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HOW DO AUSTRALIA-BASED MIGRANTS HELP IN TIMES OF CRISIS?

*A Case Study Of The Indonesian Diaspora's Response
To The Covid-19 Pandemic*



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

2024



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About the research

In 2022, researchers from the University of Melbourne undertook a project exploring how Australia-based migrants (diasporas) help in times of humanitarian crises overseas. The project involved community researchers from eight diaspora communities (Afghanistan, Indonesia, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nepal, Pacific Islands, South Sudan and Syria) to co-design methodology, engage communities and collect data to find out *how*, *why* and *what* was done by communities in Australia in response to specific crises or events. The project aims to better understand the strengths and challenges faced by Australia-based migrants responding to different kinds of crises (disasters, conflicts and complex crises), and to identify potential tools that can support diaspora communities in their responses in the future. More information about this project can be found at <https://diasporahumanitarians.com/>.

About this report

This report is a summary of findings for the case study on the **Indonesian diaspora's response to the COVID-19 pandemic**. Fia Hamid-Walker was the community researcher leading the research for this case study, in collaboration with Professor Bina Fernandez (Chief Investigator), Dr Louise Olliff (Research Associate) and Lorenza Lazzati (Project Officer). Data was gathered from 16 in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants from diverse backgrounds (age, gender, faith and cultural identity, migration experience and years living in Australia). Interviews took place by Zoom or in person (in Melbourne) between June and October 2022. 14 of the interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesian. Interviews were audio recorded and then translated and/or transcribed. Transcripts were thematically coded using Nvivo. The names of participants quoted in this report have been changed.



FINDINGS:

Crisis context:

How did the nature of the crisis shape diaspora responses?

The suffering caused by the spread of COVID-19 in Indonesia was both widespread and devastating in terms of loss of life and livelihoods, exacerbated by weak institutional responses and impacting all Indonesians in varying ways. The fact that this crisis took place within the context of a global pandemic that also affected communities in Australia shaped diaspora responses considerably. Interviewees noted that the stringent public health measures in Australia (i.e., lockdowns, border closures and restriction on travel and social gatherings) meant mobilising collectively was more difficult. Many Indonesians in Australia on student or temporary visas were not able to work and had no access to government assistance, limiting resources and capacity within the community to support people overseas. Indeed, many of the Indonesian diaspora networks in Australia were activated to primarily support Indonesians in Australia. Helping was also multi-directional, with people in Indonesia asking for Indonesians in Australia to help those impacted by loss of livelihoods, illness, or isolation in Australia.

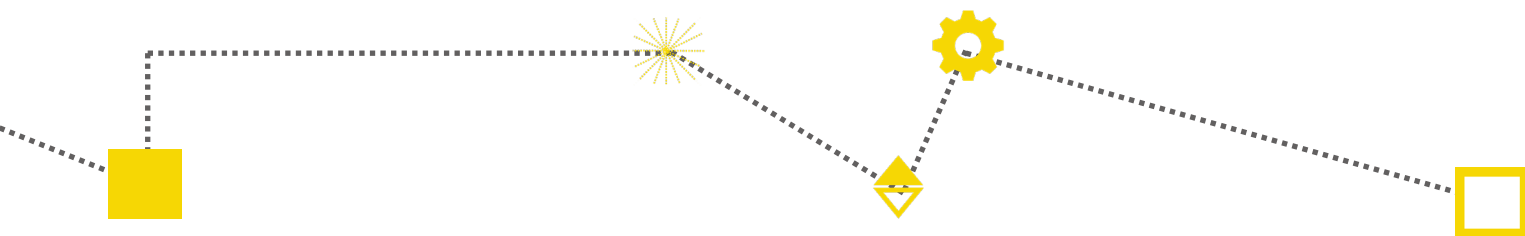
Maybe because we feel that we are also experiencing the same thing, especially me, and also almost everyone doesn't know who to help. (Budi, translation)

As it was not possible to travel overseas, the types of activities that members of diaspora communities could do was limited to what could be done virtually or from a distance. Identifying who to help in Indonesia was challenging because the needs were so great and widespread.

Maybe the difference with COVID is because COVID is massive, not only certain areas but all areas are affected... It seems like everyone needs help. So, how do you want to channel it properly and correctly? (Diah, translation)

A number of participants compared Indonesian diaspora responses to the COVID-19 pandemic to past responses to disasters, pointing to key differences in how diaspora networks in Australia were activated. This suggests that the nature of the crisis itself is significant to understanding how and why diaspora networks mobilise.

