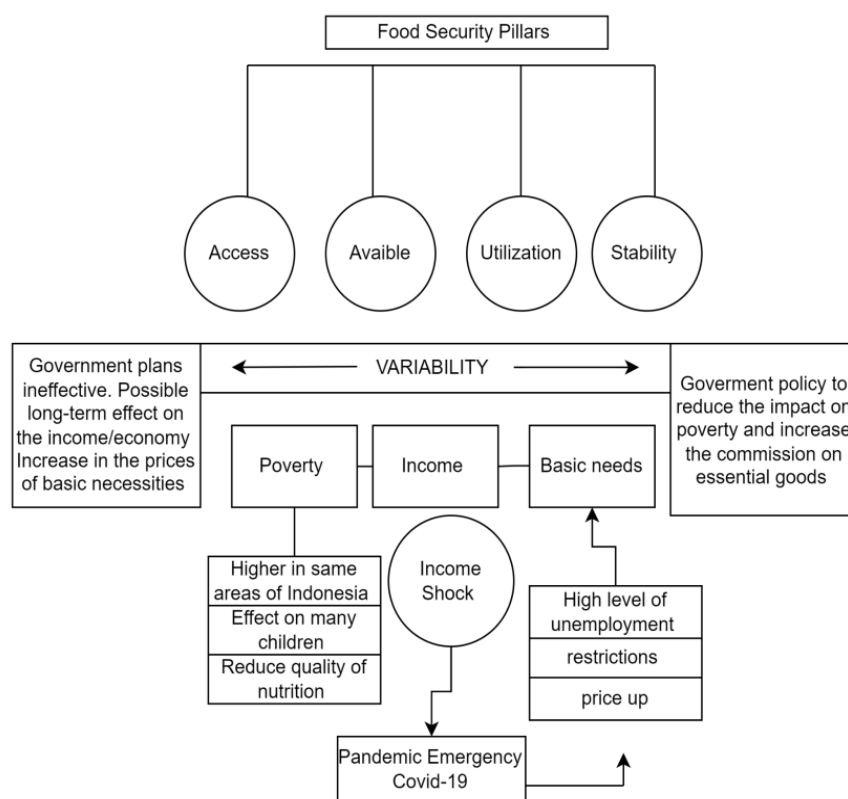
A comprehensive understanding of poverty concerning food security has been further enriched through an additional analysis conducted by the Center of Statistical Studies at the Indonesian Central Statistics Agency, employing the Basic Need Approach. According to research conducted by the Central Statistics Agency (BPS, 2020) during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia between 2020 and 2021, there is a clear correlation between COVID-19, poverty, and food security, primarily driven by the adverse impact on individuals' income and the subsequent surge in unemployment levels. As individuals lost their jobs, their ability to access basic needs, including food, was severely compromised.

COVID-19 in Indonesia, poverty, and inequality

The recent economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the vulnerability of food supply access to the forefront. It has significant implications for long-term policy formulation in times of economic turmoil. According to the Committee on World Food Security (2014), food security is contingent upon availability, access, utilization, and stability factors. The pandemic has had varying impacts on food security, severely curtailing economic activities due to lockdowns and restrictions. The high levels of unemployment have had a detrimental effect on the accessibility of food and other essential needs. Upon closer examination of the pandemic's effect on food access, it becomes evident that the increased cost of food has directly impeded the ability to procure essential dietary items, leading to adjustments in consumer priorities and often resulting in compromised food quality. Furthermore, the impact on the real economy, characterized by a slowdown in imports and exports and subsequent price hikes, has further strained household incomes.

At the macroeconomic level, COVID-19-related external shocks, such as income losses and the imposition of emergency measures, have caused instability, resulting in inadequate access to necessities and income shocks that undermine purchasing power. On the microeconomic scale, many Indonesians have experienced such significant income reductions that they cannot afford essential goods, often resorting to debt to secure basic needs and maintain a satisfactory level of nutrition. The diagram below provides an overview of the analysis, highlighting the range of effects generated by the COVID-19 emergency.

