



LEARNINGS FROM THE SEAJAR INITIATIVE IN INDONESIA

INTRODUCTION

On 28 February 2020, the Government of Indonesia declared a national disaster in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. On 11 March, the government established a national COVID-19 taskforce (Gusgas COVID-19) followed by similar structures at sub-national level. Shortly after, civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) came together to initiate a new coordination mechanism to share information and address any gaps in official responses: the Sekretariat Jaringan-Antar-jaringan (literally translated as Network-of-Networks of Civil Society Organisations), abbreviated as SEAJAR, which also means ‘equal’ in Bahasa.

This briefing shares insights from an evaluation of the SEAJAR network conducted between August and September 2020, with a view to advancing learnings of the *Building a Blueprint for Change* research project.

The Blueprint project is an initiative of Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) and Pujiono Centre, as part of HAG's Humanitarian Horizons Research Program, funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

The evaluation of SEAJAR allowed the Blueprint team to learn more about parts of the traditional and non-traditional humanitarian system in Indonesia. It explored the potential of a locally led coordination mechanism as an entry point for transformative change. The reflection on SEAJAR provides valuable insights into how the system is changing in response to COVID-19 and further drives the localisation conversation in Indonesia which has underpinned the Blueprint research.

BACKGROUND: BUILDING A BLUEPRINT FOR CHANGE

The Blueprint research, focused on Indonesia, seeks to provide an evidence base for progressing transformative change to the humanitarian system at the country level. The first phase of this research highlighted four priority areas for change, identified by stakeholders in Indonesia: coordination, accountability, resource channels and capacity development. The second phase now seeks to find leverage points at which interventions could result in systemic change across these four areas.

The momentum leading from Phase 1 into Phase 2 was interrupted by the significant changes in context brought about by COVID-19. In Indonesia, the focus – including for the Pujiono Centre – shifted towards the COVID-19 response in-country. Whilst this required a pause in the progression towards Phase 2, it also presented the research team with an opportunity to pursue an action research approach to collect learnings to augment emerging findings from Phase 1.

For the period of March to June 2020, the project pivoted to support the establishment of the SEJAJAR network (explained in more detail below). SEJAJAR's objectives link closely to the priority areas identified during Phase 1 of the Blueprint research. With support from Humanitarian Advisory Group through the Blueprint stream, a monitoring and evaluation framework for the network was developed to systematically capture evidence and learning to inform the next phase of Blueprint consultations and design.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated moves towards localisation of humanitarian action across the Asia-Pacific region.¹ HAG and Pujiono Centre's Blueprint Project has been revised to take into account this new context, concentrating on the following questions:

- ▶ **What are the success factors for transformative change to the humanitarian system in Indonesia?**
- ▶ **What are the implications for change in the humanitarian system in Indonesia moving forward?**

With these objectives in mind, reflection on the SEJAJAR initiative can be used to inform future thinking on reform to the humanitarian system in Indonesia. This briefing focuses mainly on coordination as this was SEJAJAR's primary contribution, while also considering lessons for systemic reform efforts. It draws on an evaluation carried out by a team from the Institute of Research Governance and Social Change (IRGSC) from 8 August to 8 September 2020, to capture the key points, learnings, and recommendations from SEJAJAR's response to COVID-19 in Indonesia until that time.

¹ Chen, C. and Cook, A. Humanitarian Assistance in the Asia-Pacific during COVID-19. *Nanyang Technological University Insight*. No. IN20-06. August 2020.; ARC, La Trobe, HAG and PRP. Window of Opportunity: Learning from COVID-19 to progress locally led response and development think piece. 2020.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS FOR THE BLUEPRINT PROJECT

Learnings to be further tested in Phase 2 of Blueprint are outlined below.



Coordination

Coordination in the context of COVID-19 must be multi-sectoral and more effectively take into account issues that have previously been considered outside of the humanitarian scope. Creating a more inclusive coordination architecture in line with the government's Penta Helix concept (which strives to better include the private sector and civil society in disaster management and humanitarian operations) will be critical in Indonesia post-Covid.

The evaluation found that there would be merit in promoting a more decentralised coordination mechanism among SEJAJAR members, to be managed at the provincial rather than the national level, arguing that this would improve inclusivity and participation. Blueprint will further explore opportunities for a more decentralised coordination structure, assessing advantages and disadvantages of this model.

