The Impacts of Open Government Initiatives to Deal with COVID-19: A Learning from Local Government

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Abstract. Many previous studies have confirmed that collaboration and transparency are the best ways to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. The state must involve other actors such as local governments and civil society in drafting laws, implementing COVID-19 programs, and exercising controls. This article examines the experience of the City of Semarang in applying the principles of open government in handling the COVID-19 pandemic. This article is qualitative research that combined a systematic literature review and data collected from an in-depth interview, scientific journal, report, and website related to the article's topic. This article focuses on the government city and the local civil organisation's efforts to initiate open government initiatives and implement them in its agendas to deal with the pandemic COVID-19. The article concludes that the two actors has agreed to implement open government initiatives in response to the COVID-19 pandemic as those principles has positive impacts handling the pandemic. This article also notice that various factors are still hampering the implementation of open government. For future research agenda, it is important to analysis how to deal with the obstacles.

Keywords: COVID-19, Open Government, Local Government

1 Introduction

Open Government is a term used to explain a concept that promotes transparency, accountability, and collaboration in governance. Historically, the name has been used rather than a new thought in various contexts. The term "Open Government" was first introduced by Wallace Parks in his 1955 article entitled The Open Government Principle: Applying the Tight to Know Under the Constitution [1]. It happened when Parks served as counsel in the United States (US) Special Subcommittee on Government Information to produce legislation known later as the Freedom of Information Act. In his paper, Parks wrote that open government and information availability should be essential principles of good government. The term became more distinguished after eight countries (USA, Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Norway, the Philippines, and South Africa) spearheaded Open Government Partnership (OGP) in 2011. The OGP is a multilateral initiative to secure commitments from national and subnational governments to promote transparency, endorse civil engagements, fight for corruption, and utilize new technological advancements to strengthen governance [2].

To make sense of meaning open government, it is best to examine the difference between open government and good governance. The former was born by World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as principles-transparency, accountability, efficiency, participation, and ownership- to guide their work with member countries in dealing with the economic crises [3]. Those values converted into broader objectives to develop political accountability, civil involvement, law enforcement, and access to information. However, the two international financial institutions' solutions later failed in their implementation and caused a worse situation for the recipient countries like Indonesia. They introduced the Washington Consensus, which included liberalization of market mechanisms and required fewer state interventions in the economy. For instance, it happened to Mexico and Indonesia. Indonesia should cope with chaotic situations due to removing oil subsidies as IMF suggested. Many experts criticized offers from IMF that exacerbated the situation in the Asian Crisis. Economist Anna J. Schwartz in Widarjono [4] urged the IMF to end its policies and suggested being disbanded because of its irresponsibility. The critics considered the good government concept by IMF and WB as neoliberal designs, which forgot about the roles of social participation. Another critic, like Fukuyama, noted that efforts to realize open government that WB and IMF promoted, later known as government reform, have been almost 20 years; however, they have often been used only to legalize the state and make the bureaucracy more accountable [5]. Then, the latter appeared as a response to it. Open government is a concept that emphasizes civil involvement and transparency as critical elements in government.

Open government requires transparency, participation, and collaboration as values of how it will be implemented in governance, including to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. The government should provide open data and information during the outbreak and engage public involvement. According to Roberts [6], democracy can be the source of decay when courts and political parties play enormous roles rather than public involvement; hence, an open bureaucracy is insufficient in itself to battle against the crisis. Transparency should entail civil participation supported by the political will to deal with corruption risk [7]. It needs to be perfected by agents whose capability to access and process the information is enlarged and improved [8]. In addition, transparency and budgetary management audit systems constructively impact the perception of corruption [9]. Open government has contributed to handling the pandemic. Transparency and civic participation play essential roles in reducing corruption risk. Corruption demoralizes the health system in providing better services, including data set of COVID-19 cases [7] as open-data sources provide a better understanding of the virus spread [10]. Collaboration between the government and people in handling the crisis helps to gain knowledge of health protocol, especially for vulnerable groups [11].