Figure 2: The effect on income shock on the poverty



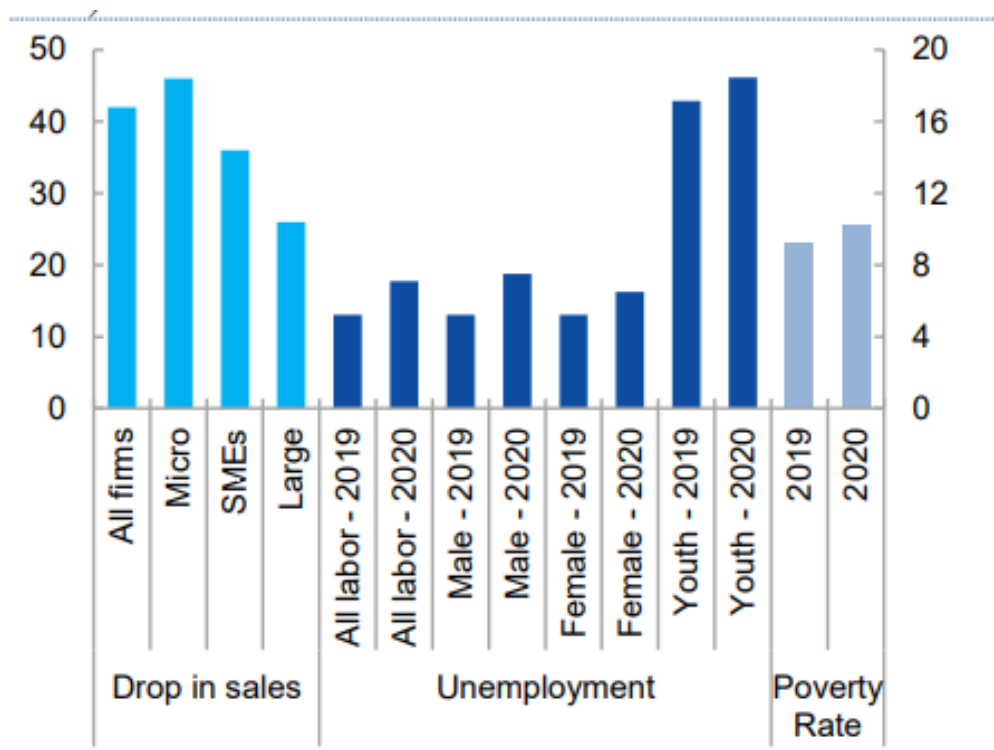
Source framework: the author

Inequality and poverty have become increasingly prevalent worldwide, particularly following the economic shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Blundell et al., 2020). Developing and developed countries have faced significant economic challenges due to the pandemic. For instance, London, which already exhibited exceptional levels of inequality prior to COVID-19, has experienced a further exacerbation of inequality and poverty throughout the capital city (Blundell et al., 2020). However, in more affluent countries, there is recognition that the pandemic experience presents an opportunity to

address spatial inequality, as remote work arrangements have gained widespread traction (Blundell et al., 2020).

On the other hand, the situation in low and middle-income countries differs. Economic growth in Asia was already experiencing fluctuations prior to the onset of COVID-19, and the pandemic further impeded progress, leading to significant job losses, particularly among low-income workers (Jurzyk et al., 2020; World Bank, 2021). These effects have disproportionately affected vulnerable sub-populations, including women and youth.

Figure 3: High toll on families, firms, and Individuals during the recession



Source: World Bank, 2021

Compared to other nations, Indonesia has been significantly impacted by COVID-19, experiencing multiple waves of contagion from 2019 to 2021 and recording the highest death rate in Southeast Asia (Berada Covid-19, 2021). The country’s high population density has posed challenges in implementing effective social distancing measures, leading to an increased caseload and rapid spread of the virus (Djalante et al., 2020). Furthermore, the inadequate health infrastructure in Indonesia has been unable to meet the demand for medical support (Mahendradhata et al., 2017; Mahendradhata et al., 2021). Inequality and resource distribution have long been persistent issues in Indonesia, contributing to a significant gap between the wealthy and the poor (Leigh & Eng, 2010; World Bank, 2015; Akita & Miyata, 2018).