So, when I go back to COVID, I don't think about helping because maybe it's too much or something. But if it is a disaster like [the tsunami in Aceh], that moves me more. I do not know... The experience of the tsunami in Aceh, we were here to help a lot. (Budi, translation)



Diaspora context:

How did characteristics of the diaspora in Australia shape responses?

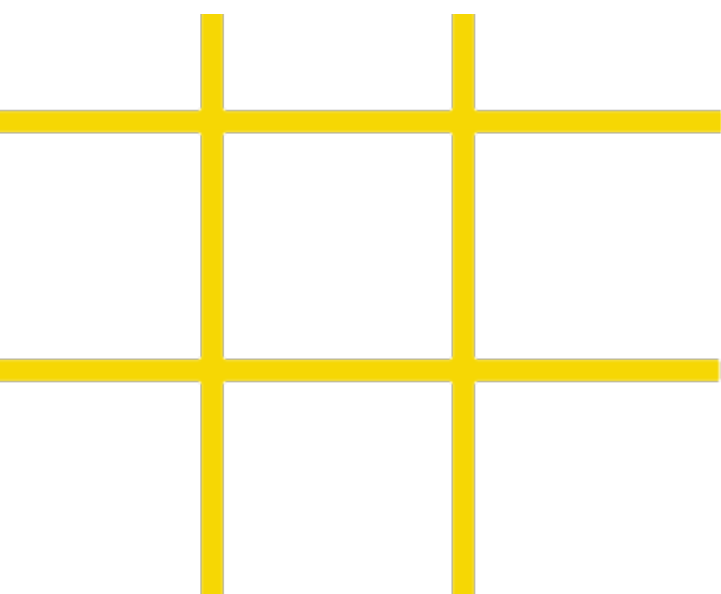
When asked about how the characteristics of the Indonesian diaspora in Australia shaped responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, several participants commented on a lack of engagement with or coordination by established diaspora organisations. At the same time, interviewees spoke positively about the potential role that strong diaspora organisations could play in future in coordinating efforts (see recommendations). Indonesian diaspora organisations or networks that were seen as effective in the COVID context tended to be those supporting international students and temporary workers living in Australia, where needs were significant. **These organisations' resources were stretched thin by competing priorities** which limited their capacity to respond to needs in Indonesia.

We as diaspora also help the diaspora who live here, not only helping Indonesia but also the diaspora who live here. (Eka, translation)

Some interviewees were aware of diaspora organisations but spoke about their hesitation to engage due to **intergenerational or perceived cultural differences**, with some feeling less able to engage due to a perception of being judged as too 'Westernised' or younger people feeling that organisations catered more for older generations. This influenced their preference to respond to the crisis through their own personal networks in Indonesia rather than through collective action or an intermediary based in Australia.

One participant felt that the Indonesian diaspora in Australia **lacked the capacity to influence or advocate** at a higher or structural level because Indonesian Australians are not able to hold dual citizenship. This means that many long-term and permanent residents of Australia do not have the same access to political actors as other diaspora communities and were not able to put pressure on the Australian government to provide more assistance to Indonesia at this time.

I still hold an Indonesian passport, which means I can't become an Australian citizen. If I am not an Australian citizen, how can I influence MPs or can I approach MPs to talk about this? (Budi, translation)





Main activities:

What did the Indonesian diaspora do?

Most interviewees spoke about the diaspora's response mostly being at a **household-to-household** or **household-to-community** level; with individuals or small groups of friends trying to help individuals, families, or local communities back in Indonesia.

So, I'm more motivated to do something more for people-to-people and I think the closest circle first, both onshore in Australia and in Indonesia. That's it. (Melati, translation)

By far the most common response to supporting people in Indonesia in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic was **financial transfers**. This included both remittances sent to family and friends (the most common response), but also sending money to individuals in need identified through a person's social networks (e.g., village, school, university, work). Individuals in Australia also spoke about donating money to local organisations or grassroots community initiatives. For example, 'Diah' spoke about giving to an initiative that purchased food from street vendors in Jakarta and distributed this to workers whose livelihoods had been disrupted. Another sent money to a family member back home who cooked and served meals for community members in need in the village. These grassroots initiatives were operating at a micro-level.