Therefore, this article tries to reveal experiences of how the government of Semarang municipality has implemented open government initiatives in dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak. The author provides that learning from local communities can be a solidarity force [12]. This research is essential because the OGP as a form of government policy must be seen from different perspectives, including local communities. As mentioned on the local OGP actions plans, the city government has two strategies to battle against the pandemic: realizing city inclusiveness and improving the community's economy through empowering micro, small, and medium enterprises (SMEs). To perform its first plan, the government focuses on strengthening citizen involvement, particularly vulnerable groups, in planning and development deliberation or musrenbang, providing information disclosure about COVID-19, and optimizing Lapor Hendi. For the second, the government tries to expand SMEs empowerment by utilizing digital transformations in which the government has developed the Original Semarang Online Local Micro Business Outlet or Gulo Asem. The application is an online marketing service innovation in a product catalogue application developed by the city's office for Cooperatives and SMEs.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Open Government: Transparency, Participation, and Collaboration as Values

Open government works come mainly from Obama's 2009 directive about open government, which later underlie the emergence of OGP as mentioned above [13][14]. As time goes over, modernization in public sectors to be more transparent and participatory continues. By utilizing the internet and many digital platforms, global transformations have gradually influenced how the government changes and adapts to the current situation [15]. Obama focuses on three principles of how open government should work: by utilizing technology, the government should provide information transparency about what the government is doing; the government ought to involve and enhance public participation, thereby promoting government effectiveness; the government should be collaborative in using innovative breakthroughs and systems by engaging all levels of government, nonprofits, and businesses [16]. Prior studies have argued disputes how open government affects in governance reform. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) interprets open government as a way to an open and responsive government [16], which give positive impacts for local politics [17]. On the contrary, Setiyono [18] stated that political reform by decentralizing power means nothing other than prosperity for elites and the new power holders.

Lucke and Geiger [19] stated that open government consists of transparency, participation, and collaboration between the state and third parties such as businesses and citizens. Evans and Campos [20] understand an open government to collaborate with stakeholders and citizens by utilizing technological advancements. In brief, open government emerges to promote transparency, accountability, and collaboration by utilizing technological advancements. As mentioned before, many works position transparency, participation, and collaboration both as a primary principle and framework of open government. As a part of those, first, transparency plays an essential role in open government. Ball [21] considers it as public virtue embraced by society to counter corruption. Transparency is related to an open policy-making process and is required to build good governance. Transparency emerges when citizens, government, media, and business actors support open decision-making. According to Van Dooren et al. [22], the principle has three critical elements: systematic and timely budget report, influential legislative institution, and civil role through mass media or civil organization. Transparency can strengthen and make government agencies more accountable to obtain more public trust and virtue. Second, participation understands itself as public involvement in the policymaking process. It can be realized through discussion and consideration [23] as critiques for development and democracy. In addition, the principle can produce collective knowledge, which affects the emergence of effective democracy and increases public optimism. The third is collaboration. As the pillar of open government, the value stressed the usage of engaging citizens in the work of their government. In detail, the government agencies or departments should use innovative tools, methods, systems to collaborate with other actors, such as nonprofits, businesses, and individuals in the private sector [24]. Collaboration among actors involved in many government agendas is vital to cause active roles by society in governance so that it will cause policies and solutions relevant to problems and needs in the society. In sum, the three key objectives of open government are connected with public virtues that legitimate the existence of open government' rights. Moreover, the values have enhanced public trust in government works. It happens when government cooperate among all levels of

government, non-governmental organizations or NGOs, the business sector, and individuals in the private sector.