From the Marxist theory, it is possible to understand that the increase in poverty and inequality in Indonesia cannot be solely attributed to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the country's economy. By examining the Indonesian capitalist economic system, it becomes apparent that it operates as a hybrid system characterized by a free but controlled market, with state intervention serving the interests of elite families (oligarchs) who reap the profits (Rosser, 2013). This economic-oligarchy structure began to develop during the Soeharto regime and solidified in its most advanced form after the fall of the regime, giving rise to an oligarchic regime (Ford & Pepinsky, 2013). Through the lens of the Marxist dialectic, this capitalist system exacerbates poverty and inequality in Indonesia during the pandemic, revealing its true nature and impact on unequal access to resources, increased poverty rates, and job losses. The issue of inequality was already severe before the pandemic and has been further exacerbated by it. Like many other low and middle-income countries, the Indonesian government faced the challenging decision of prioritizing preventing viral transmission or preserving the economy (Kar et al., 2020; Mukiibi, 2020). Imposing lockdown measures would have high economic costs, leading to job losses and a complete cessation of income for poorer individuals, thereby intensifying hardships in a country already marked by high resource distribution disparities and inequality.

Initially, President Joko Widodo pursued a middle-path compromise by implementing limited social interaction restrictions, thus avoiding a complete lockdown, in contrast to the responses seen in Europe, Australia, and China. These restrictions were enacted through the implementation of Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar (PSBB), or Large Scale Social Restrictions, as regulated by Decree No. 21 of 2020, aimed at preventing the collapse of the healthcare system. However, Asyary and Veruswati (2020) argue that the government's estimation and predictions of COVID-19 cases were underestimated, which may have influenced the outcomes of the initial policy response. Nevertheless, the implementation of PSBB significantly negatively impacted the economy, particularly in the tourism industry (Isharyanto et al., 2022). The decline in the tourism sector had ripple effects on the agricultural industry, as the demand for food supplies for hotels and resorts sharply declined (Isharyanto et al., 2022), further exacerbating the adverse impact on Indonesia's national and local economy.

As pointed out by Oliva, Gibson, and Nasrudin (2020), the government implemented two policies to mitigate the recession induced by the pandemic, focusing on supporting the poor and individuals at risk of falling into poverty. This emphasis on poverty reduction is necessary because existing policies addressing inequality have proven to be inefficient. It is evident from the unequal access to essential institutions such as education and wealth that inequality persists (Wicaksono et al., 2017). In 2021 response to the deepening economic impact caused by the pandemic, the government introduced the National Economic

Recovery Programme (Pemulihan Ekonomi Nasional or PEN), which addressed health and economic concerns. The recovery plan aimed to provide incentives for medical workers, cover treatment costs, introduce tax incentives, and relax import regulations for goods and services needed to manage the pandemic (Brata et al., 2021). Notably, most confirmed COVID-19 cases in Indonesia were concentrated in Java, particularly in Jakarta and East Java, which comprise 55% of the Indonesian population (Indonesian Central Statistics Agency, 2020).

Hence, within just one year since the emergence of COVID-19 (2019-2021), the number of people living below the poverty line in Indonesia reached 25 million, with an additional 55 million individuals struggling near the poverty line. Moreover, an alarming 20% of the Indonesian population became vulnerable to future poverty (SMERU, 2021). To fully grasp the significance of this data, it is necessary to examine how the poverty rate in Indonesia is determined. Estimates are derived from calculating minimum basic needs, where the poverty line encompasses food and non-food items (Hill, 2021). In Indonesia, the food poverty line is set at 2,100 kilocalories per capita per day, while the non-food poverty line considers access to essential necessities such as clothing, education, and healthcare. Hill (2021) emphasizes that different poverty lines yield varying poverty estimates, as consumption expenditure patterns differ across regions, particularly with a concentration in Java, leading to potential biases in generalized datasets. Therefore, comprehending the impact on household finances is crucial to understanding the effect of COVID-19 on poverty and inequality within Indonesia's food security landscape (Nurkholis, 2013; Dartanto et al., 2020). Disturbingly, after one year of the pandemic, 74.3% of households were poorer than the previous year (SMERU, 2021).

