

Research Brief

September 2016

Reality Check Approach: Early Implementation of the Village Law as Perceived by Village Officials and Local Communities



Background to the Study

The Village Law Number 6 year 2014 on Village Law (Village Law) mandates the transfer of financial resources from the central and district governments directly to village level for spending on local public goods and services, with the intention of devolving decision-making to the village level. In 2015 the average transfer to a village—combining both national and district transfers, was around IDR 800 million (or AUD 80,000). This was approximately four times the amount villages had managed prior to Village Law.

This study was designed to elicit insights directly from village officials and their constituents on their early experiences of implementation, of the Village Law over its first year of implementation during which *Dana Desa* (village funds) were transferred directly to villages. In all locations village officials shared anticipation **mixed with concern and anxiety**. The new Village Law is seen by Village Officials as another change in a series of new challenges for Village Governments, and as generally more complex than before. Village Officials shared their overall satisfaction with the training they had received, although considered the language to be too technical and some felt they would benefit from on-site mentoring rather than training in hotels. This brief concludes with some implications looking forward, considering the perspectives of the village officials, and further details of the study participants and locations.

Peoples' Perceptions of ...

The Village Law

Many villagers from the study did not have any knowledge or understanding of the Village Law and its implications, as typified by the comment: *'we don't want to think complicated because we already have a hard life'*. Some, especially younger and more educated villagers, recognise the Village Law from the TV and/or newspapers as the 2014 Election slogan *'satu desa, satu milyar'*. Many village officials told us that although they know about the introduction of the Village Law, they perceive it as a complex system of reporting, which requires rigorous upwards accountability rather than an opportunity for more locally—responsive decision—making. *'The only thing that is important is filling in the new forms'* was a reaction from a village official who had just received the Village Law training. Village officials say that they struggle to understand the new funding arrangements of *Dana Desa*. They were also concerned that *'the Village Law works the same for all villages, but is not context specific'*. Villages in this study are diverse in scale, ranging from as small as 30 households to 3,300 households, and were seen to be in a constant state of flux, with changing sub-divisions, populations, and boundaries. However, despite this varied and dynamic context, they all had the same village apparatus and largely the same fund allocations.

Pressure and Stress

“Enough is Enough” (A Village Head’s husband disapproved of her willingness to stand for an election again.)

These quotes illustrate the accumulated burden felt by the village officials, which has taken a toll on their personal and family lives.

Extra cautious in spending the budget:

“If you play with it (funds) to even buy a pack of cigarettes you can go to jail, because Jokowi government wants to beat corruption.”

The pressures to get things right:

“When you become Village Head you have a bigger potential to do wrong than to do good.”

The material compensation is not worth the stress:

In response to whether the elder brother of the Village Head would want this job:
“Never! I get the same or more money than my brother as a construction worker in Bali, and it is much less stress.”

Lack of private space:

“I can be reached at any time and privately in my own home.”

Social pressures to accept the appointment:

“The elders said, ‘You can’t refuse this [position as a sub-village head]. It would mean that your bloodline will be excluded from such opportunities in the future’.”

The strain of the job has impacted on the family life:

“If you run for election I will leave you” (Wife of Village Head). Two out of the eight Village Heads were in the process of separating from their wives.