2.2 Efforts and Determinants to Deal with the Pandemic

The need to invent breakthroughs and solutions is crucial for the government to resolve the pandemic, including the sub-national level. The outbreak has cascaded crises in society, a wave of change that has been unimaginable years ago. Consequently, the government should devote all of its power to survive in a crisis due to pandemics. This part explains how current studies have implemented three principles of open government in battling against the pandemic. Prior works related to the article's topic showed how transparency, including data and information availability, significantly plays a role during the crisis. Open data facilitated people's participation in policy-making and increased social perception towards the COVID-19 [25]. In addition, focusing on the timeliness of open data on 52 portals in 60 countries, Nikiforova [26] shows that open data affects developing knowledge, values, and solutions to settle the pandemics. Yiannakoulias et al. [27] state that open government data could increase transparency and accountability in governance. Open data can be helpful not only to fulfil states' interests but also to benefit society. Unfortunately, only some countries are aware of it. Emergencies due to pandemics cannot force all countries to provide data and information needed to handle the pandemic. For instance, it happened to the USA and China, where few datasets function [28]. In Indonesia, data disclosure has impacted the level of trust in society [29], but data disclosure provided by the government is still low and makes people distrust information about the outbreak. All publications and data usage should notice their debilities to ensure that people have been informed about the uncertainty of COVID-19 information.

Moreover, participation and collaboration from actors involved in struggling against the pandemic have been crucial during pandemics. More literature provides involvement from outside actors and technological advancements used to deal with the pandemic. During COVID-19, technology and information (IT) have served as a critical element to afford precise information about the pandemic [30][31]. Although participatory actions demonstrate their crucial parts, the emerging challenges are a dearth of data availability that will hamper experts and citizens from developing appropriate strategies to discharge the crisis [32]. For instance, Kim [33] explained South Korea's experience of solving face mask shortage during the pandemics. The research told how the country unraveled its problem by increasing transparency in governance. In conclusion, combining open data and technological developments can effectively deal with masked difficulties.

This article is qualitative research that combined a systematic literature review and data collected from an in-depth interview, scientific journal, report, and website related to the article's topic. The interview was conducted on August 27, 2021, with Dewi Sadtyaji -the person in charge of Semarang municipality local OGP- as the interviewee. This research focuses on efforts by the government city in initiating open government initiatives and implementing them in its agendas to deal with the pandemic COVID-19. Moreover, the author explains the impacts of those endeavors as an experience of Semarang city, a sub-national level of government. The initiatives refer to Semarang municipality's local OGP action plans for 2021-2023. The author limits time research from March 2020, which is the first case in the city, to August 2021 before writing this article. The author used the open government concept to obtain a robust theoretical base as a research guide. The concept will explain how open government values have been implemented in the government programs during pandemics. Then, the author will explain the impacts of breakthroughs from the government as experience that others can follow those as learning to combat the crisis due to the pandemics.

3 Result

Semarang Municipality has been a local OGP member since 2020. Many expect its membership to make civil involvement easier to reach transparency and accountability in governance. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, several works highlighted how subnational governments play their roles in dealing with the outbreak. Gao and Yu [34] explained that such a government as a village played significant roles in providing assistance and protecting citizens from horrible impacts during the crisis. It happens as local governments have very close relationships whose roles impact people's daily lives. Besides, Pradana et al. [35] mentioned how the ruling groups and civil organizations are likely to ensure social welfare during the pandemic. Of many cities in Indonesia, Semarang municipality is a city that has a forward view and awareness of wide-ranging ingenuity regarding solutions to solve the pandemic. Referring to the Semarang local OGP action plans for 2021-2023, there are two visions to reach open government: realizing the city as an inclusive city and improving the community's economy by empowering SMEs.

Although its membership of OGP has just been entering its first year, the city has initiated and implemented several programs to support transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in the governance process. The city's government also involved other actors on several government agendas by working collaboratively. In 2017, the government and PATTIRO Semarang and Transparency International (TI) Indonesia developed a local integrity system to endorse integrity and prevent fraud and corruption. In response to the public's enthusiasm for open government, the city created Lapor Hendi, an online platform for public complaints and reports on the bureaucracy's performance. In addition, the town also joined with some national and international programs on open government, such as the 2019 Open Government Week, the Local Open Contracting Initiative in Ottawa, Canada, in 2019, and the Seminar on Human Rights in South Korea.