I sent money to my family, and I've been sending money to my family throughout the pandemic, pretty much. (Dewi, translation)

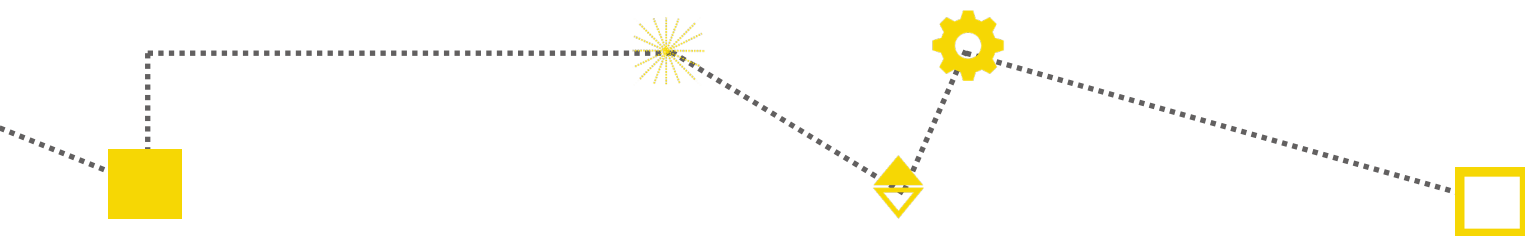
Most of my friends are musicians, so they couldn't do concerts, couldn't do this and that. Now many are selling food... My friend who works at the hotel also suddenly sells blinds, sells donuts. So, for me, at that time me and

others helped my friends, not only helped them to pay for the hospital, pay for this and that, but also how they survive. (Bulan)

It was a collective action of small groups of friends or close family relatives to help our colleagues. You know, our office friends or family or friends in the office or relatives, far relatives or close relatives and things like that. So more like a small personal circle... (Intan, translation)

While all the interviewees spoke about personally sending money to Indonesia as individuals or small groups (i.e., remittances), some were also involved in **organising fundraising activities** and collecting donations from wider social networks. Fundraising activities mentioned by interviewees included holding an online event at a university to discuss the situation in Indonesia during the devastating wave in 2021 and collecting donations from participants, and a Melbourne-based woman raising funds by participating in a charity run. These fundraising activities reached out to broader (diaspora and non-diaspora) social networks and funds that were raised were sent to local organisations or initiatives responding in Indonesia.

An activity that several interviewees mentioned was how Indonesians in Australia tried to create awareness and share expert knowledge with their networks back home about COVID-19, promoting public health messaging and why and how to protect yourself from infection. This **knowledge transfer** happened at both an individual social network level, with people creating and sharing information through social media, as well as at a broader community level through mass media channels (for example, creating and sharing content from ABC Indonesia). As one interviewee suggested, 'sharing ideas' with people in Indonesia about what the public health response looked like in Australia



helped to increase information access in the context of widespread misinformation being spread in Indonesia at the time, including through media outlets and by government officials.

I think our contribution is raising awareness. I think it's more about raising awareness and raising concern, and also raising the voices of the medical health workers at that time. I think so. Because their voices were also drowned out. (Banyu, translated)

In a smaller way, Indonesian diaspora networks in Australia and globally also got involved in the **procurement and supply of material goods** for hospitals and health workers in Indonesia. This included both sending funds to purchase personal protective equipment (PPE) within Indonesia, and directly sourcing and sending PPE from overseas.

[I have a friend who] posted on her social media: "Hey, I'm collecting PPE equipment for doctors and nurses in Indonesia. If you have funding [or] if you have PPE

equipment and you want to donate." And when we were in Jakarta we used to live in same Airbnb place that was owned by this Indonesian doctor. So, all the PPE was sent back to the (boarding house) in Jakarta. (Baskoro, translated)

Lastly, many interviewees alluded to or explicitly talked about the **psychosocial support** provided to family and friends back home who were struggling with illness, grief, isolation and loss of livelihoods. This mainly took the form of phone calls, staying in touch by WhatsApp or Facebook groups, and video calls. Again, psychosocial support was multi-directional due to the widespread and varying impact of the pandemic on social networks that spanned Australia and Indonesia.