SEJAJAR has also further proven the importance of securing appropriate government support for any new initiative. Achieving government engagement and buy-in will be a core objective of the Phase 2 of Blueprint.



Capacity

The evaluation found that government often overlooked the capacity of CSOs and undervalued the role of SEJAJAR in mobilising civil society. This finding echoes one of the priorities identified in Blueprint Phase 1. Developing CSO capacity will be essential for these organisations and networks to be seen as partners for the government response.

SEJAJAR has hosted several trainings and capacity development events alongside more than 40 webinars to boost knowledge and capacity of local organisations. This has been valued by members but lacks systemic impact. Blueprint Phase 2 will seek to understand how to link standardised capacity development with localisation processes to enhance benefits across all levels of the system.



Resource channels

The SEJAJAR evaluation has provided empirical evidence of the critical gap in information flows from the national government and international system to the grassroots level – another core issue identified by Blueprint Phase 1.

SEJAJAR created alternative channels of information exchange by cutting the long bureaucratic procedures of vertical crisis and risk communication flows to local organisations – this was seen as one of the greatest value-adds of the network. Phase 2 of Blueprint will seek to identify ways to build on this process to facilitate freer flow of information and institutionalise this change across the system.

A key question raised by SEJAJAR has been 'how can civil society access funding to survive the pandemic?' This requires developing ways to access and generate funds in a repeated and sustainable manner. This will be explored as a priority for Blueprint, as to how to better open funding channels to local organisations.



Accountability

Blueprint Phase 1 identified increased accountability to affected populations as a core priority in Indonesia, echoing calls for global reform. Although this was not explicitly addressed through SEJAJAR, it has provided a forum to test the idea that improved coordination will ultimately lead to a more effective, inclusive and accountable response. This will be further explored through Blueprint Phase 2.

One of the core objectives of SEJAJAR has been to hold the government accountable for their response. This has given rise to tensions between SEJAJAR's role as a partner to government to increase collaboration versus the platform's role as a critic of the government to remain accountable to its members and elevate criticism from the grassroots level. Striking a balance between upwards and downwards accountability will be crucial for any new reform initiative.

THE EVALUATION

SEJAJAR is a multi-sectoral platform designed to specifically address the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. It seeks to provide and develop value added services for CSOs/NGOs and communities, through exchanging information, strengthening grassroots and CSOs/NGOs cooperation at national, provincial, and district/city levels, and supporting strategy development in dealing with the pandemic. SEJAJAR also aims to strengthen cooperation with governments and other stakeholders to combat COVID-19. Members view SEJAJAR as a ‘meta-network’: a network of networks of CSOs/NGOs, including Red Cross Indonesia, which serves as a multi-sector and multi-issue platform. SEJAJAR is comprised of 25 national organisational networks, bringing a total of at least 600 CSOs/NGOs from 34 provinces across Indonesia.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

As a spontaneous response network, SEJAJAR is not a ‘project by design’. Some of SEJAJAR’s vision and mission were articulated over time as the COVID-19 crisis evolved, as SEJAJAR’s role adapted and expanded, and as expectations from both the members and the networks increased over time. The evaluation contributed to this process by proposing a theory of change as well as examining SEJAJAR’s response to the pandemic.

The evaluation applied mix-method approaches to address the evaluation questions of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, transformative ability and sustainability. Data collection methods combined online focus group discussions (FGD), Zoom interviews and desk research, including review of webinar videos. Key informant interviews (KIIs) and the FGDs were done via online meeting rooms. Online phone interviews and the FGDs were

done separately at the national and provincial levels. All findings summarised in this briefing reflect the views of key informants and analysis of the evaluation team. References are detailed in the full evaluation, available upon request.

FINDINGS

Relevance

For members, SEJAJAR’s key purpose is to communicate information from the grassroots up. Informants indicated that this takes multiple forms: an information clearing house, a knowledge broker, a platform for knowledge sharing, a provider of technical assistance for sub-national NGOs and catalyst for government-CSO coordination. SEJAJAR envisioned itself as a ‘network of networks’ that allows CSOs to facilitate and quicken the exchange of information, communication and coordination between governments and civil society more broadly. The traditional crisis management structures dealing with disasters and public health emergencies have faced increased pressure due to COVID-19. SEJAJAR has provided additional support to these structures so they have the necessary capabilities and capacities. The platform provided a unique value to responding to the crisis by providing a whole of society approach.