3.1 Realizing Participatory Government during Pandemic

The Semarang city makes inclusiveness in governance a crucial issue in its OGP membership. The initiatives regarding open government are fore part of how the city uses them as crucial keys to solving the pandemic. Besides, efforts to increase citizen participation in development planning deliberation or Musrenbang were the primary focus to uphold an open government. Thus, those encourage the city to provide access to information for the public regarding governance. The innovation mentioned above is necessary when the pandemic has caused many social restrictions. In this case, the government made two advances to ensure civil involvement: implementing online Musrenbang during the COVID-19 and ensuring the availability of information dan public services related to the outbreak by providing a Siaga Corona website and increasing the Lapor Hendi performance.

The participation of vulnerable people in Musrenbang is the first issue in the city's action plans. The government discerns that participation in governance is a priority even though the situation compels restrictions on social activities. Citizen involvement in development planning processes is expected to increase. Moreover, a crisis due to pandemics requires collaborative actions between the government and society in dealing with pandemics. Those actions have concerns with increasing participation from vulnerable groups in Musrenbang in sub-district or village levels so that various empowerment programs continue to rise to the groups. In addition to focusing on their aims, Musrenbang, during pandemics, has utilised the advancement of technology by organising hybrid Musrenbang. The government considers citizen involvement as a critical element in city development. It refers to a situation where there is a lack of participation from the vulnerable ones in Musrenbang in the city. The OGP plan to enhance civil involvement targets a minimum of 28% of the group's participation in a Musrenbang. Figure 1 shows that women's participation in Musrenbang at the village level is less than 30%.



Civil Participation in Village Level Musrenbang in 2019-2021

To realize government inclusiveness, the local OGP of Semarang city also focuses on data and information disclosure. Expressly, in handling the COVID-19 pandemic, the city has provided a website to openly make available data and information related to the pandemic to the broader community. This program aims to supply data services about the COVID-19 integrated on www.siagacorona.semarangkota.go.id. This website is expected to be a valid primary reference for the public to access information about the pandemic, including data on virus spread, vaccination programs, and information on the availability of health services. Data accessibility is essential because it can underlie the government's effective policies.

Moreover, the city's plan is also concerned with optimizing Lapor Hendi, a platform to facilitate people's wishes to have a transparent, accountable, and easily accessible reporting and complaint channel. The Lapor Hendi is a breakthrough to eliminate public perceptions of government reports that seem difficult, closed, and unfriendly [36]. From May 2016 to October 2020, the Lapor Hendi had received 17,673 reports and complaints about public services, transportation, and housing. To strengthen the innovation, the city's mayor issued Regulation Number 34 of 2017 concerning the Management of Public Complaints about Public Services to emphasize that citizen involvement is mandatory in development [37].

3.2 Efforts to Economic Growth among Social Restrictions

Yeyati and Filippini [38] explain that more than 90% of the economy was globally depressed and affected their income. In addition to solving broader impacts due to the pandemic, the city focuses on improving citizens' economies by empowering SMEs. This effort is crucial as the COVID-19 pandemic causes health and humanitarian crises and has a widespread impact on the global economy, including the city. For Indonesia, COVID-19 also affects economic uncertainty, which has resulted in increased unemployment and other social crises [39].

Fig. 1. The Number of Civil Participation Musrenbang in Village Level in 2019-2021

The city government is the regular customer for culinary creations to supply needs for official government meetings. The government focuses on empowering the local economy as the city's vision to realize an equal town in economics. Providing a transparent and accountable procurement process, the government is willing to offer openness that affects social economics, especially when there are many restrictions during pandemics. The government initiated Gulo Asem -the original Semarang online local micro-business outlet- to provide a place for SMEs to market their products through online platforms. The application is an online marketing service innovation in a product catalogue application developed by the Cooperatives and SMEs Service department. In detail, the Gulo Asem includes culinary products, craft, fashion, and creative economy.