Mostly at first it was just like checking in with them to see how they were doing. I'm part of the family WhatsApp group. As there were a lot of people in the group, we changed the group permission because I also have a cousin who is a doctor in the group, and for her it was quite stressful [to read distressing messages] because she had to be on in the field, in the battleground, every single day... (Baskoro, translated)







Needs addressed:

What needs within crisis-affected communities were addressed?



Healthcare – purchase and provision of oxygen and PPE, contributing to the payment of medical treatment, contributing to the payment of ambulances to take people to hospitals, dissemination of public health messaging.



Food and basic necessities for those whose incomes had been lost by pandemic-related disruptions, including providing money for food, rent and utilities.



Livelihood loss – helping people transition to new income generating activities, including supporting people to establish new businesses.



Support for marginalised - including members of LGBTQI+ and artist communities who faced additional challenges during this time due to lack of social support in local communities.



Modalities:

What tools helped to facilitate diaspora responses?

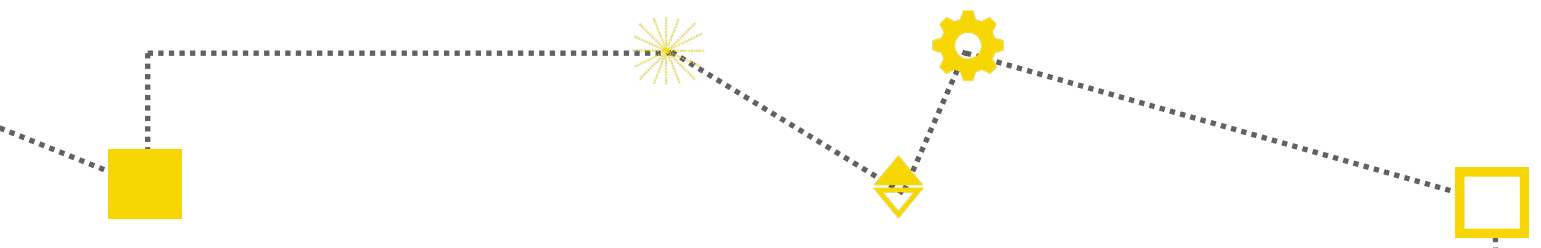
The key tools that were described by interviewees as facilitating or shaping how the diaspora in Australia responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia was through **social media platforms**, in particular WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook groups. Social media provided tools for communicating with loved ones, sharing information, identifying needs, coordinating responses and fundraising.

The number one platform that helps so much... is WhatsApp. So, what I did is, I did some campaign material on WhatsApp, I copy and paste, and then I just ask all my friends from my WhatsApp groups—from my primary school, middle school, high school, university—and it's like a chain reaction. So, from there, people spread again [and again], because suddenly our donations started coming with all these Indonesian names I've never heard of. I don't know them. They started coming from all around the world, which is amazing. (Arti, translation)

As exemplified in the above quote, **social networks** were central to diaspora responses and were mobilised in many ways, with many participants mentioning the mobilisation, activation or reactivation of student groups, school or university alumni groups, friendship groups, and various interest groups (sports, artistic, village or regional). These networks spanned geographical location, with people in Indonesia, Australia and the wider diaspora connecting in real time. When talking about social networks as how things got done, **trust** was a strongly recurring theme. Simply put, people relied on trusted relationships to facilitate actions.

[I help] more because of the relationship it seems. Because, personally, when I give help, I have to know the person because I have more confidence, so I don't hesitate to spend the money. All of them [I sent money to] I know. (Lestari, translation)

Online **financial transfer** services were described by almost all participants as accessible and effective tool in facilitating remittances and financial transfers, particularly to local groups and initiatives. As Intan simply put it: 'Transferring money from Australia to Indonesia is so easy'. An Indonesian **crowdfunding platform**, Kitabisa.com, was discussed by several interviewees as a useful tool for transferring funds to very localised initiatives and organisations responding to the needs of crisis-affected communities. In the context of a pandemic where international travel was very highly restricted, this crowdfunding platform was a way for Indonesians overseas to support local 'grassroots' initiatives and was an effective bridge for local responders to reach out to those in the diaspora, as well as to people within Indonesia. Specifically, some identified this crowdfunding platform as crucial to getting funds directly to crisis-affected local communities without the burden of slower and more costly bureaucracies. On the other hand, some concerns were expressed about accountability for funds raised in this way and how those posting on this platform were vetted.