SEJAJAR’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic filled the gaps in the formal response system led by local and national government. This includes helping NGOs from sub-national levels to channel localised information and their own objectives to provincial and central governments. Critical members as well as respondents from national government acknowledged that there was a big gap in information as local communities were neither adequately aware of the level of the crisis nor

properly informed about risk management and crisis response measures from the central government. SEJAJAR also provided technical assistance and resource persons to help local CSOs/NGOs access some opportunities that were made available by some donors.

Effectiveness

The main service of SEJAJAR has been to provide information, clarify misinformation and allow new collaborative work. SEJAJAR organised a number of webinar sessions, with participants including community organisers, working and actively organising at the national or provincial level. The webinars created an additional network, bringing more opportunity for SEJAJAR's members to cooperate. The webinar sessions are not one-way communications but provide opportunities for actors to mobilise ideas and form critical thinking regarding the current gaps in the governmental approach, as well as possible solutions.

Using its network of national and local CSOs/NGOs, SEJAJAR attempted to address the gaps in the government's response, ranging from coordination, to crisis and risk communication. For example, capacity development through SEJAJAR at provincial level included trainings for village facilitators and local officials in East Nusa Tenggara and West Sumatra. Some CSOs said that access to reliable and real time information from experts with various backgrounds was SEJAJAR's most important contribution to their work. SEJAJAR has been able to mobilise in a timely manner, a contribution highlighted by a key government partner. While it can be improved, evidence suggests that the activities of SEJAJAR's secretariat were effective and appropriate for its objective to improve coordination.

Efficiency

The cost of running SEJAJAR is based on the spirit of Gotong Royong, where every organisation contributes according to its

capacity. The operational cost for the secretariat is co-managed by Muhammadiyah Disaster Management Centre (MDMC), Pujiono Centre and Oxfam. The operational budget consists of communication costs, including the payment for the subscription of virtual meeting rooms (e.g. Zoom). The present funding model is seen as ideal by most SEJAJAR members. Staff costs were carried by organisations allocating work-days of existing staff members to SEJAJAR activities. The financial structure does not demand significant resources or complex reporting requirements.

Transformative ability

SEJAJAR has made important contributions to existing agendas. The Central Government's Penta-Helix concept promotes inclusion of the private sector and civil society (including academia or expert and mass media) in disaster management and humanitarian response. SEJAJAR has connected governments with other actors in the Penta-Helix. Within the context of humanitarian reform, SEJAJAR has emerged as a business model for 'localisation from below,' reflecting global calls for locally led reform.

SEJAJAR also presents a unique opportunity for civil society collective action. With Indonesia emerging as a middle-income country, external donor support has declined but a policy for CSOs/NGOs sector development does not yet clearly exist. As a result, CSOs/NGOs in Indonesia have been experiencing an existential crisis due to stagnation and SEJAJAR has been instrumental in asking the right questions concerning civil society survival in the context of the pandemic and beyond. SEJAJAR presents a unique opportunity for Indonesian CSOs/NGOs across sectors to create historical momentum by acting collectively to channel their aspiration to governments at different levels.

Sustainability

In general, most of SEJAJAR's network agree to continue working within the platform over the next 12 months, or as long as COVID-19 persists. However, views on the future of SEJAJAR beyond COVID-19 vary and the potential direction of SEJAJAR into the future is highly contested among members. Potential outcomes can be summarised in four scenarios, which may overlap (see text box).

By moving beyond traditional boundaries of disaster-focused CSOs/NGO networks, SEJAJAR inherently brings potential competition as well as new connections, which affect how different members view SEJAJAR's future. If SEJAJAR is

to continue, it will need resources to maintain services to both grassroots organisations and CSOs/NGOs.

Currently SEJAJAR operates as a government partner, complementing the government's work, but also acts as a representative of society to scrutinise and potentially criticise government responses. These two positions can create tensions among SEJAJAR members as well as between members and the government. How members view SEJAJAR's contribution and the best ways to support any future role will be important questions as the pandemic response slows down.

Potential scenarios for SEJAJAR's future



Norm-building process:

This scenario recognises that SEJAJAR's continuity depends on shared decision-making by all members, who should decide what is the best structure and role of its secretariat. For example, the current administrative head office could be replaced by a rotating presidency held by different members.