This program focuses on making regulations, improving the involvement of local economic actors, and increasing the number of transactions in the Gulo Asem. To date, 687 SMEs with more than 868 products are incorporated in that marketplace. The Gulo Asem has at least two main objectives: (1) with an application-based marketplace; this makes it easier for the people of Semarang city to conduct buying and selling transactions without having to interact directly and avoid the potential dangers of a pandemic; (2) this application participates in helping SMEs through regular food demands by the city government offices. The city government initiated that the city government's activity agenda could buy in SME businesses using the regional budget. According to data from the city government, Gulo Asem has had a significant impact with an expenditure value of around IDR 3.14 billion since March 2020.

3.3 Open Government and COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities

Implementing the OGP's program during the pandemic, the city government often encounters various obstacles that could be technical or substantial. The two actors -including government representatives and civil organizations- agree that principles about openness have played crucial roles in governance. According to Dewi Sadtyaji, the person in charge of OGP of Semarang city, open government is in line with the city's motto "Bergerak Bersama untuk Semarang Semakin Hebat", or moving together for a more excellent Semarang city. The government wants to show that they are very intense and open to collaboration from many parties to build the city of Semarang jointly. It would be necessary because the governing process must involve other sectors, such as business, civil society, and mass media.

Moreover, the government also targeted 50% of what weak groups proposed in each Musrenbang can be accommodated in government offices. It aims to show that all social groups, including vulnerable people, participate in the city's development. The government must warrant that the OGP will run effectively to fulfil fundamental rights and protect the community's social welfare. Meanwhile, civil parties consider principles like transparency, accountability, and collaboration essential in governance. In this case, PATTIRO Semarang sees that those principles are the key of OGP, particularly transparency and cooperation. An open government is not only interpreted as open and transparent as people do.

As a representative of civil society groups, PATTIRO Semarang understood that collaboration between actors plays a vital role in democratic governance. Additionally, the organization emphasized that the term "open government" refers to initiatives from the government to involve more community participation in the development of the city. Transparency must lead to the significance of government programs. All programs by the government are meant not to budget absorption, but there are goals in output, outcomes, and real effects for the society. The next problem is that social restrictions impact the participation of vulnerable groups in the OGP implementation. In PATTIRO Semarang's view, social

restrictions and changes in community activities have triggered difficulties for vulnerable groups to participate in Musrenbang at any level.

Open government should present initiative principles, and the government should cooperate. Although transparency will be crucial as collaboration exists in government programs, it cannot be understood only as openness. Moreover, the principle must lead to the significance of government programs limited to absorbing budget and obtaining output, outcome, and real impact. Since 2004, PATTIRO Semarang has been well-grounded in initiating the involvement of academia and private actors in the policymaking process. The outbreak has forced many of us to adapt to the current situation during the pandemic. In the government view, the challenge that emerged to the implementation of OGP is technical issues such as difficulties in arranging meeting schedules, activity reporting administration, and program budgeting. Another perspective stated by PATTIRO Semarang explained obstacles in implementing OGP.

The pandemic is having an impact. From the demand side, the community must also process and adapt to situations that require many activities to be carried out online. The Semarang city Government and PATTIRO must also educate the public regarding Work from Home (WFH). In the implementation of inclusiveness, for example. In the Musrenbang, the problems that arise are related to community participation. Under normal conditions before the pandemic, the involvement of vulnerable groups in Musrenbang was very little. It is even worse during a pandemic. Limited resources, community capacity in access to technology, and lack of facilitation are factors that make this vision challenging to implement.

Furthermore, the problems that arise are related to government actors' thinking or mindset. In PATTIRO's notes, the pandemic should expand community participation because of the ease of access through online mechanisms. However, in practice, this makes it more difficult for community participation. Performance-based budgeting regulations still refer to physical meetings, and there is no precise regulation on the use of the budget through online or offline activities. Because the online system should also facilitate the activities of economic actors to promote their products through the online market, this situation is a must.