So, the fundraising is through kitabisa.com. [...] The slogan is 'people help good people' [...]. The poor and neglected people are cared for by kitabisa.com, not by the state. (Melati, translation)

Yeah, kitabisa.com. That's how you connect. I think it's a very good platform. [...] I feel like that small initiative, grassroot donation [through kitabisa.com] was more effective, especially as the impact of COVID was really immediate. So, that's the way. It does help, I think. (Citra, translation)





Motivations:

Why did the Indonesian diaspora in Australia respond?

When talking about what prompted those in Australia to respond to the impact of COVID-19 on people in Indonesia in the ways that they did, interviewees shared widely divergent perspectives on motivations. Indeed, many talked about a **lack of motivation** due to the scale of needs, difficulties knowing who and how to help, and the significant challenges they or others were facing living in Australia itself.

Others who sent money back home spoke about **obligation to family, friends and community**, with a narrative of moral duty. This was particularly expressed through comparisons made between the risks and capacity to respond to the pandemic in Australia and in Indonesia. In this, there were expressions of guilt, worry and shock at the scale of the crisis in Indonesia, which was related to population size and density, the precariousness of life for many Indonesians who survive day-to-day through their daily labour, and the weak institutional capacity within the healthcare system and Indonesian government more broadly to respond to needs. In this, interviewees' personal social networks were caught up and placed at risk.

I thought, if a developed country struggles with this... And just like Indonesia, which is a developing nation, will be even more in trouble because we don't have as many doctors or resources to actually deal with a pandemic of this scale... Definitely I felt for my extended family and my friends at home. (Baskoro, translation)

Two participants spoke at length about the **lack of trust in formal institutions** (government and humanitarian) and the need for 'people' to step into the void to provide social assistance. Implied in this narrative is that diaspora networks in Australia are

part of the 'people' who needed to respond to crisis, and that this went beyond an obligation to family and friends, but to Indonesian society more broadly.

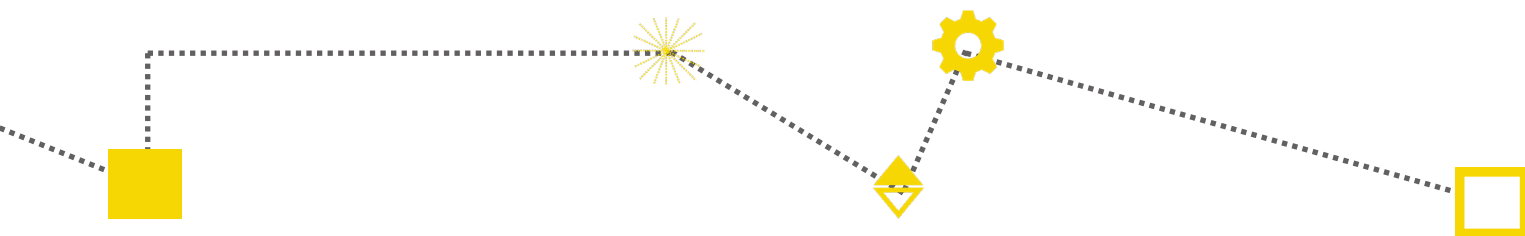
in Indonesia the slogan is that the people help the people. [Even before COVID-19] there was a crisis of trust in all mainstream institutions, be it the government or other social institutions that were already well-established like that... Because in Indonesia, social assistance is also problematic. (Melati, translation)

Indonesians help people very creatively and differently. I don't know whether you remember, but there's one time that there's a Lombok earthquake and people from Padang had solid solidarity for them to cook rendang and send it off to Lombok. So, like Indonesian people are generally very generous ... That's how we organise things. We don't need to rely on the institutions... (Citra, translation)

Finally, interviewees who were most active in responding to people in need in Indonesia talked about helping being motivated by a sense of **personal fulfillment or satisfaction**; that it was also fulfilling a need to feel like something was being done.