Indonesia Food Supply Policy

Indonesia is ranked 70th out of 107 countries on the Global Hunger Index (GHI, 2020), with a score of 19.1, indicating a moderate risk of food insecurity. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the GHI analysis offers a national perspective and does not adequately account for the disparities between urban and rural areas, particularly the variations in hunger levels across the eastern islands. The GHI fails to capture the distinct experiences of families residing in urban areas compared to those in rural regions, as well as the discrepancies between Java/Bali and the other eastern islands, specifically the Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT) area, where the risk of hunger is significantly higher. According to the NGO Action Against Hunger, malnutrition rates in Kupang are alarmingly high, with 21.2% of children aged 6 to 59 months experiencing malnutrition, including a severe acute malnutrition rate of 3.9%, that surpasses the emergency threshold of 2%. Malnutrition remains a pervasive issue in Indonesia, particularly in eastern regions, and

poses a significant challenge for children, with the situation further exacerbated by the pandemic (UNICEF, 2021; WHO, 2021).

According to the Center of Indonesian Policy Studies (2021), self-sufficiency levels do not solely determine food security. Instead, it relies on factors such as affordability, nutritional value, and dietary diversity. Food security implies that everyone has consistent and adequate physical and economic access to safe and nutritious food, aligning with their dietary requirements and preferences, to support active and healthy lives (FAO, 2006). The Food Security Index ranks Indonesia 65th globally (FSI, 2021), with approximately 22 million Indonesians facing hunger and nearly 30% (9 million) of children suffering from undernutrition, including 10.2% experiencing wasting and 17.7% being underweight (Asian Development Bank, 2019). While domestic production has struggled to meet the demands of the growing population over the years, the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the challenges by limiting the ability to import food due to disruptions in global supply chains and local disturbances resulting in declining farm-gate prices. Various provinces across the country were already experiencing shortages in critical staples such as rice, garlic, sugar, chili peppers, eggs, and corn (ADB, 2020). Examining the government's relevant policies to understand how access to food is becoming increasingly difficult for a larger portion of the Indonesian population (Amanta & Aprilianti, 2020).

The food supply in Indonesia is closely tied to domestic agricultural policies, particularly regarding rice production. However, the country also relies on imports for various products, including garlic, beef, sugar, and rice (Asogiyan, 2018; Respatiadi & Nabila, 2017; McDonald & Meylinah, 2019; Indonesia Ministry of Agriculture, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown restrictions disrupted these imports, leading to reductions and delays in processing. Consequently, poverty and persistent hunger have been exacerbated, with 27.5 million people experiencing unemployment in Indonesia (Statistics Indonesia, 2021). World Bank data indicates that among 4,000 households surveyed, 23% reported food shortages, and 29% reported reduced food consumption (World Bank, 2021b). The government has implemented various regulations and laws to regulate the food system in Indonesia. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the enactment of the Omnibus Law, the food trade was governed by law No. 18/2012, commonly known as the Food Law. This law restricted food and agricultural imports to the domestic supply level (Amanta & Aprilianti, 2020). However, this approach proved inadequate as Indonesia struggled to meet its internal food demand, particularly rice (SMERU, 2020). The Omnibus Law brought revisions to the Food Law, allowing food imports to contribute to the country's food security and serve as a source of food supply (Amanta & Aprilianti, 2020). The figure below, provided by the CIPS, summarizes the changes introduced by the Omnibus Law in relation to the Food Law in Indonesia.