COVID-only mandate: This scenario sees SEJAJAR being dismantled as soon as the pandemic ends, to avoid duplication of mandates. It is preferred by nearly half of the disaster-focused NGO members.



Expanded mandate: This scenario imagines SEJAJAR continuing to function beyond COVID-19 as an infrastructure for Indonesian CSOs/NGOs, to support collective advocacy at the national level. It is especially favoured by members of SEJAJAR with non-disaster related mandates, such as gender, rural technology and media networks.



Institutionalisation process: This scenario considers the possibility of SEJAJAR evolving into a networked NGO. While being mindful of the cost and resources required to operate a large network, most members agreed that SEJAJAR should remain in the form of a network and rejected the idea of institutionalising it as an NGO.

RECOMMENDATIONS MOVING FORWARD

The evaluation recommends 8 agendas for SEJAJAR over the next 12 months:



- 1. Improve collaboration.** Whatever approach is taken, SEJAJAR remains vital to strengthen the collaboration amongst stakeholders which will support the formal pandemic response led by governments at the national and sub-national levels.



- 2. Increase legitimacy** by connecting with government beyond the COVID-19 Task Force (Satgas COVID-19) structure.



- 3.** In order to gain traction from government, there is a need to **create more compelling stories about SEJAJAR's contribution to the COVID-19 response.** For example, SEJAJAR can be more confident in explaining its 'net worth' as a collective in order to frame some positive stories around the contribution of its member to the overall COVID-19 response.



- 4.** SEJAJAR should **remain agile in asking critical questions** including the question on how to respond to local grassroots demands. This allows SEJAJAR to help government fill the gaps between the policy created in Jakarta and the implementation in the field.



- 5.** SEJAJAR also needs to find ways to **facilitate its platforms with mainstream media.** There is need to reach more stakeholders for greater impact.



- 6. Promoting a more decentralised coordination mechanism among members.** For example, there is a merit for SEJAJAR to move from being a nationwide CSOs/NGOs coordination platform to be managed at provincial level where provincial focal points can be regrouped to provide more quality information and engagement.



- 7. Continuing support for capacity development** of local organisations in dealing with COVID-19. This can be based on assessment and monitoring of specific provincial level efforts to map the constraints faced by provincial focal points.



- 8.** SEJAJAR should **find ways to balance its role** as a critical partner to hold government accountable and as a facilitator to complement government crisis management, communication, collaboration and coordination.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

SEJAJAR evaluation



Lesson 1

The evaluation found that the Indonesian government's National Task Force, and to certain extent also the leading emergency response organisations, did not adequately recognise the role and contribution of SEJAJAR. It suggested that SEJAJAR's role was insufficiently understood despite its ability to catalyse civil society and sub-national level coordination and information exchange.

Reflections for reform



Reflection 1

It takes time and resources for the work of new initiatives to become known, even when these include or are led by established actors. During periods of system-wide response there is great competition for attention and some actors may prefer to use familiar channels even where these may be less efficient or effective than alternatives. Where initiatives may have to medium or long-term roles, consideration should be given to building an evidence base – even if 'anecdotal' at first – to track their contributions from the outset.



Lesson 2



Reflection 2

The evaluation identified two sets of tensions over mandates and approaches within SEJAJAR and between SEJAJAR and government actors. Firstly, it suggested that the network explore how members view SEJAJAR's mandate and any future potential roles with a view to any competition or overlaps. Secondly, it highlighted that SEJAJAR could develop a strategy for government engagement, helping it to navigate situations where vocal criticisms could jeopardise government support while also honouring the need to channel the voices of its members, including in public forums when deemed necessary.

Institutional politics inform how different stakeholders view coordination opportunities. Agreements to cooperate on an emergency footing may (or may not) temporarily shift institutional priorities or preferences, but will not permanently remove these factors. Collective advocacy can help to amplify marginalised voices, however consideration must be given to how decisions are made in collaborative forums, including power dynamics, different vulnerabilities and risk appetites, and relevance to shared objectives.

The Institute of Research Governance and Social Change (IRGSC) team that led the evaluation included D.E. Li, J.A. Lassa, J. Talan, M. Violeta and R. Banunaek. The evaluation was conducted in consultation with the Pujiono Centre and Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) and funded through HAG's partnership with the Australia Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

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