Maybe people think I'm doing for others, but actually I'm doing it more for myself to make me feel that I can help people. (Budi, translation)

Last year, [I felt] euphoria; like I cannot believe how many good people around me would like to help a lot. (Arti, translation)



Collaboration:

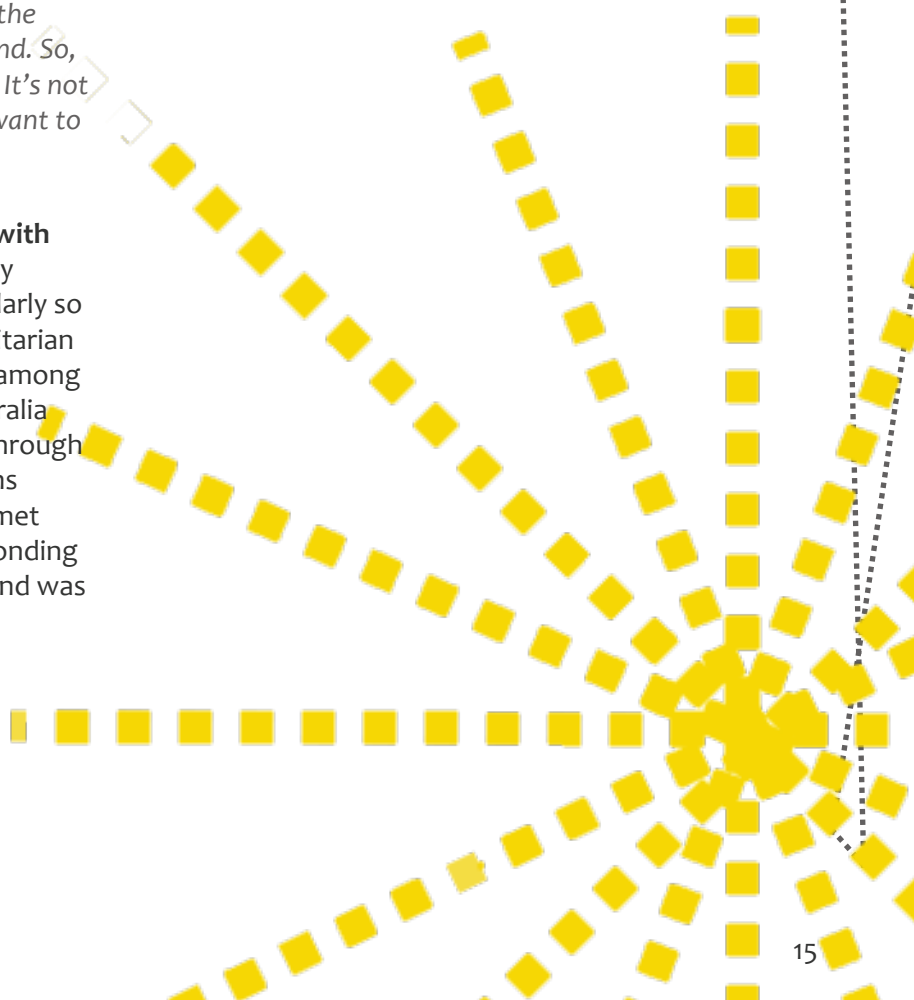
How did the Indonesian diaspora connect with other actors?

In terms of relationships between the Indonesian diaspora in Australia and other actors responding to the COVID-19 crisis in Indonesia, the strongest connection was between diaspora networks and **local organisations or initiatives by individuals or small groups from within crisis-affected communities**. These local actors were seen as trusted and embedded in crisis-affected communities. As 'Lestari' reflected:

I think I'm better off donating to a small group. That's my decision, others may differ. Rather than a large group because maybe the big ones have big names, so the possibility of getting more donors. That's my mind. So, I've never been to an international organisation. It's not that I don't trust them, but I'm more like, I just want to go small...

Other **institutional actors were spoken about with some distrust** and there was no evidence of any engagement or collaboration. This was particularly so for the Indonesian government. Larger humanitarian NGOs were referenced, but there was a sense among interviewees that financial transfers from Australia were more impactful if they were channelled through personal networks or sent to local organisations and initiatives because it was more direct and met immediate needs. There was a sense that responding through local actors cut out the intermediary and was a better use of modest amounts of funds.

I think international organizations attract more international supporting donors, right? Like in my case, I donate through my friend because I know her... Like if you're in the nation and you have connections, I think it's easier to just use your connection rather than go through an NGO. (Baskoro, translation)





Impact and effectiveness:

What made a difference?