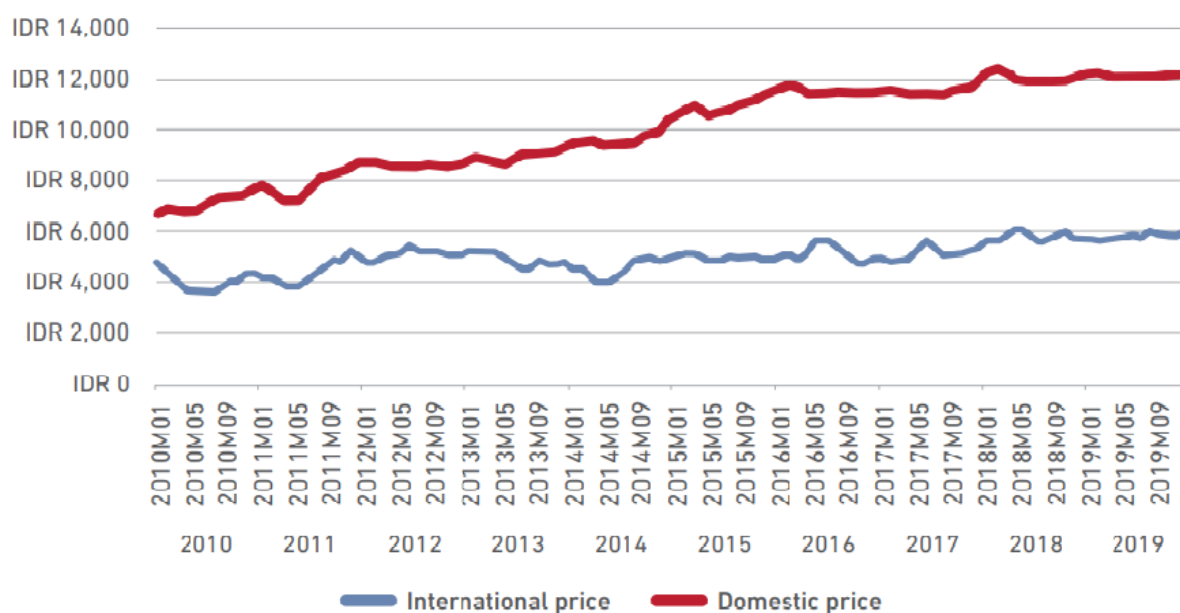
Figure 4 : Changes in the Omnibus Law on Job Creation relating to food import

	Food Law	Omnibus Law
Article 1(7)	Food availability is the condition of the availability of good from domestic production and National Food Reserve as well as important if the two main sources cannot meet demand	Food availability is the condition of the availability of food from domestic production, National Food Reserve and food imports
Article 14(1)	The source of food availability comes from domestic food production and National Food Reserve	The source of food availability is prioritized from: a) Domestic food production b) National Food Reserve and/or c) Food imports
Article 14 (2)	In case food supply as elaborated in (1) is not sufficient, food can be supplied from imports according to demand	Source of food as elaborated in (1) is implemented with consideration of the interest of farmers, fishermen, seafood breeders and micro-and small food businesses though tariff and NTMs
Article 36 (1)	Food imports can only be conducted if domestic food production is not enough and/or if it cannot be produced in the country	Food imports are conducted to fulfil domestic demand
Article 36 (2)	Staple food imports can only be conducted if domestic food production and National Food Reserve are not sufficient	Staple food imports are conducted to fulfil domestic demand and National Food Reserve
Article 36 (3)	The sufficiency of domestic food production and by the ministry or government agency in charge of food	Food imports as described in (1) and in (2) are set by the central government with consideration of interest of farmers, fishermen, seafood breeders, and micro-and small-food businesses

Source: Amanta & Aprilianti 2020

Indeed, the implementation of the new law has contributed to the liberalization of food trade in Indonesia. However, the effectiveness of this liberalization will depend on the country’s ability to reform its complex food trade policies. According to the Center of Indonesian Policy Studies (CIPS), it is crucial for Indonesia to critically evaluate its regulatory measures, particularly the Non-Tariff Measure (NTM) regulation (CIPS, 2020b). Amanda and Wibisono (2021) argue that the imposition of NTMs in international agricultural trade has had adverse effects, leading to higher food costs. Figure 5 provides a visual representation of the increase in rice prices over the past decade, highlighting the impact of these measures.

Figure 5 : Domestic (Indonesia) and International rice price trend



Source: Amanda & Wibisono (2021)