As a summary of how the two actors viewed the involvement of vulnerable groups in OGP, the researcher concludes several points about the challenges in implementing these initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.3.1 Participation of Vulnerable Groups

The pandemic should expand public participation because of access through online mechanisms. However, this made it more difficult for people to join in practice. It happened because the digitization of the agenda is not supported by an increase in the quality of the society to access technology and the financial capacity of vulnerable groups.

3.3.2 Quality of Musrenbang Output

Both the city and PATTIRO Semarang, the actors, worried that digitalization in the Musrenbang process would reduce the quality of results as the discussion runs ineffectively. It emerged because online discussions have limitations both technically and in substance. The technical obstacle that occurs is the unequal distribution of facilities and access to technology for the community. As a result, virtual meetings often experience a reduction in the substantive meaning of the topic of discussion.

PATTIRO Semarang saw two things. This policy has been around for a long time regarding the one data policy and was regulated by the central government through

Presidential Decree No. 39 of 2019 concerning One Indonesian Data. In PATTIRO Semarang's expectation, (1) Semarang City did not initially have the initiative to provide data and information related to COVID-19, and PATTIRO encouraged it. (2) Then, although there is already a vaccination data channel or channel, the details and vaccination distribution are not precise. The lack of socialisation about vaccines also impacts the low public awareness of vaccinations. Referring to the Participation Action Research (PAR) results in 2019, the participation of women's groups in Musrenbang is still below 30%. This fact repeats what happened in 2019, where the involvement of vulnerable groups was not as much of the threshold.

Furthermore, the city government sees that the challenge is how to get results of Musrenbang during the pandemic as good as it did run in a normal situation. The problem comes from technological adaptation, where limited access to technology causes difficulties for the people. Those complications are influenced by several factors, such as knowledge, experience, and cultural factors [40]. So far, many people know that Musrenbang only occurred at the city/district level; the public hearing process and civil participation, including vulnerable groups, have been conducted at the village level. The municipal government, in general, does not change the bureaucratic mechanism and remains committed to transparency and collaboration within the government. To respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, the city government has changed several government sectors that allow it. Some public services such as civil registration have changed to an online system

Referring to the city's department for Cooperatives and SMEs Service data, the Gulo Asem program has significantly impacted almost IDR 1 billion expenditure value since 2020. This initiative is a great start. However, the problem that arises is the number of transactions related to facilities for SMEs. The next challenge is that the number of SMEs joining Gulo Asem is still very small. PATTIRO saw that this idea was excellent and original, and the implementation was very complex. The standards and levels between SMEs are still not equal, where the quality of SMEs is still not evenly distributed. SMEs are also often faced with capital, tax, supply, and demand problems. The existence of Gulo Asem has a positive impact on SMEs' actors.

Challenges of implementing the OGP in Semarang city during the COVID-19 Pandemic: 1. The bureaucratic mindset in managing activities. The bureaucracy still has a conventional perspective regarding activities, oriented to physical presence. 2. Education and adaptation of marketing technology in economic activities that are still minimal, including transactions with SMEs' digital media. The opportunity for implementing OGP during the pandemic is enormous. The pandemic and technological advances force us to take advantage of ICT. ICT makes it easier to access information and communication sources through online networks. Efforts and the use of technology make it easier to create opportunities and broad access.

4 Conclusion

As part of the global OGP initiative, the city's local OGP received a positive response from many parties, including civil society groups. Transparency and collaboration are the core of OGP. In implementing its action plans for 2021, various challenges were born related to the two visions in the action plan. Even though there are slight differences, the local actors involved have some similarities in how they perceived the challenges of implementing local OGP during the pandemic. The two actors agreed that some OGP implementations such as Lapor Hendi, website www.siagacorona.semarangkota.go.id, and the Gulo Asem marketplace have gone quite well. However, other efforts to increase the participation of vulnerable groups in the Musrenbang are still hampered by the old-fashioned bureaucracy. In addition, another limitation comes from the government's lack of facilitation for the public to access advanced technology.

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