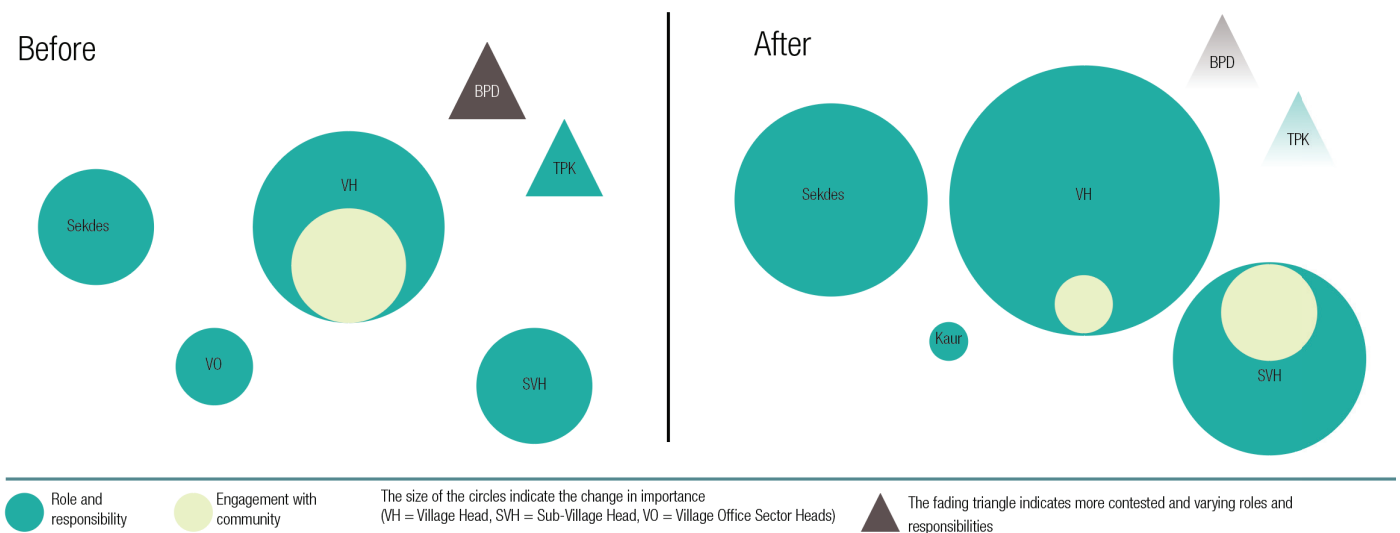
Health and wellbeing:

“He is always busy and people come to him all the time.”

Changing Roles

The figure 1 shows people’s perceptions of the changing roles, responsibilities, and engagement with the community.

Figure 1: Adapting Internal and External Relations and Roles



- **The Village Head role has increased** in importance and maintaining connections at district and sub-district levels has become key. This means there is less time and appetite for community engagement and this activity has devolved to Sub-Village Heads. Many Village Heads also shared the strains of the increased workload and how this was impacting on their health and families.
- **The Sub-Village Heads now finds themselves more burdened** with solving local problems and championing local complaints, in addition to their traditional role of being the conduit for information sharing for their constituents.
- **The Village Secretary (Sekdes) workload has increased** because they are the main link with sub-districts and are described as ‘the key to the village’. They not only manage the increased paperwork associated with the Village Law, but because of accountability concerns, are increasingly becoming the only one to sign-off on proposals, budgets, and receipts of funds.
- Due to **the concerns of making mistakes** and perceived increased vigilance of the Corruption Eradication Commission (‘we are worried about the KPK’), all staff, but especially the Kaur staff, are scared to make decisions and have removed themselves from former responsibilities.

- **The *Badan Permusyawaratan Desa's* (BPD's) role, function, and presence is the most contested** and is a source of confusion across all the villages. Within all of the study villages, the BPD members shared that they felt they had limited-to-no-power, even if they wanted to fulfil their role in oversight and accountability.
- ***Tim Pengelola Kegiatan* (TPK)** (found in half of the villages) **have varying roles** and are often described as being quite influential in deciding on village projects and finances.

Procedures of the Village Law

The procedures for villages to receive the Village Funds from the sub-district varied and were generally perceived as *'more complex than before'*. Despite having plans in place at the start of the year, first tranches did not come until July 2015 and some villages were still waiting in December for their second tranche payments. Village Officials shared:

- They like that funds are directly transferred to the village account, but as the sub-district has *'to approve the authorisation of the tranches'*, they told us *'it is like giving us the head and body but the tail is still with the Camat'*.
- The criteria for selecting village projects for funding was not understood, and most villages chose the safe option of funding village roads irrespective of whether these were the village priorities. Village Officials say that roads are easy to manage and fund and provide a general public good, so *'everyone is happy'*. But this meant that more important priorities that had been identified by villagers, such as water projects or provision of ambulances or fuel, were overlooked.
- The process of having disbursements of funds approved was not clear and it took around two months, required many signatures, and was generally only perceived as successful, *'when the bribe money is ok'*.

Village officials shared that they were confused about and needed more information about:

- Pooling of ADD and DD funds and what the funds can and cannot be used for.
- Fund allocation formulas, especially provision of the rationale for different funding to different villages, given the range of village sizes and needs.
- What local, district, and national funds are intended to cover.
- The official process for accessing village fund tranches.
- What are the mechanisms for complaints and grievances for district and sub-district services.
- The role of the village facilitator and what they should expect from them in terms of support and frequency of visits.
- The future status of village secretaries as village employees or civil servants.