It is evident from the graphic that the price of rice in Indonesia does not follow a linear trend with the prices set by the government-administered Ministry of Trade Regulation No. 57/2017, which range from IDR 9,450 to IDR 10,250. The graphic highlights that the rice price in Indonesia is higher than the international price, making it unaffordable for many Indonesians to purchase imported foods. According to the Center of Indonesian Policy Studies (CIPS), this high price can be attributed to various challenges in domestic agriculture and trade policies, including low productivity, high production costs, limited agricultural land, inadequate infrastructure, and climate change-induced flooding (ADB, 2019). Additionally, the cost of rice production in Indonesia is 2.5 times higher than in Vietnam (Arifin et al., 2019). Indeed, the focus lies in examining the impact of COVID-19 on the food supply policy in Indonesia. It is evident that domestic factors, such as low productivity, weak infrastructure, and geographical variations, could be improved domestic food production. Moreover, it is clear that more than domestic agricultural production is needed to meet the demand in the short term. Therefore, trade regulations that impose high taxes, such as Non-Tariff Measures (NTMs), will not effectively address Indonesia's food security concerns. During the early stages of the pandemic, the Ministry of Trade temporarily eliminated import licensing for certain food items. The CIPS analyzed the impact of food regulations without NTMs and found that the removal of NTM restrictions on items like garlic and onions could result in price reductions from IDR 57,350 per kilogram to IDR 40,650 (Amanta, 2021; Amanta & Wibisono, 2021), as per the CIPS analysis. Such price reductions could enhance food access, quantity, and quality for a larger

population, thereby alleviating poverty. According to Ikhsan (2021), the Government should remain flexible with food import policy to ensure food supply to ensure that food prices are not too high. As the CIPS suggests, the Indonesian Government should pay more attention to improving flexibility in NMTs regulations.

COVID-19: effect on food security

To understand the effect of COVID-19 on food security in Indonesia, it is crucial to examine the pandemic's impact on all aspects of the food supply system. This is necessary due to the diverse mechanisms involved, ranging from disruptions in international trade to challenges in domestic production (Schmidhuber et al., 2020). In a country like Indonesia, which relies on imports to supplement domestic food production, COVID-19 has posed an additional challenge, particularly in terms of the potential depression of the international market, particularly for rice. Moreover, exporting countries may implement barriers to prioritize their domestic needs, further complicating the situation (Sulser & Dunston, 2020). However, it is worth noting that food prices did not experience significant increases during the early stages of the pandemic (SMERU, 2020). Prices remained relatively stable, although variations were observed across different cities, and prices even dropped during the Idul Fitri holidays. Nevertheless, the increase in COVID-19 cases affected people's access to food by disrupting employment and income due to distancing and movement restrictions. In other words, the pandemic triggered an income shock, leading to a significant rise in unemployment and a subsequent increase in poverty levels (BPS, 2020). The impact of declining income and poverty has exacerbated the situation, increasing debt and hardship. A study conducted by SMERU in Bekasi, Maros, and Bandung (Bali) revealed that many individuals in Indonesia had to resort to borrowing from stores or food vendors, compounding the income shock experienced by the population (Hastuti et al., 2020). Moreover, the shock extended beyond restricted food access and affected food quality. According to J-PAL, only 19% of households reported consuming an adequate amount of food in the previous week, while 35% reported eating less than necessary, primarily due to financial constraints during the pandemic's peak (Hanna & Olken, 2020). The diverse social characteristics of the country have resulted in different income shocks experienced by individuals, which have significantly impacted the nutritional quality of their diets. SMERU (2020) found that vulnerable groups with reduced daily income face challenges in accessing an adequate food supply and experience a decline in dietary quality, particularly in terms of insufficient consumption of fruits and vegetables.

Conclusion

This article unpacks the intricate relationship between food security, poverty, and inequality, specifically focusing on the policy measures formulated to address the economic crisis during the pandemic between 2019-2021. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented

significant challenges to Indonesia, pushing the country into its first substantial economic crisis since 1998. The impact on the economy has been palpable, leading to an expansion of the poverty rate and a widening wealth gap. As an importing nation, Indonesia has experienced escalating prices for imported food items, particularly rice, which has outpaced the income growth of a significant portion of the population. Consequently, the economic crisis and soaring unemployment rates have compelled many individuals to accumulate debt in order to meet their basic needs. This has increased the number of people consuming lower-quality food and a surge in hunger rates. It is evident that the food system in Indonesia, along with its associated regulations, requires restructuring to incorporate greater social protection measures, especially for vulnerable segments of the population, including children and remote provinces that are more susceptible to economic shocks. Moreover, particular attention should be directed towards the Indonesian political-economic system. The economic shock induced by COVID-19 is not the primary cause of the surge in poverty; rather, it is a consequence of an inadequate political-economic structure that, when confronted with the pandemic, has exposed an existing system plagued by poverty, lack of freedom (in Sen's perspective), and inequality

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