In reflecting on the impact and effectiveness of diaspora responses, there was a perception that **social networks (that include those in the diaspora) can be more creative, faster and effective** than institutional actors at mobilising in response to crises more broadly. As Siti said:

I think diasporas are going to be more effective than any other traditional international organisations; I guess they have so much red tape... [Diasporas] feel like... more stable, and a lot more effective at mobilising their resources than the traditional bureaucratic organisations.

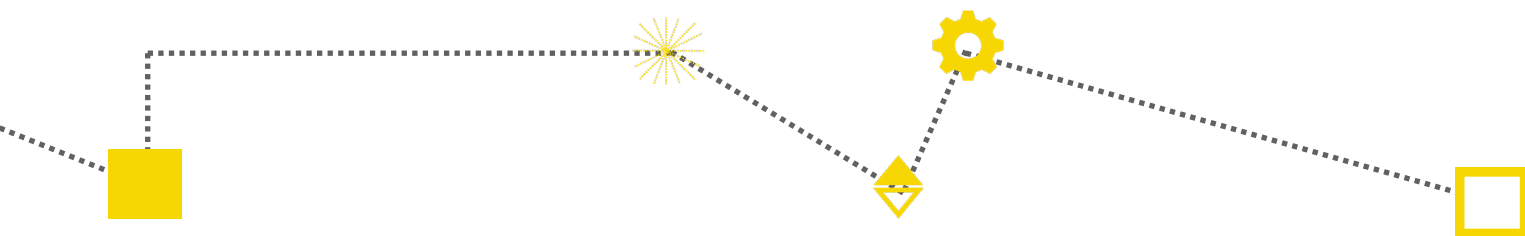
Supporting **micro-level responders** was also perceived by interviewees to be both impactful and effective, illustrated by the example given of the woman who sent money to her mother to buy food and cook for people in the village who had lost their source of income, or the man in Jakarta who set up an initiative where people could donate small amounts of money to purchase meals from street vendors and these were then distributed to day labourers who were out of work. While there were questions raised in people's minds about how the impact of these kinds of initiatives could be assessed, there was a belief that these kinds of initiatives worked because they involved trusted relationships. When asked about the impact of sending money to procure PPE for health workers, one person explained:

I saw the photos when PPE equipment arrived in Jakarta. Yeah, the doctors and nurses wore them in the hospital and they said 'thank you for the donations' blah blah. But I don't know how many people and I don't know,

like, at the end of the day, how many lives were saved. If you want to quantify the metrics, I don't know... I just know that it helped to some extent. And for me, at that time, that was enough. (Baskoro, translated)

The **sharing of knowledge by those in the diaspora with people in Indonesia** was also seen as an important contribution to the crisis response, with a number of interviewees speaking about how their distinct perspectives gained from living in Australia, and their ability to translate information and ideas into local language and context, contributed to a more robust discussion within Indonesia about the public health risks and response related to COVID-19. As a journalist working at the time described:

How we contributed is that we are challenging hoaxes and fake news during the COVID era. That's why we need health workers, epidemiologists, scientists... The reason why we interviewed them is because they are independent; it means that they are not associated with government bodies... because we also need to straighten out hoaxes, fake news, and also verify what the government said at that time.



Challenges:

What was difficult or didn't work?