Collecting Data

Some village officials feel constant demands to update village data are burdensome and come from *'above'*, and are also expected without due payment of *'allowances'* from the district. The village officials were frustrated that even when they update data every month and every year as requested, *'none of the programmes seem to be based on the data that we sent'*. The use of outdated data that does not represent the actual condition creates tensions between the villagers and the Village Office. For example, a Village Head said that he *'could not explain the data'* to upset villagers who were not included in lists for social assistance.

On Training they received from the National Government

Working Well...

- Training was good in terms of providing the basics for compliance with the new reporting procedures.
- Village Officials shared relief that the trainers had assured them that *'whatever progress we make this year will be accepted because it is the first year—the trainers told us there were still many problems from Jakarta'*.
- They received hard copies of the manuals and the reporting forms.
- They received generous allowances and transport money to attend the Village Law training activities.
- Their own informal networks had somewhat substituted for the non-functioning formal post-training system. Through these informal networks they share files and reporting formats, especially between those who have successfully navigated the approval and auditing process and those who are struggling with the process.

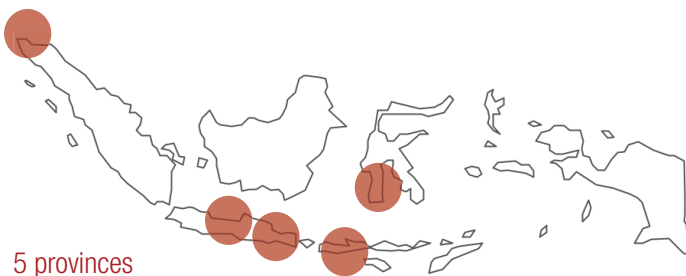
Working Less Well...

- The training was provided too late in the year (*'the funds were disbursed in July and we were only given training in November'*).
- The training was considered to be too technical, with too much jargon, when village governments said they require simple guidelines and basic information to support them in their daily tasks.
- People are frustrated that the regulations and processes keep changing, as typified by one treasurer who pleaded: *'please do not change it again next year'*.
- Many did not attend the full schedule of training, leaving early in the afternoon to get home before dark, or in some cases skipping the last days, even though they had been provided with a hotel room.
- Several shared that they would prefer that training not take place in hotels, but rather should be provided on-site through mentoring. As explained by one treasurer: *'what we want is administrative mentors in the village office, friendly support and who can give us direction if we don't understand'*.

Moving Forward

- **Younger Voices for Change: Young people were often quite engaged on village governance issues** (more than the older generation) and want to elect different kinds of leaders who they feel '*are fair, open and honest*', and not from elite dynasties who have dominated the village leadership in the past. Furthermore, Village Offices have often taken on temporary young staff to manage the computer-based data entry and the many new forms required of the Village Law, saying the existing older staff do not have the needed skills.
- **Clarifying and Empowering the Role of the BPD:** There are diverse views on the role of the BPD, with some feeling hostile towards them, while others recognise that they can provide support and community oversight. Those in the latter camp, including the BPD members themselves, feel the **BPD should be empowered and that their roles and responsibilities be clarified.**
- **Informal Rather than Formal Meetings/Discussions: Villagers do not read information currently on village boards and notices.** Villagers also do not like formal meetings and prefer the informal opportunities to catch up with what is going on in the village, for example in the evenings in the ubiquitous outdoor gazebos. In particular, this is where the Sub-Village Heads chat with their constituents.
- **Reviewing the Village Government Roles and Responsibilities:** Village Officials are still confused about their new roles and how the division of tasks is supposed to be managed. They feel there is a need for them to review the roles of the different members of the Village Government and make sure that work and responsibility (and particularly accountability) is more evenly spread.

Who was Involved in the Study?



5 provinces

8 villages (lagging and non-lagging villages)

Lived with:

- 7 families of Village Heads (including Women Village Heads)
- 10 families of other village officials
- 12 families, especially those who were living in poverty.

Interacted with:

- 162 village officials
- 2,600 neighbour and other community members.



Research Institute: The Reality Check Approach

This is an internationally recognised qualitative approach to feedback, which has been used in several countries since 2007. It involves the study team living in the homes of people living in poverty and the people providing services to them (such as village heads and village officials in this study), which the team joins in their everyday lives. The relaxed environment this provides enables easy, informal conversations with all members of the family, their neighbours, and others in the community. It also allows the study team member to experience and observe the realities of the family and provides a meaningful basis for joint reflection.

A full report is also available at www.reality-check-approach.com.

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