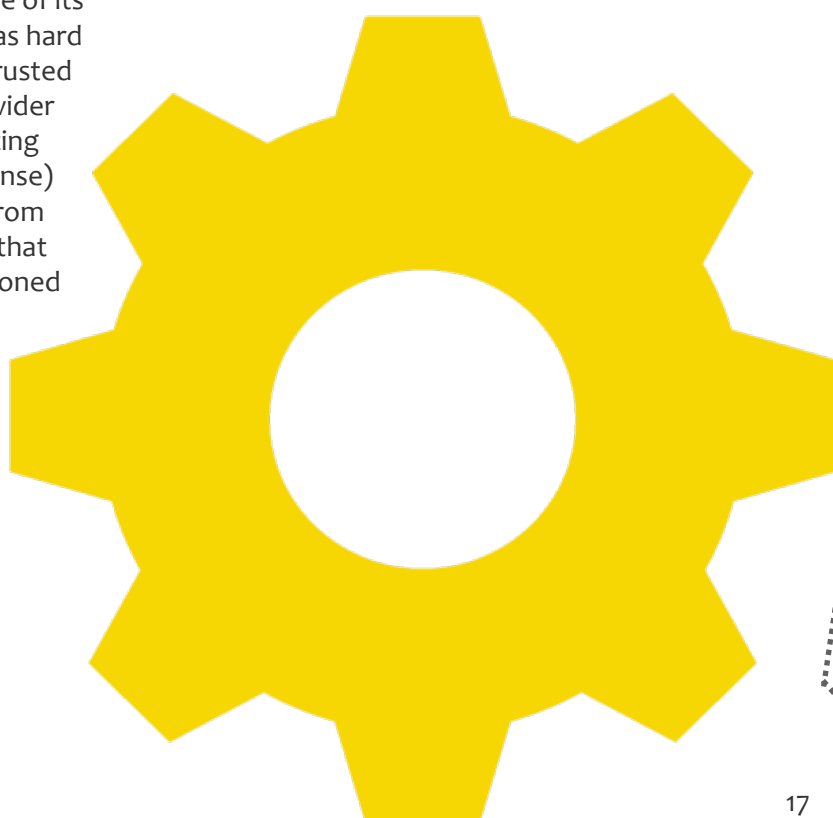
As much of the response by the diaspora was channelled through personal connections and social networks, a challenge or question raised in interviews was **how diaspora responses are limited by the reach of these social networks**. As Diah describes:

So, if you outline how the diaspora in Australia helps its community, the grassroots community in Indonesia, there needs to be a clear communication link. For example, helping grassroots women in Indonesia, for example fisherwomen, if I don't have access to fisherwomen, how would I know how they were doing during the COVID pandemic? (translation)

While doing small things through social networks was instinctively understood to be impactful because of its directness, it was also challenging because it was hard to measure impact and support that relied on trusted relationships. This limited the extent to which wider networks (i.e., people who do not have an existing relationship with the people involved in a response) could be engaged to contribute. As the quote from Baskoro above suggests, while it was 'enough' that he saw a photo of doctors in PPE, others questioned

the **transparency and accountability of grassroots initiatives**.

There were people interviewed who also spoke about how the Indonesian diaspora in Australia was not effective in its response to this crisis, with many referring to the **limited capacity of people struggling in Australia** to send money overseas, particularly for students and Indonesian-Australians in insecure work. As described earlier, there was also a question posed by one interviewee about how effective the Indonesian diaspora in Australia could be in its broader influence and advocacy because of the issue with dual citizenship and subsequent engagement with Australian decision-makers.





Recommendations:

What could help diasporas respond to humanitarian crises in future?

Several themes emerged from participants about what could help the Indonesian diaspora in Australia to respond to humanitarian crises in future. This included:

- 1. Platforms to channel support to local initiatives in crisis-affected communities.**

Mobilising through social networks is one way that diaspora communities channel support directly to crisis-affected communities, but there should be different ways of helping that reaches people not within these networks. Online crowdfunding platforms (kitabisa.com) allow those in the diaspora to support crisis-affected communities directly and at a grassroots level, without a pre-existing relationship. However, these platforms need to be trusted to do this effectively, with some assurance of vetting, and there needs to be simple ways for reporting back to donors the outcomes of smaller initiatives.
- 2. Coordination and collaboration between diaspora networks and organisations in Australia.**

There need to be opportunities for stronger connections and collaboration within diaspora communities in Australia, possibly facilitated with the support of the Indonesian Consulate General, to be able to disseminate information, about the crisis, about fundraisers, and calls to action.
- 3. Opportunities to amplify knowledge and information sharing from the diaspora to wider public**

There is potential for diaspora members to share knowledge and expertise from Australia with people back home due to their unique perspectives and ability to communicate directly and sensitively across different contexts – e.g., in the pandemic context. If given platforms to speak (e.g., media, events, awareness-raising) individuals in the diaspora can be a conduit between crisis-affected communities and people in Australia (the general public) who can support.
- 4. Stronger collaboration between diaspora communities and the humanitarian sector.**

There should be stronger engagement by institutional humanitarian actors (e.g., INGOs, governments) and diaspora communities who can act as a bridge. Humanitarian sector (government and INGOs) can help diasporas with procurement and delivery of goods, to reduce redtape and costs. Diaspora communities can help INGOs or governments with linkages to local organisations or initiatives in crisis-affected areas.





School of Social and Political Sciences